

BEING RAM DASS

Ram Dass
with Rameshwar Das

CONTENTS

FOREWORD by Anne Lamott ix

Introduction 1

PART I

Learning and Unlearning 7

- 1 Fired—and Free 9
- 2 Power and Love 17
- 3 Mind Fields 33
- 4 Working on the Railroad 47
- 5 Harvard Yard 53
- 6 Becoming No Body 63
- 7 The Harvard Psilocybin Project 73
- 8 Acidification 83
- 9 Hotel Nirvana 93
- 10 Newton Commune 99
- 11 The Center Does Not Hold 107
- 12 Millbrook Morphs 119
- 13 East Versus West 131
- 14 Mother 143

PART II

Pilgrim of the Heart 153

- 15 Journey to the East 155
- 16 The Mapmaker 167
- 17 Instant Yogi 175
- 18 Quick, Get in the Car 193
- 19 From Bindu to Ojas 207
- 20 A World Tour 217
- 21 Power Plays 231
- 22 Be Here Now 249

PART III

Service Center 259

- 23 All Doing Time 261
- 24 Brooklyn Detour 271
- 25 Dying Project 279
- 26 How Can I Help? 291
- 27 It's Only Love 303
- 28 Looking Inward, Reaching Out 313

PART IV

The Wheel Turns 321

- 29 The New Old Age 323
- 30 Stroked 335
- 31 Long Road Back 345
- 32 Marooned on Maui 353
- 33 Only Son 363

PART V

Ocean View 371

- 34 Heart 2 Heart 373
- 35 Maharaj-ji's Lila 381
- 36 Closer to Home 389

THE NEXT CHAPTER Ram Dass: Here/Not Here 397

Acknowledgments 403

Photography Credits 407

About Love Serve Remember Foundation 409

INTRODUCTION

I've always loved things that go fast. I've owned an MG sports car, a Mercedes coupe, a Plymouth convertible, two Jaguars, and a Dodge Dart. In graduate school, I bought a Triumph motorcycle and a small Harley. I loved to roar up the hills in California at ninety-five miles an hour, the wind rushing in my ears. Racing upward, climbing faster and faster, I'd hit the throttle until I reached a moment when the adrenaline, the shiver of danger, and the roar of the engine created such a feeling of bliss that I felt suspended in time, the atoms of my being vibrating with joy.

It lasted all of a split second, but I craved that moment. After that, I took flying lessons. I had the motorcycle and the sports car, but I wanted a plane too. I'm not sure why—I didn't really have anywhere to go—except that I loved that adrenaline rush, that thrill that always brought me completely into the present.

I've always had this penchant for risk taking. There is a part of me that is impulsive, leaping into the moment without regard for consequences. In the airplane, I was often awestruck by the view, seeing the cloud formations and the patterns of the earth below. Sometimes I was so overcome that I would forget to look at my instruments. But for me, flying had more to do with power than with beauty. It was about pushing my limits. It was about reaching for something beyond myself.

This adventurer side—the curiosity, the impulsivity, the optimism—has defined my life. In many ways, this drive also thrust me into the position of cultural trailblazer for a changing America. In the 1960s,

when I was still Richard Alpert, a professor of psychology at Harvard, I met Timothy Leary, with whom I first tried psychedelic drugs. These substances, which were completely legal at the time, promised such a transformative view of reality that we felt as if we'd stumbled onto a key to enlightenment. Suddenly I realized there was more to my existence than my professorial self. Underlying it all was a vast ocean of consciousness.

For a materialist like me, this was a cataclysmic shift. Wanting to understand the potential of psychedelics, especially their creative and therapeutic power. Tim and I famously designed experiments to explore human consciousness. Besides giving these chemicals to others, we ingested them ourselves. We were opening doors to unconscious and spiritual dimensions of the human psyche, with no real idea how to navigate. The insights were profound, though by also using ourselves as subjects, we risked being biased by our own conceptions. As scientists, it was like skydiving without knowing if the parachute would open.

News headlines at the time were about the space race and the first astronauts circling the globe. We thought of ourselves as intranauts, exploring the unmapped worlds of inner space.

Eventually our experiments, the attendant publicity, and a certain cavalier attitude on our part got us kicked out of Harvard. Psychedelics came under intense government scrutiny, and a backlash began. Tim and I, however, were not done exploring. We set up our own scientific community at an estate in New York called Millbrook. We met others in the field: Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, the chemist Owsley Stanley. We continued our experiments. Tim preached on the value of psychedelics to the masses. I distributed LSD as a sideline to lecturing.

Amid all this hoopla, I realized psychedelics had their limitations. Like my motorcycle and my airplane, it turned out that drugs were a vehicle. After a trip into unknown dimensions of consciousness and deep cosmic unity, I still had to land. I tried bigger or more frequent doses, pushing the limits, but the bliss was temporary. I could not hold on to it. The motorcycle, the airplane, the drugs: they all gave me a taste of something I was searching for, but they were not enough.

I wanted to know more. This is how I ended up in India in 1967 and how I came to meet the being I now call my guru. Neem Karoli Baba



was an older Indian man who was called simply Maharaj-ji, a frequent honorific that means “great king.” At first glimpse, he looked ordinary. He sat wrapped in a plaid blanket and seemed kind. But at his feet, I had an experience more powerful than any I’d had with psychedelics. He saw me as a soul with a love outside of place and time that stirred me to my core.

I stayed in India for six months, training as a yogi, before Maharaj-ji sent me back to America with a new name: Ram Dass. Back in the US I found that I was a pioneer of an entirely different sort. In the chaos and churning conflict of the late 1960s and early ’70s—the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the war in Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, the Kent State shootings—young Americans were searching for spiritual answers. I was carrying what felt like a jewel, Maharaj-ji’s presence and the spiritual path.

Turning toward Eastern spirituality was not just my inner evolution but part of a major cultural shift. In my role as guide I found myself also leading other reconnaissance missions. I was involved in innovative prison programs, the emerging hospice movement, caring for the homeless and people with AIDS, making a commitment to planetary survival. As I aged and baby boomers did too, my own body provided a reason to explore yet another uncharted area: conscious aging. Sometimes I felt like my friends were letting me do all the work!

Helping others is a two-way gift. Over the years, my work as teacher, as lecturer, and as guide has brought me into contact with a truly inspiring cast of characters from many different fields. I’ve been a small pebble in a big pond. Some of the ideas I helped bring to the fore—psychedelic research, yoga and meditation, prison and hospice care—are still spreading. There are yoga studios in every community. Hospice is standard medical care. Research on therapeutic uses of psychedelics is reviving.

That’s the outer view. None of my adventuring would have taken place without an inner aspiration, the drive to push my own internal limits. The true risk taking, the search that has really defined my life, has been about identity and inner truth. When I look back on my life, I can track those risks: choosing a psychology degree instead of medical school, taking drugs whose effects I didn’t know, taking chances with

my love life, and, most of all, becoming a yogi, serving as a mouthpiece for Maharaj-ji, a guru from another culture.

To be sure, these choices broke me out of the cultural box of my upbringing. Only after meeting Maharaj-ji did I really understand this impulse. I wasn't just an ambitious ex-professor, straining against expectations. I am a soul on a journey. My constant reaching for the edge is really a creative act, an existential push to break through to another level, to find that place in myself that answers the question, Who am I, really?

This book is about the internal journey. Who I *am* is awareness and deep love, a presence beyond experience within a temporal, changing form. Who I am is a soul, a soul without a name, address, Social Security number, or biography, who isn't born and doesn't die. I *am*.

I see this life as an incarnation, as an evolutionary progression of the soul, a journey not just in this life but through many lives. As westerners, we're taught to bookend our lives with birth and death. However, from my experiences with death and sitting with dying people, I find this to be a limited view. Reincarnation resonates for me because it connects my consciousness and spirit to the cycle of birth and death. It's not so much about bookends or beginnings and endings. Life and death are a continuum.

All traditional cultures have this sense of spiritual continuity. They live with ancestors and rituals. They honor the unseen mystery of where the life-force comes from and where consciousness goes. In India, with its thousands of years of layered civilizations, this continuum is thought of as a wheel of births and deaths, of lives linked by karma and punctuated by reincarnation. Birth and death, birth and death are propelled by the subtle thread of past actions and desires toward a fulfillment that is variously described as realization, liberation, unconditional love, and Oneness.

I am one of those evolving souls. From my birth in 1931 as Richard Alpert to Ram Dass as I am now, a spiritual seeker whose aging body is nearing death, this incarnation has been a journey of awakening. My life has been a succession of openings, accompanied by profound changes in point of view, how I identify who I am, how I see myself. At times, I feel like I'm on a spiral staircase, looking back at my former

selves on the landings below, while above I am the witness, ensconced in my soul, watching myself traverse the steps of this incarnation.

Maharaj-ji's unconditioned love has radiated and reverberated through my life. Through his eyes I see everything in my life as an orchestrated play, each person and situation and desire a potential ingredient in the recipe for awakening. My sweep of years seems like a series of adventures, none of them coincidences. They are populated by an extraordinary panorama of friends straight from central casting. My fellow performers in the dance of love are, as I am, working out their own karma and sliding in and out of the embrace of the One. My life is part of a unified field, an interconnected whole, of which you, dear reader, are a part.

As a teacher, I always use my life experiences as a lesson plan—often as an example of what *not* to do. I am reminded of when I was flying my airplane with Tim Leary. I was circling the airfield in Mexico City where we were to land. I meant to follow the tower's instructions for landing, but with my inadequate Spanish I flew right into the path of a big Aeronaves de México airliner. The other pilot had to abort his landing and pull up in a hurry to avoid a crash. When I finally landed, our plane was surrounded by grim-looking *federales*. Everyone was furious. Tim, in his charming and inimitable way, knew how to get out of the jam. He said, "This is going to cost us about twenty dollars." It did, and we went out to lunch.

My high flying and risk taking have sometimes been destructive. A lot of things don't just go away with twenty dollars. But it's important to me to share as truthfully as I can. Some of the story that follows you may find familiar. I am nearing ninety now, and behind me lie decades of talks, books, and recordings. I hope putting these experiences together in the context of this incarnation will be helpful to you, as it is to me. After all, we are fellow souls. We are on the same journey home to the heart.

This is a story of awakening from feeling separate and alienated toward living in oneness and love. May this look back at my incarnation encourage you in yours.

Ram Dass
Maui, Hawaii
December 2019

PART I

LEARNING AND
UNLEARNING



See everything
in the universe
for the good.

MAHARAJ-JI

FIRE—AND FREE

Did you give drugs to an undergraduate?”

It was May 14, 1963, and I was in the office of Harvard University president Nathan M. Pusey. A youthful-looking man with a patrician air, Pusey was known for both his low-key manner and his outspoken commitment to academic freedom. Early in his tenure, he'd tangled with Senator Joseph McCarthy and won great praise for resisting the demagogue's attempt to get several Harvard professors fired for being supposed Communists. Now he was staring at me from across his desk. He wanted an answer. Perhaps I had pushed the boundary of academic freedom too far.

His question wasn't that crazy. As an assistant professor in clinical psychology and education, I'd spent two years working with my colleague Timothy Leary, a lecturer in clinical psychology, on research projects involving psychedelic drugs. Tim and I were hardly the first to take an interest; research into LSD and mescaline was already happening in Canada and England. Harvard itself had conducted experiments in the 1950s on the mind-altering effects of LSD. Later it was revealed that this research was sponsored by the Central Intelligence Agency, as part of its MK-Ultra project.

By this point psychedelics had also captured the public imagination. In May 1957, *Life* magazine published a cover story titled “Seeking the Magic Mushrooms.” It was a first-person account by a New York banker named R. Gordon Wasson, who had ingested a handful of “divine” wild

mushrooms in the mountains of Mexico and reported visions “more real to me than anything I had ever seen with my own eyes.”

But a lot of the early research focus had been on the drugs’ psychotomimetic qualities, their potential to mimic psychosis. The CIA was interested in mind control and in some instances gave LSD to people without their knowledge or consent. Tim and I saw a potential in psychedelics not for psychosis, but for therapy, creativity, and spiritual growth. Some researchers, like the British psychiatrist Humphry Osmond, were already exploring this therapeutic approach. (He coined the term *psychedelic*, meaning “mind manifesting.”) Osmond was successfully using psychedelics to treat conditions like alcoholism and depression.

Our own first experiences of psychedelics were overwhelmingly positive—and profound. Six months after Tim tried wild mushrooms in Mexico, a hallucinogenic trip that sent him down “the cellular time tunnel,” as he put it, he facilitated my journey one night back in Cambridge with a dose of psilocybin, the synthetic version of the mushrooms.

I was twenty-nine at the time, an academic up-and-comer. I had a PhD from Stanford University, as well as research contracts at Stanford and Yale. I’d landed the assistant professorship at Harvard just a year earlier. As the son of the president of the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad, I was comfortable with Boston’s elite and had all the trappings of academic success: a path to tenure, a corner office, two secretaries, dozens of research assistants, a Cambridge apartment full of antiques, a Mercedes-Benz, a Triumph motorcycle, an MG sports car, even a Cessna airplane.

Psilocybin turned my up-and-coming world upside-down. For the first time I saw myself from *outside* myself. Who I *thought* I was—a son, a professor, a psychologist—was not who I *actually* was. I thought my physical and psychological identity was everything. Psychedelics showed me I was a soul. There were planes of pure being beyond my achievements, prestige, and rational understanding. The realization was cataclysmic. It made me feel, as I would refer to it for many years afterward, that I was finally home, home in my heart.

Changed by our experiences, Tim and I embarked on a series of experiments to explore the creative and therapeutic potential of