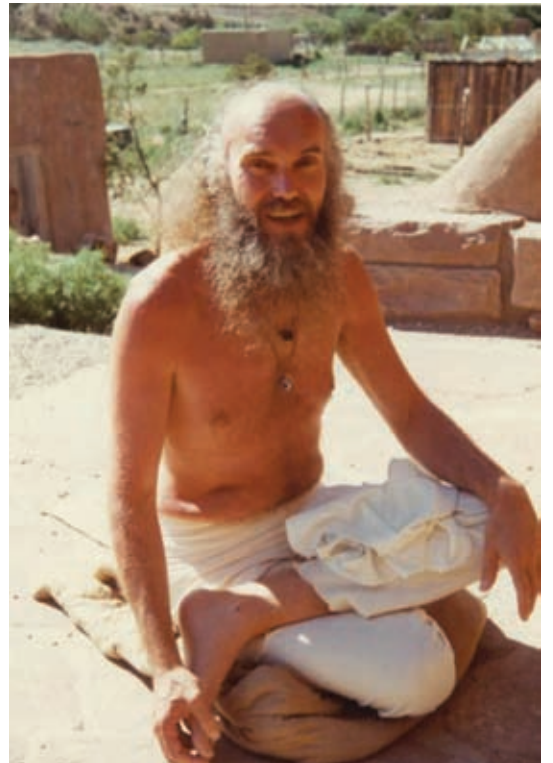


PHOTO: RAMESHWAR DAS



Ram Dass in India, 1971 with his guru Neem Karoli Baba, affectionately known as Maharajji



Common Ground

Interviews Ram Dass

BY ROB SIDON AND CARRIE GROSSMAN

Ram Dass has been one of America's preeminent spiritual figures for the past 30 years. Born Richard Alpert in 1931 to a prominent Jewish family in Boston, he quickly excelled academically. After earning a B.A. from Tufts College and a Ph.D. in human development from Stanford University, he took a job at Cal and eventually became a full professor at Harvard in the early 1960s. With his colleague, the late Timothy Leary, they famously conducted research on human consciousness using psychedelic drugs, which led to their expulsion from the university. After traveling to Mexico and the Caribbean, they settled in a 60-room mansion in Millbrook, N.Y., where many famous artists, philosophers, and activists came to share in the "turn on, tune in, drop out" experience.

In 1967, Alpert traveled to India, where he was introduced to Neem Karoli Baba (affectionately known as Maharajji), a deeply respected Hindu spiritual teacher, who renamed him Ram Dass, or "servant of God." Deeply moved, he returned to the States, where he cofounded the Hanuman Foundation and the Seva Foundation. His popularity soared after he wrote *Be Here Now*, widely considered a spiritual classic, having sold millions since 1971.

In 1997, Ram Dass suffered a major stroke. The recovery process was quite challenging, as recounted in his book *Still Here* and the documentary film *Fierce Grace*. A longtime resident of Marin County, Ram Dass moved to Maui in 2004. We caught up with him on the phone for three hours in late October, whereupon he said our interview was the longest and most comprehensive he had ever done. We are, of course, deeply grateful.



Common Ground: *Be Here Now* was first published almost 40 years ago and has brought so many to the path. Did you ever think it would be so popular?

Ram Dass: It's been two million copies so far. At the time, I didn't know anything like that would happen.

Why do you think the book has had such lasting appeal?

Well, it was quite timely, and the format and pictures made it something that people wanted to hold onto. Steve Durkee, an artist at Lama Foundation, set up the square book and cover, and we all did the pictures together. People keep coming up to me and saying, "Thank you for that book," but I really feel it's not *my* book. It's a lot of people's book, and it's my guru's too.

I'd like to talk about Maharajji, but first let's go back to before you went to India. You were an eminent Harvard psychologist collaborating with Timothy Leary, experimenting with a lot of LSD. Can you talk about that period?

Well, my life took three stages: social psychology, psychedelics, and then Eastern religion. Psychology centered on who we think we are, and it showed me what was inside all of us. The psychedelics opened my heart and showed me that there's much more to consciousness than the ego. I had been a social scientist, so writings such as the Bhagavad Gita seemed a bunch of crap. Psychedelics worked as a transition from psychology to Eastern religion.

One Saturday night, I remember a trip—a heavy-duty trip—and I couldn't put the experience into words. On the next Tuesday, Aldous Huxley shared with me the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and there were the words

“My child is now 53, which means I missed diapers and paying for college and all that. I was shocked because one doesn’t usually find out about children at my age.”

for my trip! When I saw that, a book for reading to monks when they died, I thought, “I gotta go toward the East, because they know what we’re missing; our theories are wrong.”

We then did the Good Friday experiment in which we took ministers as our subjects and put them in the Boston University chapel, downstairs, and had them listen to the service. Half of them were on psychedelics and half of them were on another drug, which was a control. They recorded their experiences, and theologians judged those recordings for mystical experiences, based on experiences reported from all the holy books of the world. In our psychedelics group, something like nine of the ten ministers had mystical experiences compared to something like three of the ten in the control group. It was a very significant finding.

Previously, I had done many years of Freudian analysis, and realized they were boxes in my head. They didn’t seem to get where I was or “scratch the itch.” I remember I was leaving Stanford for Harvard, and my analyst said, “You gotta go to an analyst when you get to Boston because you can’t be trusted in social situations.” [Laughs]

Was he right? Well, obviously!

You and Tim were fired from Harvard; were you at all sad about that?

No. There were so many funny things. When I was fired from Harvard, I was in the president’s office thinking, “This poor slob. He doesn’t really know what’s happened to me, and he can’t get it.” He was completely caught in his mind.

Then what?

After Harvard, Tim Leary and I used a hotel in Mexico as a psychedelic training center, and the Mexican government threw us out. So we started a scene on an island in the Caribbean. Then came Millbrook—a 60-room house in upstate New York. When Tim and Ralph Metzner went traveling, I filled the house with artists and hippies. They didn’t like that so much.

Eventually, I went back to the Haight-Ashbury. Since I had gotten my Ph.D. at Stanford, I liked the West Coast. In the East we were very research-oriented, but in the West they were fun-oriented, like Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters.

The ’60s were an incredibly productive, changing, and creative period for the culture, and the young people at the time smelled that. The ’50s were very dull compared to that—they looked backward and the ’60s looked forward. The ’60s were so exciting because we were changing the culture. We were like Jerry Rubin and all the guys at the Chicago Eight—they were taking psychedelics and going outward, and people like Allen Ginsberg and I were taking psychedelics and going inward.

You must have spent a lot of time with the other Jerry of the era, Jerry Garcia.

Oh, yes, so much dancing. But Jerry didn’t like holy

men. When we were around the music, we were great together, but when we were alone, we clashed.

This is going to sound a bit *People* magazine, but did you ever trip with John Lennon?

No, John Lennon came to my office later in New York with Yoko, and it was a very short visit. I was taking teachings from a Brooklyn woman, and the woman got on the phone to Yoko and balled her out for ruining the Beatles, and then Yoko got freaked, and John got up and left.

Wow! That was your meeting with John Lennon. Like Jerry Garcia, he seemed heart-centered.

Yes, he was very heart-centered.

Did you ever know Jim Morrison?

I met him. He came to my house and we talked, but I don’t think we shared anything of interest.

I just read something that surprised me about LSD in Hollywood in the ’50s. It was the Cary Grant era, the ’50s and early ’60s. It surprised me because it seemed to pre-date Tim and you.

Yes, and I talked to Cary, and he and I took a little trip together. He liked it, but he also thought of it as a psychological medicine. I’m fascinated with that era and the use of psychedelics. They were using it the way folks like that would—for creativity and things like that.

Did you know at the time that Cary Grant was a closet homosexual? Did that ever come out?

It did not come out in the session.

But you knew? Yeah.

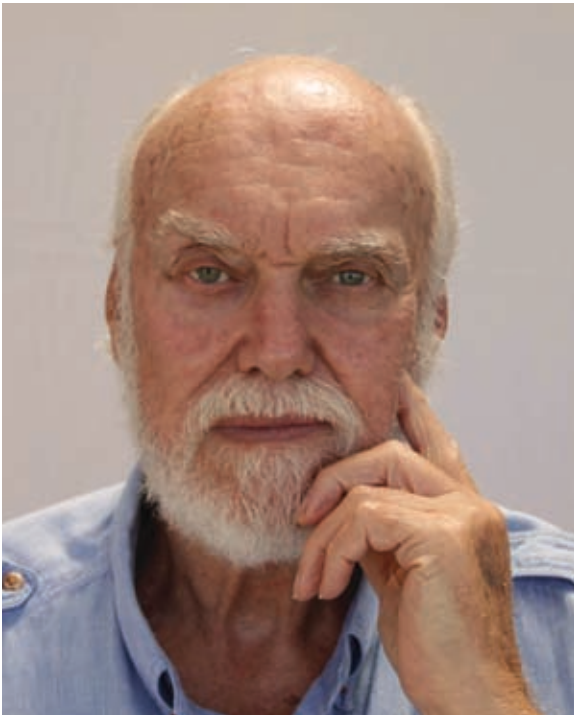
Was it difficult for you being homosexual in the ’50s and ’60s?

Well, during all of the ’50s, most of the time, I led two lives. I usually had a regular life connected with my schools and stuff like that, and then I had a homosexual life. That was uncomfortable. I felt that very badly. In the ’60s, Tim was very turned off by homosexuals, and I had to keep it under wraps so he didn’t get freaked by my behavior. Then after Maharajji there were incidents, but I didn’t label myself in that way, and haven’t ever since Maharajji.

Let’s talk about Maharajji. In 1967 you went to India. Did you have any inkling that you would meet your guru, Neem Karoli Baba, or Maharajji?

No, no, no. In fact, I went over as a Buddhist and visited Buddhist teachers, and it was only by chance that I met Maharajji. Hinduism put me off—too many gods and goddesses, too much calendar art, and all that sort of stuff. Loud speakers in the temples, terrible sound systems, and gurus—I thought the whole thing was crap!

When I met Maharajji, he played with me because I had come in a Land Rover, and I was very concerned that somebody was gonna steal the Land Rover—that



pocket, which was supposed to take me to New York two days later. And I didn't leave India for six months. Two days versus six months! So something kept me—it was that love. That love awakened love in me.

You gave LSD to Maharajji when you met him?

Well, it happened at the end of the first visit, six months after we met. He asked for medicine for his head, and I thought he meant aspirin. I didn't know that the fellow who was with me spilled the beans about me doing psychedelics. And he said, "No, no, I want your yogi medicine."

I had pills in my medicine bag—those pills were 300 micrograms each, which was a very, very healthy dose. They were made for me because I was big, and also experienced. There he was, this probably 70-year-old man with no experience, and I extended my hand with the pills, sort of hoping he wouldn't take any. He reached over and took three pills, one by one. I was toward his side, and he threw the pills into his mouth or over his shoulder, I wasn't quite sure. And I thought, "My God, three pills—that's an elephant dose!" As a social scientist, I sat there and watched his behavior, but there was nothing strange about it.

The next day I went back to the United States, and stayed there for two years. During those two years, I told people that he had taken those pills, but I hadn't been sure because maybe he threw them over his shoulder. I was bugged for two years—yes he did, no he didn't.

On the second visit, I reached him and across the temple he asked, "Did you give me some medicine when you were here last time?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Did I take it?" And I said, "I don't know." So he said, "Got any more?" I brought out the pills, and this time he took four!

He took each one separately, stuck it on his tongue, and made a big thing about swallowing it. After nothing happened, he pulled his blanket up over his face. When he pulled it down, he had a face on him that looked crazy, and I was freaked! So he put his face back on, and the rest of the day he had no reaction.

Afterward, he said, "These plants were used years ago in the Kulu Valley by yogis, but they always took hatha yoga before to get their body ready." I had worshipped these drugs, and he was showing me that they were insignificant. He was showing me that our medicines were small potatoes compared to the stuff he was working with. He said, "You can come into the room where Christ is, but then you've gotta leave immediately." [Laughs] I too was getting sick of up and down, up and down, up and down.

When you come to God's plane through the crutch of a pill, that's an experience, but when you come down, you're kicked out of the garden, so to speak. What Maharajji was trying to tell you was that, to be in that room permanently, you have to do spiritual practice.

Yes, yes, yes.

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was in my mind. The first thing he asked me was, "Did you come in a big car?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, give it to me." And I, of course, was apprehensive.

The fellow who came with me jumped up and said, "Maharajji, if you want it, you can have it!" And I got freaked. It was his guru, and the other people around him all laughed because I got freaked. The guru never asked for anything from anybody; the only thing he'd ask for was an apple or something like that. So he was toying with me and everyone saw the joke but me.

Maharajji was the real deal. Your heart bursts for your teacher.

In my first visit with Maharajji, he told me what I was thinking the night before. As a psychologist, we couldn't do that, so it blew my mind. And it blew my mind for at least 10 years. Afterward, I said to myself, "My God, he reads my mind. That means he'll read this, he'll read that. Oooh..." I had all of this embarrassment—

About having a dirty mind? [Laughs]

Yes. I was sitting in front of him on the ground, thinking about 15 negative things. I forgot that he was sitting above me, and I put my head up and looked directly in his eyes; he was looking at me with unconditional love. I had never been looked at that way—with unconditional love. He had read that stuff in my mind, and he still loved me.

I never had unconditional love because my parents, everybody, wanted something. But he didn't want anything and he didn't care; he loved me with all that stuff that I had just recited in my mind. After that visit, I kept saying, "I'm home, I'm home, I'm really home." And I meant home in my heart. That unconditional love changed me. It changed me. When I was with Maharajji that first time, I had my plane ticket in my

That's not easy for a lot of Westerners who want an easy glimpse, and another....

I know it. And the thing is, one of those glimpses is an experience of the inner room, but you can't stay there. That experience also messes up your *sadhana* [spiritual practice]. I'll tell you, yoga—not body-beautiful yoga, but yoga—is preferable.

Is that what inspired your new book *Be Love Now*?

Well, 40 years ago [when I wrote *Be Here Now*], I was freaked that Maharajji could read my mind—it was a miracle. But 30 years ago I started to remember that visit and realized that his *love* changed me, not the miracle of his being able to read my mind. So I wanted to correct that perception of what had changed me. *Be Love Now* came out of that.

Since that time I tried to “do” unconditional love, but I couldn't because I was only the individual soul, I was not the Atman, the One, the God within, the Universal Soul. We experienced it as Maharajji “doing” something—as in,

“I'll do unconditional love to Ram Dass.” But he was just love. He *was* love, he was a ball of love, and he didn't *do* anything. He was *being* love. So now I am working to *be* love, and not just *do* love.

How would you define love? It seems like something we often speak about in a relational way.

Well, we tend to treat love like other emotions—like fear, anger, and stuff like that. But it isn't, because those are all mind emotions, and love is an emotion that comes from the soul. That's why people react to love, because it's really soul stuff. When you perceive the world from the soul, you see it as a love object. When you perceive the world from the ego, then love objects, falling in love, romance—that is substituted for the soul love. It's a substitute.

So two egos can't love, only souls.

That's absolutely right.

You speak about *doing* love versus *being* love—that's such an important distinction. How can we be that love and move out of the consciousness of thinking we need to do something?

As you go into your “real” self, your soul, then you go toward the plane of consciousness that is One. In the other plane, everything looks like the One, but then in the final plane of consciousness, you stop being separate and merge with the One.

Then it's *all* love. You can be love and peace, compassion, and wisdom. That's what Maharajji is. It's said that

you have to have grace to move from one to the other. But most of us have grace anyway, just to be working with that kind of problem.

Here's hoping, at least. Yet, I think you coined the expression “fierce grace.”

There's a funny story about that because I had a graceful life with Maharajji until the stroke. When the stroke came, I said, “Did you go out to lunch or something? You left me high and dry with this thing.” All the people around me in the hospital were like, “Oh terrible. You had a terrible thing, a stroke.” And all my doctor friends were like, “You're probably gonna die.”

So there was a picture of Maharajji on the wall, and I looked at him and said, “What in the hell is going on here? Maybe this is fierce grace.” I didn't believe it, but I was reacting to all the minds around me. And I wondered: Maybe this is a *good* thing.

Even as the film came out, *Fierce Grace*, I somehow thought Maharajji “gave me the stroke.” But later I realized he didn't give me the stroke—the stroke was nature. He gave me the *reaction* to the stroke: *Oh wow, it's wonderful!* The grace was that I saw the stroke positively.

Not immediately, though, right?

It took a long time.

So you felt sorry for yourself in the beginning? You thought you'd fallen from grace?

Yeah, I thought I'd fallen from grace. And now I think it's not fall, but it's spring. [Laughs] This stroke has offered me an opportunity to go within. I'm not saying everybody should have a stroke, though! [Laughs]

You've been around the big hitters—icons of the counterculture: Aldous Huxley, Ken Kesey, on and on. I know you can't speak for them, but those people just don't speak about devotion like you do. What's missing?

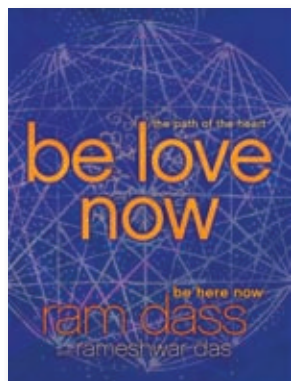
The difference is that I'm a *bhakti* [devotional path] yogi, and *bhakti* is through the heart. It's yoga transmitted from heart to heart: the spiritual heart of the guru and the spiritual heart of the *chela* [disciple]. None of those mentioned are *bhakti* yogis. Aldous was a Vedantist [the non-dual philosophy of the Vedas]. Tim was in his mind, not in his heart. They were all trapped in the mind because they loved the creativity of their minds—it's like a *siddha*, a power, that we have, the mind. You can get caught in that power. When I think of all the years I spent studying ego psychology, it was a little box, and now I can walk around that little box and feel it in my psyche. I think people have different paths—we don't have to evaluate them. Tim thought I was crazy! [Laughs]

Some people try to couch their devotion, for fear of being seen as odd.

I know it.

But you've been “out of the closet” about your

Ram Dass with *Be Love Now* coauthor Rameshwar Das



devotion, so to speak, for all these years.

You know why that is? It's because I've gotten so much joy from my spiritual practices. And now I just sit in the love, and mirror other people's Atman [Self]. It's compassion—my life is now compassion.

Well, it's inspiring. You can speak from both worlds, from the Ivy League intelligentsia and as a blathering devotee. Yet you never shirked from trying to share that with your colleagues along the way.

You know who's been my colleague with compassion? Huston Smith. We build love together. He is absolutely beautiful.

Well, another colleague people love seeing you with is Krishna Das [the kirtan singer]. He was with Maharajji too and has now become quite popular in the yoga world, opening people's hearts.

And he and I are the same source—he sings to Maharajji.

These days you're fortunate enough to be around younger people, and I'm curious if you've noticed a difference in the approach of spiritual seekers today versus in the '60s.

Well, I think the spiritual life is much more integral to their lives today, and it was much more foreign in the '60s. In the '60s maybe 10 percent of my audience really seriously wanted to be spiritual, and now it's 100 percent. The young people now are really yearning—they're yearning. I'm not talking about *all* young people, but the young people that I come across, which is of course limited. They are serious, and they're happily serious.

Well, speaking of young people, my secret sources tell me that you recently learned of having a child and a grandchild!

Yes. [Laughs] That's what happened at Stanford! I was about 24 or something like that.

Was that your first time with a woman?

No, no, no. I was very, very sexy in that day. [Laughs] And I said to somebody about my son, "This is going to ruin my reputation as a homosexual!"

My child is now 53, which means I missed diapers and paying for college and all that. [Laughs] He's an absolutely wonderful guy. He's from North Carolina. I was shocked because one doesn't usually find out about children at my age. His younger brother found a picture of me and it looked like his older brother. So he wrote letters to his brother and me, suggesting that we follow up. My son was 52 at the time.

Last year?

Yes. I was 78. It's wonderful, because I've always been blessed by *satsang* [true company] around me. In my lectures I always say, "If you really want to know how effective your sadhana is, just spend a weekend with your family." It's very cute. But now family, sadhana,

and satsang—they're getting closer together. It happened when my father was 90, and I was helping him die. He was changing from ego to soul, and we were sitting there, soul to soul, and he was so beautifully light. Now this son, he keeps giving me family. If you can think of how his life has changed in the past year—

So he never heard of you until last year?

No. Never heard of me.

Wow! Congratulations!

People keep congratulating me, and I keep saying, "Why?" I'm not interested in carrying on my DNA or anything like that.

Nevertheless, it's happened. What's the famous saying, "We plan, God laughs"?

Yes! [Laughs] That's great.

We telephoned for a long time—once a week—and then he came to Hawaii because I don't take airplanes.

You lived in the Bay Area for so long, and now you live in Maui. I'm wondering if there's something you miss about the Bay Area.

The Bay Area is complicated; it's too "in the culture." I'm an island boy. If you want to go inside—well, my next-door neighbors are the ocean and the trees. It's quiet. I loved the dancing at the Fillmore, and I loved Berkeley, Palo Alto, Haight Ashbury, and all those wonderful places, but they all pulled me outward. I mean, the ocean pulls me outward, but it reminds me of God. And manmade things don't remind me of God. Maybe that's my limitation. Maharajji insisted that we stay in the marketplace and be God-centered. Maybe I'm not doing that, but I've never been so content.

Do you know what the national pastime is? What?

Baseball. Did you know that the San Francisco Giants are playing the first game of the World Series tonight? Yes.

Are you excited? Yes.

Are you a Giants fan?

No, I'm a Bostonian. Way back when the Red Sox were Boston's.

But you lived in the Bay Area for so long!

I know, but once you get into a team, you get fried! [Laughs]

I think we're gonna win!

I think so. I hope so. [Laughs]

Well, I think that's a wrap. Thank you.

This has been the longest interview I've done, ever.

Really?! Well, it's been great, and we're very grateful. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Top: First trip to India, 1967; Bottom: Ram Dass speaking in New Hampshire, 1969



PHOTO: COURTESY RAM DASS

PHOTO: RAMESHWAR DAS