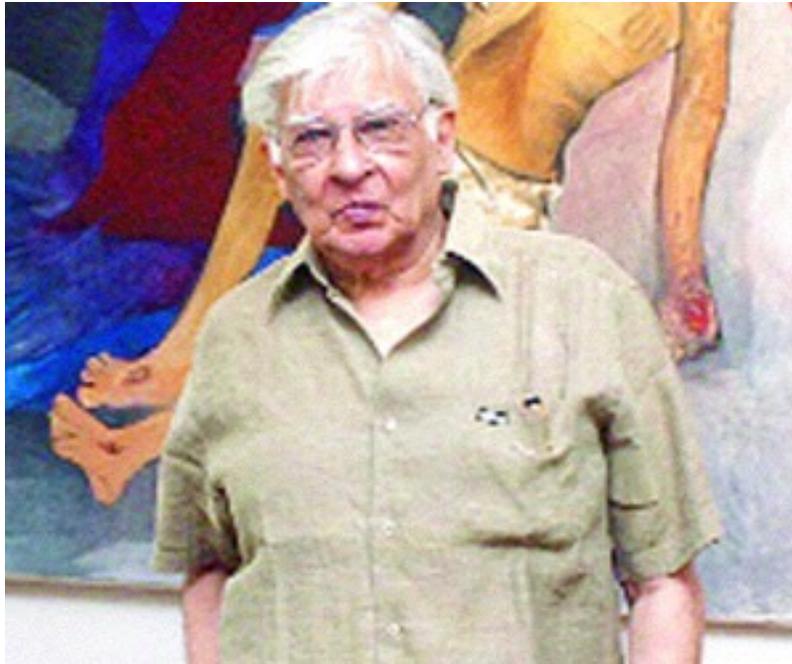


Krishen Khanna

Artist

'Painting is an agent for forces beyond me'

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Krishen Khanna is a well established contemporary artist. He has been awarded the Padamshree in 1990.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is the awareness that one's actions are determined by a whole series of forces transcending the self. We would like at times to call our own, actions and decisions which in fact are very much influenced by those external factors, and are the result of a large combination of things.

So reckoning those factors is what spirituality is about. Also, as spiritual aspirations become more and more abstract, and as you look at the totality of the universe, the questions of being, dying and so on become much less important. You understand that no matter what and where, you are in good company.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

I have had all my life a number of very odd experiences that could not be explained but with such a force – strange coincidences, random events and encounters. One could say they are God's doing, or external forces, it does not matter.

No matter what, it is about something bigger and beyond us, which bear a determining influence on the way our life develops. Of course it does not mean that our journey unfolds by simply sitting idle on a chair. We have to work hard for it. But as you intend, prepare and do, you can't ever be sure that the results will be according to your plans.

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

The purpose of my life is my work — my painting, my drawing. A lot of people do not know what their purpose is, but since I was a child, I always knew I had to paint. My father was very encouraging. He had lost his right hand but he painted and sculpted with his left hand. Every Sunday we would do it together.

Later on though, as partition took place, I had to find a job to make ends meet. By pure coincidence, I ended up in a bank. I spent thirteen years there, very dedicated to my work, but at some point I had to leave: one should be true to the profession we are involved in and spend all one's energies towards it.

For me, painting was my real passion. And my wife is the one who gave me the courage and green light to abandon the safety of a salaried profession for the unknown of painting. She said we did not know if I would succeed or not, but we knew I was passionate about one thing, whereas most people aren't. So at least the children would grow in an atmosphere of passion and purpose. Which they did.

So painting to me is about being an agent for forces beyond me, a channel, a conduit — but a critical conduit. I have my judgment, my eye, my history. Then once the result is out, anybody can look at it. I do not grudge those who do not understand my work or are not touched by it. I did my best, and this is what matters.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

I try and treat all people equally without distinction of class or caste. And above all, spirituality is my work. I really transcend myself the moment I touch a pencil. If I do not draw one single day, something is missing in my life. So work is my daily prayer.

Can you tell us about a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

When I was working in a bank in Bombay, living in a flat with a number of other friends, we decided one day to have a séance, for fun. I did not believe in such things and preferred to simply observe from the side, without participating. Cards were played, the glass stopped, gave answers and so on. I did not touch it as I did not want to influence anything. Suddenly though my friend suggested I think of someone — the image of my grand-mother came to my mind.

The glass started moving, pointing out to letters. The string of letters made no sense. So I put the paper in my pocket and forgot about it. Later on, as it fell out of my pocket, I looked at it again and realized it was a Punjabi word. All people involved were Bengali so no one could have understood it. My grand-mother actually only talked in Punjabi. And the message was typical of a blessing she would have given. This experience opened my mind ever more to the idea that there could be something beyond.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

I went to a Muslim high-school, my father was a Hindu but he is the one who introduced me to the idea of Jesus and to the Bible, which subsequently played an important place in my work.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

I've had such wonderful associations in this life, amazing friends. I married the girl I wanted from childhood. I have been doing what I am passionate about. So of course, I would wish for the same kind of journey.

If there was one question you could ask God, what would it be?

Why all this?

What is your idea of happiness?

It is about fulfillment, and doing my best. At the end of every day, when I ask myself how it went by, it should be in a satisfying manner. And even if a painting is a so-called failure, I actually still would feel satisfied by it. Because if it was honestly done, and with persistence, there is always some gain. I may have learnt about the way things happen, or about the way to invoke things to come.