

An Interview With RAM DASS

by Deborah McGee

In the 1960s, many young people questioned America's "live for the moment" mentality, and grew interested in a more Eastern approach, that of living *in* the moment. The teachings reached us in many voices, and the one which probably reached the most ears was that of Ram Dass.

Born Richard Alpert, as a young man he followed an academic path, becoming a social science professor at Harvard University. Then in 1961 he and colleague Timothy Leary began experimenting with psychedelic drugs. In 1963, Harvard showed them both the door. The events startled many thinking people, who thought they'd blown more than their minds.

Alpert continued his research in a private foundation, and delved deeply into Eastern philosophy, especially the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. He travelled to India in 1967 and met Neem Karoli Baba, who became his beloved guru ("dispeller of darkness") in spite of Alpert's initial reluctance. Baba gave him his spiritual name, which means "Servant of God," and encouraged him to share with other Americans the teachings which had enriched his life.

Be Here Now, Ram Dass's first book about his life, and a sort of recipe book of spiritual practices, was like a Bible to young adults in the 1960s and '70s. I didn't read it until the early '80s, in a rustic geodesic dome, in a remote corner of a remote commune in Southern Oregon. I found it among the left-behind feathers, zigzag papers and beads... and the mice droppings. It seemed a luminescent remnant of the days when Ram Dass spoke more frequently to audiences, often made up of flower children, all over America.

Ram Dass went on to establish the Hanuman Foundation, best known for its work with the dying. Now he is on the board of directors of the Seva Foundation, "seva" being the Sanskrit word for service. "To be fully human, we must translate our compassion and concern into useful service," is the idea they started with. Their projects include fighting blindness in Nepal, building a Native American health clinic, and aiding Guatemalan refugees in Southern Mexico.

Ram Dass visited Breitenbush Hot Springs last fall. The story goes that Thomas Fisher, of the local CHOICES Consulting and Counseling firm, ended up sharing a hot

tub with him. From their conversations grew Ram Dass's March 17 visit to Eugene.

The following is from a recent telephone interview with Ram Dass.

WH: What role do psychedelic drugs play in one's spiritual search? What do you think of the Reagan Administration's "War on Drugs?"

RD: I honor psychedelics a great deal. They've served me well. From a spiritual point of view, as my guru said to me, "If you're alone and feeling peaceful and your mind is turned toward God, a psychedelic could be useful." After you've seen what you have to incorporate in your life, you still have to do the work.

The government's position towards drugs is hysterical and political. They mass together the use of opiates (crack, cocaine, etc.), which are basically escapist and to enhance sensuality, with tryptamines, which

"The spiritual awakening and social responsibility emerging now in this culture is much more grounded."

are capable of enriching society immensely if used consciously. It's an unfortunate oversight. The issue is quieting down—ultimately we'll have a more rational policy.

Our culture is very heavily addicted to much more than crack and cocaine, things like money, power, sensuality, security.

People ask me what I tell young people about drugs. I say, there's an agenda to life. Those people who try to become nobody before they become somebody have to spend the rest of their lives putting it together. The young need social, economic and political grounding to work out first.

WH: What are your thoughts on Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and his Oregon community?



Ram Dass will speak in Eugene on *Cultivating the Heart of Compassion*.

RD: I think Rajneesh is a very charismatic tantric teacher who was chiding the culture in a way that tantric teachers do. There were impurities in his scene—the paranoia, the treatment of their neighbors, the people he had around him. All of it hurts my heart.

I have been involved in similar scenes. After it was over, my heart was in great pain for quite a while. Then I saw I had received a good teaching. The only thing destroyed was another model in my head. If you come to a teaching with a pure heart, you get a pure teaching, even if the teacher may have some impurity.

After a dream dies, there's a grief reaction. You must allow grief reactions their space. If the followers are pure in their yearning for spirit, they'll take the teaching, lick their wounds, and listen for the next teaching.

WH: Do people still come around and want to be your followers? What do you do with them?

RD: I don't have a base or students. I'm sharing what I have to share. I'm not an enlightened being. I'm just somebody who says what we're doing and says it well. I don't like having followers—it nurtures a dependency that isn't healthy. I tell people to listen to their own hearts. I don't think people should relegate to me their intuitive wisdom! I feel like people at lectures and retreats today are a much more mature crowd. It's not faddish—the people are living life deeply, have made grounded contacts with the world, care about life and awakening in spirit.

WH: In the Jan. 30 *L.A. Weekly*, you spoke of the difference between your approach to world peace, and that of Daniel Ellsberg. You are quoted as saying Ellsberg's "... theme has been using fear and urgency as the motivators to oppose nuclear proliferation." Would you elaborate on this for politically-active Eugene?

RD: Recently I spent a day walking with the Great Peace March and

spoke with them during the march. We were talking together about the need for each of us to become the statement of what we'd like the universe to be. When you act in a way which awakens fear in others in order to bring about that effect, the means itself is exacerbating the root cause of nuclear war. Fear is what produced the bomb in the first place.

To be an instrument of peace, the demand you put on yourself to oppose, without closing your heart to the opposition and without increasing the amount of anxiety in the culture, is what is demanded of us. Conscious protest. Mahatma Gandhi is one of my models for this. Martin Luther King, too. As I told people in the march, at the end, you've got to be the peace movement in your being. It's difficult to do a march and be a march. I feel we're doing better than we used to; our acts of civil disobedience are much more conscious.

Continued on page 12

CHIROPRACTIC CARE

combined with

- Massage
- Hot/Cold Packs
- Muscle Balancing
- Exercise Rehabilitation



GENTLE TECHNIQUES

CYNTHIA STOCKWELL, D.C.
CHIROPRACTIC PHYSICIAN

595 West 8th Avenue

342-6500

Acupuncture can be effective for:

Headaches
Muscular Tension
Sports Related Injuries
Menstrual Problems
(including P.M.S.)
Gastrointestinal Problems

For more information and appointments call
Acupuncture Clinic
Larry Weinstein, L.Ac.
344-5882 260 E. 15th St.
Eugene, Ore. 97401

Travel the World at Folkways



Fifth St. Public Market
downstairs
683-2204

762 E. 13th Ave.
next to the Excelsior
343-8667

FOLKWAYS IMPORTS