

WALKING EACH OTHER HOME

*Conversations
on Loving
and Dying*

RAM DASS & MIRABAI BUSH



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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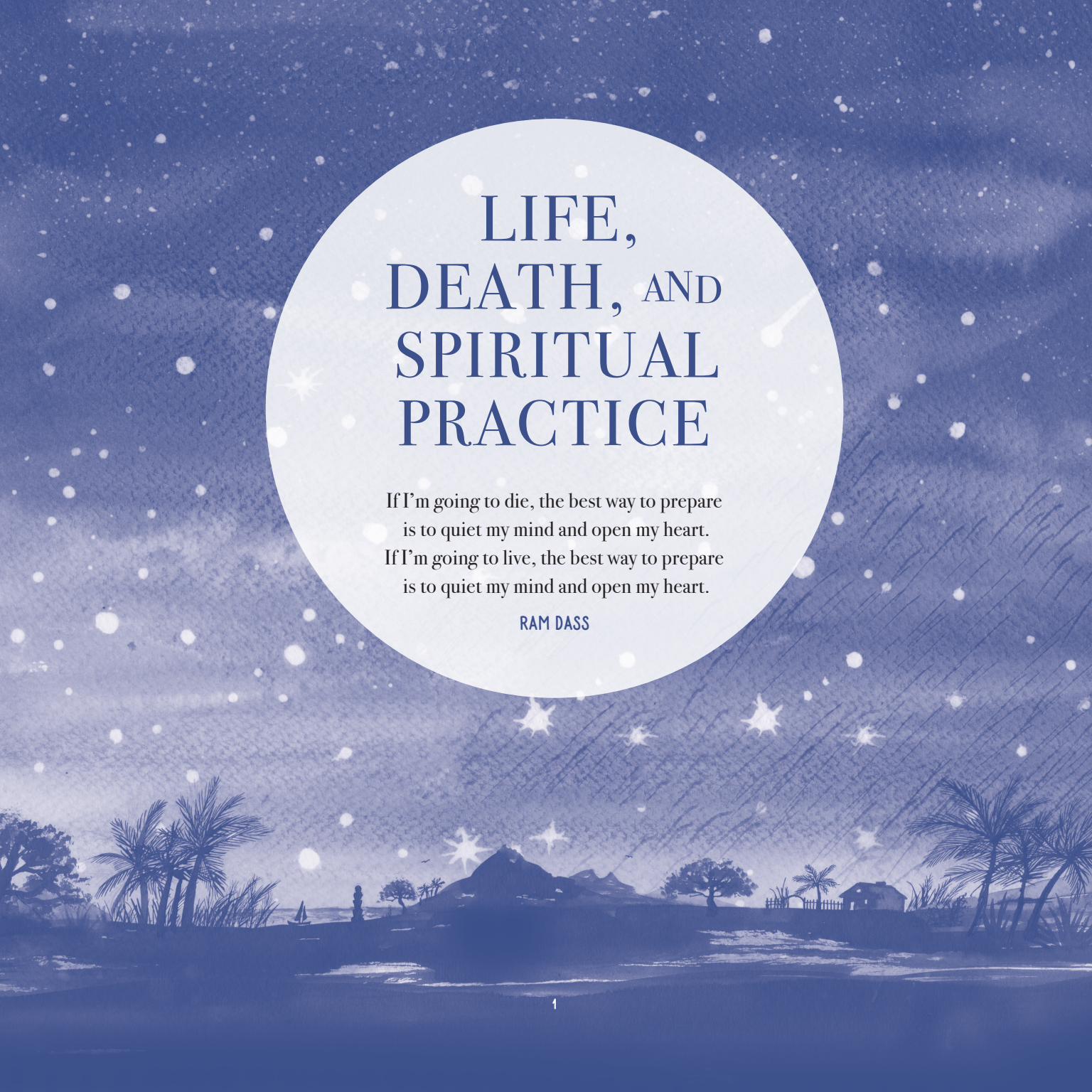
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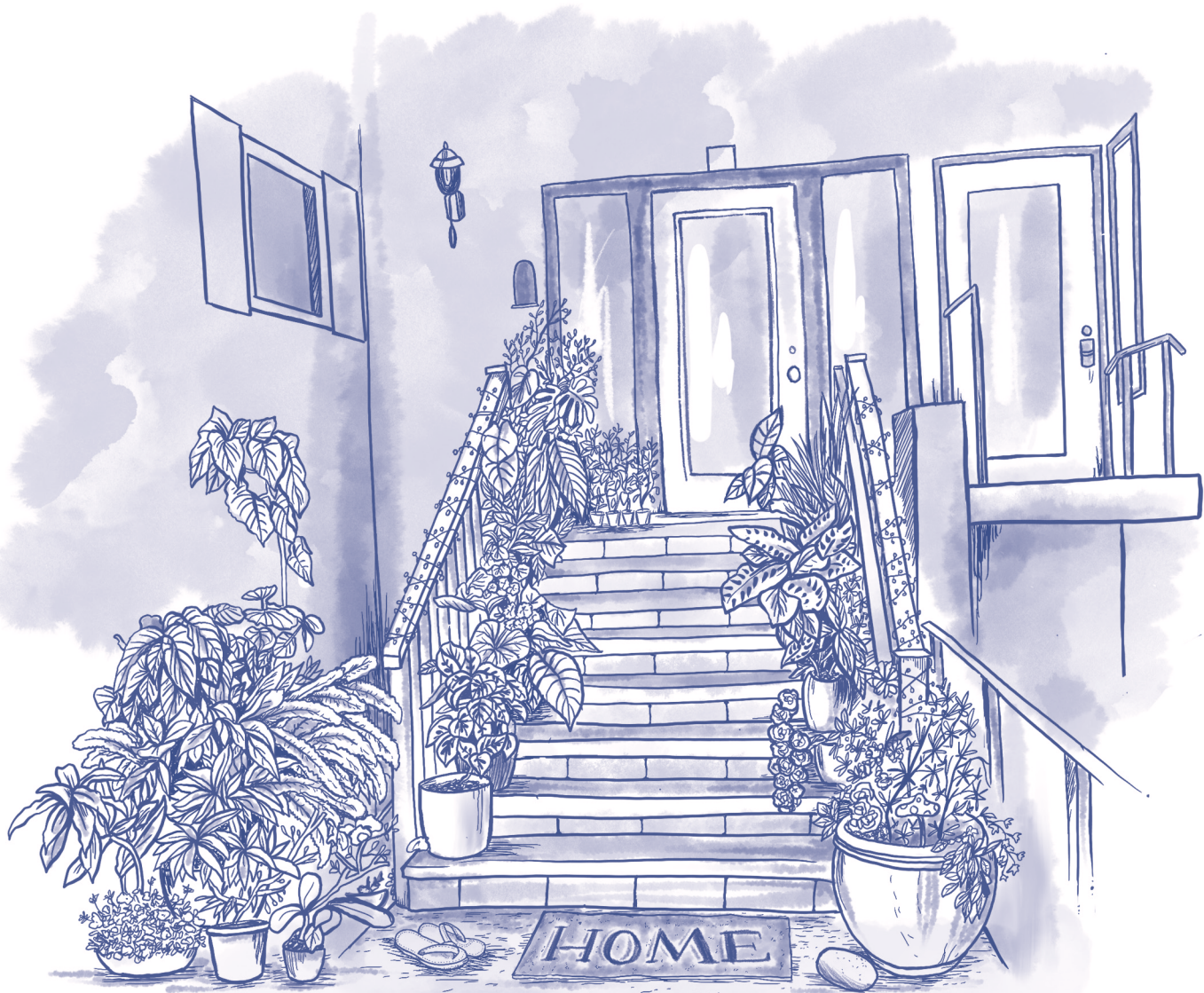
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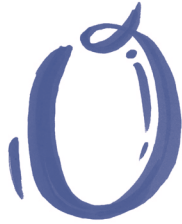
LIFE, DEATH, AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

If I'm going to die, the best way to prepare
is to quiet my mind and open my heart.
If I'm going to live, the best way to prepare
is to quiet my mind and open my heart.

RAM DASS



ARRIVAL



On my way to Maui from Western Massachusetts for our first conversations, I am sitting in the cramped space of a Delta flight eating cookies and reading a book by the poet and philosopher John O'Donohue, a friend who had died a few years before. He wrote that paying attention to death reminds us of the incredible miracle of being here, where “we are all wildly, dangerously free.”

I think that writing about death will be challenging. Death relates to all of life, so which paths should we take, which stories should we tell, which questions should we pursue? We want to ask questions that will lead to a process of opening and deepening and to an appreciation of how facing death can alter life in helpful and maybe even amazing ways.

Right now I am asking, what do we each *really* know about death, in the midst of this wildly, dangerously free life that we are living? I am not sure, but I know I'll learn a lot from sitting with Ram Dass.

I arrive in Maui late at night. Ram Dass lives in a sprawling house on a hill overlooking the Pacific. His caregivers live there too, and usually old friends are staying as well. Its open floor plan and staircase elevator chair make it easy for Ram Dass to move around in his wheelchair. There are always fresh flowers—hibiscus, ginger, protea, and birds-of-paradise—and napping cats. Everyone is asleep, and I go right to bed. As I doze off, I can hear the quiet whooshing of the ceiling fan and feel the trade winds blowing through the window, ruffling the batiks depicting Hanuman and Ganesh.

To see Ram Dass the next morning after some months away is a return to the home of my heart. As he arrives at the breakfast table, he looks at me from his wheelchair with eyes I have known for so long and through so much. I fall into them and immediately feel happy throughout my body. We hug and then hug more deeply. Beaming. Yes, yes, yes. Over eggs

and toast, he asks about my husband, E. J., and his godson, my only son Owen, and my granddaughter, Dahlia, whom he blessed soon after she entered the world. “They are all well. My hip has been bothering me.” And I tell him what Dahlia told me: “Ama, you’re not old. Old is when you get broken and you can’t get fixed.”

Ram Dass laughs. As he downs his vitamins and medications, he says, “I guess we’re not old. We’re still getting fixed.”



GOING INWARD

After breakfast, we go upstairs, where Ram Dass has his bed, a bathroom, his office—a wall of books, photos of friends, an altar with Maharaj-ji’s picture, a phone, an intercom. Lakshman, who helps care for Ram Dass, moves him from his wheelchair to a big, comfy reclining chair and covers him with a blanket. The scent of sandalwood from incense burned at the morning chant downstairs floats up into the room.

I jump right in and ask, “You’ve written and spoken so much about death before this. Do you have a new understanding about death now that you’re getting closer?”

Ram Dass closes his eyes and is silent for a long time. I have no idea what he will say. “I snuggle up to Maharaj-ji. I distance myself from the body, my body.”

“How do you do that?”

“I identify with the witness, with awareness, with the soul. The body is ending, but the soul will go on and on and on. I keep going inward to the soul.”

“Is that different from before?”

“My body is dying now, but I don’t feel like I’m dying. I’m fascinated with how my body is . . . doing it.”

We both laugh.

Then he says: “For many years, I’d been thinking about the phenomenon of death, but not my own death. I’d talk about it with Stephen Levine and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, with Frank Ostaseski, Dale Borglum, Bodhi Be, Joan Halifax, and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, and I’d read the words of great masters and others about death. Now, when I piece it together with my heart, not with my intellect, I find nothing to fear if I identify with loving awareness. Death becomes simply the final stage of my sadhana. My death . . . my death . . .”

Ram Dass is quiet for a long time, looking out at the sea. We’ve talked about death before, but not so directly and so personally. Saying it out loud changes things.

“For hours I look at the ocean, and I see it as a symbol. It’s the ocean of love, and I can just float. It’s infinite. I’m getting used to infinite. Time . . . time is just moving, and I am withdrawing out of time. I find myself asking what day, what month, what year this is. But I never ask what moment this is. Ah, this moment. Ah . . . I’ve been shedding roles, like the role of ‘strokee.’ I’m doing the work of sadhana: bringing up the past and loving it.”

“Loving it?” I ask.

“Loving it as a thought. Letting go of regrets and loving the past for what it was and is. There’s a difference between clinging to memories and reexperiencing them from present consciousness. They’re all just thoughts. The key is to stay in your heart. Just keep loving.”



THE PAINFUL TRUTH



ater that morning, after a break, we begin our next session in Ram Dass's room, exploring what David Whyte calls "the conversational nature of reality." I am tired but so happy to be with Ram Dass that I barely notice. He gets settled in his recliner, with his blanket warming his legs on this overcast and breezy Maui day. Lucian, another of his caretakers, brings us chai that tastes like cinnamon.

The day before, Ram Dass had been sitting with a Brazilian woman who is on a self-retreat in a cabin on the property. She told him about being on a plane that almost crashed and how she had thought she would die but didn't. "It shook her," he says. After the experience she felt more comfortable with death, having been so close to it. Ram Dass says, "That was fierce grace."

Ram Dass has always seen life as a journey of growth and everything that happens to us as an opportunity to learn, awaken, and grow. Learning from a frightening experience is therefore a great gift. He and I begin to talk about how you can get beyond the fear of death if you don't have the good fortune of being in the near crash of a plane.

Ram Dass says, "Well, we are all dying, but nobody admits it. People want a long life. It makes sense; they only know life, not death."

"Remember what Wavy says: 'Death was Patrick Henry's second choice.'"

Ram Dass laughs and shakes his head. Sixties icon and activist Wavy Gravy always makes us laugh, even at the most difficult times.

Then Ram Dass says, "Death is a painful truth. But death is also only a thought. Ramana Maharshi said, 'Don't believe your thoughts. *I am the body* is a thought. *I am the mind* is a thought.

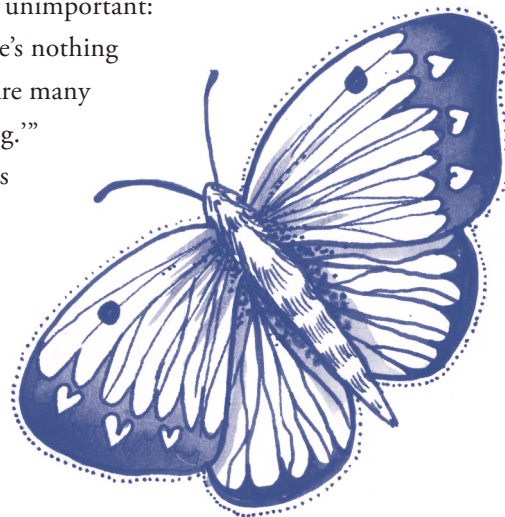
I am the doer is a thought. Worry is only a thought. Fear is only a thought. Death is only a thought.’”

We talk about how we all have fears. Fear begins early in our lives and has helped us survive as a species, originally from being eaten by tigers and now from being hurt in a car crash if we don’t buckle up. We fear the unknown: What will happen to us if a terrorist decides to bomb the airport? Specific fears can be helpful—we buckle up. But when we fear death itself—what happens when the heart stops beating—it often becomes a more generalized anxiety, and it can be debilitating. With an anxious and unclear mind, we don’t see things as they are, and we can make bad choices.

I tell Ram Dass about my sister’s fears as she was dying. “I wondered what fear remained since the dementia had affected her memory so much, so I asked her, ‘Are you afraid of dying? Of leaving behind the children you love?’

She said simply, ‘I’m afraid.’ She showed me her tumor, which was swelling the skin over her liver. She didn’t know what it was. Mostly she thought that the swelling made her look pregnant—‘at this time in my life!’ But she didn’t say why she was afraid, didn’t mention death. She skipped away from it to make it seem unimportant: ‘Well, everybody has fears.’ Then she moved to saying there’s nothing really to be afraid of: ‘If anything happened to me, there are many people here in the nursing home who would come running.’”

But by denying death, my sister didn’t change what was happening. She died. We all die, and those people who would come running can’t stop death, which Gelek Rimpoche describes as retreating, retreating, retreating, until finally we retreat even from the seed we collected from our parents, into our deepest point.



MEMENTO MORI

Ram Dass has talked about how our culture supports the fear and denial of death in many ways, from our glorification of youth in the media to embalming practices that make the dead person appear to be still alive. We are discouraged from looking at the bare bones, as it were, of mortality. My mother told us not to talk about “unpleasant things.”

Dying most often takes place in hospitals or nursing homes, removed from the natural life of the family. Hardly anyone is simply honest about it, including many doctors, who often consider death a failure in their job of ensuring health and survival even though they know we will all someday be broken and unfixable.

At a retreat for medical professionals in 1989, Ram Dass spoke about this:

Death is a failure in medicine, and to talk about death as a natural part of life and how to deal with the fear of death and how to stay open so everybody can grow from the process is a departure from the medical model. You’ve got to move by very gentle degrees. And so my suggestion is you work on yourself. You look at your own fear of dying. And then as you work on yourself and you’re lighter about it, your colleagues become interested in what’s happening to you. They in turn start to hear it. They may be burning out from being entrapped in failure—because for the medical community, the problem is that all patients die. Sooner or later, everybody dies. I mean, it’s just built into the system. And how do you deal with continual failure? Do you keep saying, “Well, medical technology hasn’t evolved that far, but later we’ll stop that”?

We have to get
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FEAR

so we know it.

Know our attachments,
and let them

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We have to be willing to look at Everything.



The Western religious traditions all tell us to remember that we will die—memento mori. In *The Shambhala Principle*, Buddhist teacher Sakyong Mipham says that “when we feel inadequate, we consume the world around us rapaciously” so that we don’t have to think about death.

Ram Dass says, “We have to get close to what we fear, so we know it. Know our attachments and let them go. We have to be willing to look at everything. Keeping death at arm’s length keeps us from living life fully.” He goes on: “In the Mahabharata, the sage Yudhisthira is asked, ‘Of all things in life, what is the most amazing?’ He answers that a man, seeing others die all around him, never thinks that he will die. But everyone dies. Each of us will die. We just don’t know when.”

I say, “Maharaj-ji said to always tell the truth and you’ll never be afraid. I guess that means that if you look at the truth of your own death, you won’t fear it.”

In his classic book *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin wonders if “the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death.”

