

CHAPTER FIVE:RAM DASS (RICHARD ALPERT, PhD)PSYCHOLOGIST, SEEKER AND SERVERand Seva, an Organization of Service¹

Richard Alpert was born in 1931 to a wealthy and influential American Jewish family. He was always very active in community affairs and, although somewhat traditional in his Jewish ways, was initially more interested in politics than in spirituality. He followed a career path befitting one from an advantaged socio-economic background. He received his Phd in psychology, taught at Stanford University, and served as visiting professor at the University of California at Berkeley. In in his early thirties, from 1955, he was a psychologist at Harvard and also worked in Harvard's Health Service as a therapist. He also had research contracts with Yale and Stanford. He had an elegant apartment in Cambridge, fancy cars, an airplane, a sailboat, a motorcycle and a bicycle!

Nevertheless, Dr. Richard Alpert felt that *something* was missing, *something* was wrong in his world--something he could not define nor put a finger on.

I felt that the psychologists didn't really have a grasp of the human condition, and that the theories I was teaching, which were the theories of achievement and defense mechanisms and so on, weren't getting to the crux of the matter. At a personal level, I felt that after five years of psychoanalysis I was, in my personal life, as neurotic as when I started, working as a "nine-to-five psychologist". Basically, I felt I was mainly playing a good game in the academic world. The nature of life was a mystery to me, all that I was teaching did not add to a feeling of anything like wisdom. Among my peers were the first team in cognitive psychology, personality psychology, developmental psychology. I felt that their lives were not fulfilled.

There was not enough human beauty, human fulfillment, human contentment. In the face of this feeling of malaise, I ate more, collected more possessions, collected more appointments and positions of status, more sexual and alcoholic orgies, and more wildness in my life.²

Early in 1960, Richard Alpert met Timothy Leary who, together with David McLelland, had started a large psychedelic project at Harvard University and was exploring and experimenting with the effects of psychedelics on himself and on students. Soon after their meeting, Alpert "joined in" and, on March 6th, had his first psychedelic experience.³ The experience remains fresh in his memory even after many years, and he recalls how he had then thought of it as an "external hallucination:"

... a figure was standing about 8 feet away from me which seemed to represent the various aspects of my "Richard Alpert-ness"--the professor, the social cosmopolite, the cellist, the lover, etc. With each presentation, as these aspects of myself seemed to separate away from me, I again and again reassured myself that I did not need that particular persona or social identity anyway. As long as I could keep "his body," I felt I could handle this. But then, I had a feeling that my whole body disintegrated in front of my eyes. Slowly, to my horror, I saw the progressive disappearance of my limbs, and then torso, until all I could see with my eyes open was the couch on which I sat. I panicked, I felt I must be dying, because there was nothing in my universe that led me to believe in life beyond the body. Panic mounted, adrenalin shot through my system; but along with this, I heard an intimate voice asking, quietly and rather jocularly, "but who's minding the store?". And then, slowly, I realized that although everything by which I knew myself, my body and even my life itself, was gone--and I was still fully aware! Not only that, but this aware "I" was watching the entire drama, including the panic, with calm compassion.

Instantly, with this recognition, I felt a new kind of calmness--one of a profundity never experienced before. I had only that "I"--that scanning device, that point, that essence, that place beyond. A place where "I" existed independent of social and physical identity. That which was "I" was beyond life and death. And something else--that "I" *knew*. It really knew. It was wise rather than just knowledgeable. It was a voice inside that spoke truth. I recognized it, was one with it, and felt as if my entire life of looking to the outside world for reassurance--David Reisman's "other-directed being," was over. Now I need only to look within to that place where I knew. ...Fear turned to exaltation. I run out into the snow laughing

as the huge flakes swirled about me. In a moment the house was lost from view, but it was all right because now I knew.⁴

Dr Alpert's first psychedelic experience was, for him, intense. Even though highly symbolic, Alpert's experience touched the heart of the issue of death and the fears associated with that subject in our materialistic society--the fear of being stripped of personal and social identity, the fear of physical disembodiment. To his surprise and, in fact, to his ultimate relief, he discovered that rather than totally disappearing he arrived at a larger sense of "I", at a sense of inner knowingness that transcended all illusions about physical death and the extinction of awareness.

Taken seriously (as was surely the case with Dr. Alpert), such experience and contemplations are indeed very transformative--particularly for someone who had been specializing in mainstream scientific perspectives and the accompanying consumerism and mirror-nihilism. Thus, what may appear to be simply a drug-induced perceptual illusion, distortion, or confusion, amounted to a thorough reassessment of the dominant Western modes of "rational" perception and it led Dr. Alpert to embark upon a search for meaning and growth that became the underlying force of all his life and actions.

Dr. Alpert's first psychedelic "journey" triggered his interest in further exploration of the newly-discovered realms and dimension of life. He pursued his explorations both personally and through his work in prison and at the Harvard Psychedelic Research Project, which Alpert and Timothy Leary founded in 1960. They began with psilocybin and eventually used LSD. To the growing discontent of university authorities, about two hundred volunteers--graduate students, teaching assistants, and some professors--participated in the exploratory experimentation with LSD.

At that time there had not even developed a language, within mainstream psychology, to describe altered states of consciousness, ecstasies, or visions. There were no descriptive or interpretative models for these experiential states outside of

"psychosis." On the other hand, these experiences were valued in traditional cultures and generally considered mystical and religious. Leary and Alpert embarked on their exploratory journey with no references or "maps," and they found (as suggested by other researchers such as Watts and later Grof), that the content and the nature of psychedelic experience was a function of *set* and *setting*--namely, expectations regarding what might happen, and the environment in which the drug was used. Alpert and Leary reported that they observed, in typical cases, a heightened sensitivity of the senses and a speeding up of the thought process. They also observed, in most cases, a very profound perceptual experience of interpersonal shift of figure and ground. When subjects under the influence of the psychedelic would, for example, look at others, they would see the others as similar to themselves. In this regard, psychedelics appeared to facilitate the experience of interconnectedness.

This self-exploration was, for Alpert, the beginning of the realization of our attachment, as Westerners, to our conventional sensorial and rational modes of perception as the vehicles through which we receive information--and of how this limitation keeps us so exclusively focused on *things* and on the world of *form* that we even conceive of ourselves as *things* of *form*. What Richard Alpert was beginning to discover was another, larger, part of himself--the part that was *formless*.

But...how would you know about it? You can't hear it, you can't see it, you can't smell it or taste it, you can't touch it, you can't even think about it. Because it is not an object, you can not think about it. This is about as deep as mysticism gets, actually. Like when Einstein said: "I didn't arrive at my understanding about the primary laws of the universe through my rational mind," what I understand him to have meant is that he went beyond his thinking mind and beyond his sense experiences and he went into--this is where words begin to fall apart--some way of being with what is, where you become one with it. There is no longer subject-object, nor 'thinking about,' nor a relationship. He *became* $E=mc^2$ and then he came back and he articulated it because he was a physicist. In the same way Bach *became* music and then

came back and imperfectly, but really pretty good still, articulated the Brandenburg concerto. Or, Mozart, De Vinci, Picasso, MichaelAngelo...⁵

Alpert, Leary, Metzner and his colleagues, and the people following in their footsteps, continued experimenting with psychedelics and accessing the nonverbal aspects of the subconscious mind--which they had been pursuing in a theoretical way for so many years. Unavoidably, a gap was created between them and their academic peers who were not ready to experiment upon themselves with psychedelics and believed that Alpert, Leary and their cohorts had lost their scientific objectivity in their willingness to be their own subjects--experimenters upon themselves. Leary, on the other hand, considered it unethical for anyone to give another a drug that one was not willing to take oneself.

The university fired both Alpert and Leary in 1963 in an attempt to deal with the challenge and dilemma that psychedelic experimentation posed to the scientific community, and to quell the growing student interest. At the Press Conference convened for the occasion, Alpert became very much aware that in the eyes of mainstream society he was an eccentric, or simply mad; but he was already feeling increasingly dissatisfied with purely intellectual knowledge, and with the contemporary materialistic philosophy.

When I was at Harvard I was paid for thinking. Ever since I was a child I was taught "thinking is better". And look what a mess it creates, because it doesn't recognize the deeper harmony and deeper unity that exists among people and between us and nature on all levels. It tries to figure it all out and see what it *does*.

...And there is a very deep Western predisposition to identify with your thoughts. To think you are your thoughts--that who you *think* you are is who you are...

...But what happens if the major stuff--happiness and survival and existence--if that is rooted in something that you can't know you know. What are we going to do? What if it is not amenable to the scientific method? Should we reject it? Or is it possible for us to become--to train ourselves to go beyond our own minds and our attachment to our senses and our thinking

minds?...It is scary when you recognize that a vast part of yourself is nonconceptual. You can be it but you can't *know* it...

Western cognitive psychology does not deal with this at all, by the way. It talks about what you think about. It assumes an identity between you and the thinker: 'cogito ergo sum'. But just imagine now how are you gonna get through that part of yourself that can't be known by your intellect without putting your intellect down? It is a beautiful servant but a lousy master. And you treat it as master most the time. It's wonderful if you can think but it is not so great if you can't stop it. It is like the sorcerer's apprentice, it goes on and on and you can't stop it.⁶

Alpert was thus starting to discover, by glimpses, the realm of the intuitive and the spiritual, a perspective of life and reality that made much more sense to him and was much more meaningful. He was experiencing high moments of ecstasy, of self-discovery, or of cosmic or spiritual union with the aid of psychedelics; but these were always followed by "downs"--however ingenious their experimental designs. The frustration this caused in him, coupled with his sense of responsibility for those who were following him and to whom he could offer no stable spiritual state of being through psychedelics, gave rise to much self-doubt. After all, he had just lost a good academic position and possibly the prospects of a successful career in his field. His future was uncertain, and it was increasingly obvious that to reach lasting enlightenment was not a simple matter.

Depressed and discouraged, Richard Alpert simply followed the example of others like Metzner, Leary, and Alan Ginsberg and went to India. He did not feel much optimism--either about psychedelics or about India. Initially, he simply visited some sites and learned some mantras and Hindu ways; but soon, through a series of unplanned events and circumstances, Alpert met the teacher who became his Guru: Neem Karoli Baba (Maharaji).

Alpert's first encounter with Maharaji was very powerful. It involved a totally unexpected, and novel, for Alpert, sense of psychic communication, in which Maharaji seemed able to literally read Alpert's thoughts and sense his emotional and physical

sensations (an extremely violent pain in his chest, for example, as well as his almost overpowering feeling of communion and "homecoming").

For the first time I recognized a being who had realized the potential that my own awakening had shown me to be a possibility. His heart so received my own that I at once understood the meaning of "guru". I found myself embarked upon a traditional yogic path to God of gurukripa, or opening to the grace of the guru...⁷

That night Alpert was taken to a temple about 12 miles away to stay overnight. Soon thereafter, Alpert carried out the ultimate LSD experiment, the one that provided the long sought answer about the validity of the insights reached through psychedelics and their value in spiritual fulfillment: Maharaji's own LSD experience. Rather humorously and light heartedly, Maharaji ingested what according to Alpert was an extraordinarily large (and potentially fatal) dosage of LSD and experienced or showed no change whatever! Maharaji's constant loving state of being was apparently more consistent and more comprehensive than anything LSD could induce. Alpert thus arrived at one of his most significant realizations since his first psychedelic "trip," namely, that we all have the capacity for higher states of consciousness, and we can reach them and maintain them in more stable and integrated ways through meditation.

...a moment without thinking: "I am aware" or "that is a tree" a moment that perhaps occurred as you walked alone in the woods or on a beach as the roar of the ocean washed away all your thoughts--such a moment brings a sense of rightness, of clarity, of being at one. Such moments are the essence of meditation.⁸

They named him Ram Dass (Sanskrit for "servant of God") and invited him to stay in the ashram--with no vows, promises, contracts, or conditions of any sort. To his surprise, he found great excitement, sheer fun and bliss in just "hanging out" around Maharaji, watching him lovingly interact with those around him with steady constancy.

More than anything, perhaps, Alpert felt such a deep love for and with him that he perceived himself expanding beyond his self-consciousness and his ego and even his own individual person. His feelings were so profound and so strong that it launched him on his path (a path perhaps difficult to understand from our Western perspective) of devotion through devotion to his guru--a path which he continues to follow (though Maharaji died in 1973).

Such a path is not easy. For him it involved the challenge of transforming, or rather expanding, the overwhelming personal love he felt for his Guru into a truly unconditional, service-oriented, *transpersonal* love. As he deepened his meditation practice, Alpert became increasingly, and painfully, aware of the strong hold his ego, personality characteristics, selfish interests, and emotions had on his consciousness. He often felt strong blocks within himself obstructing the unconditional love that was his will. To overcome these obstructions through compassionate service has been Ram Dass' major aspiration and endeavor.

This was Maharaji's bidding from the beginning. When Ram Dass would ask him, with some anxiety at times, knowing his eventual return was inevitable, how he could carry out his work in America, Maharaji would always reply: "Love people, serve people, feed people, and remember God."

Back in the United States, Ram Dass made numerous public appearances during the late sixties and seventies. In lectures and at conferences, he spoke of his own insights and told his own story of trials and tribulations on his new spiritual path and his practice of meditation. He also brought back, for everyone to see, some of the external aspects of his India experience including his Indian attire and various Hindu symbols and images. These images, he later reflects, may have fit the mood and the mode of the time:

During the late sixties and early seventies there was a period of fanaticism in our spiritual involvement. We were importing models from the East at a great rate and trying very hard to convert ourselves but, in a manner consistent with our tradition of doing things from the outside in, although we were taking a lot of the symbols and accoutrements and might have looked like Buddha from outside, from inside we were just somebody who was trying to look like Buddha. We were very confused about vows and commitments, the relationship to teachers, the whole concept of Guru, and what the journey was about. In the sixties the word God was still taboo, so we talked about "altered states of consciousness."⁹

So Ram Dass used only his Hindu name and wore Hindu robes, flowers, and beads, and this perhaps contributed to the receptivity of his ideas and explanations among that growing population that was then in a similar phase. But even in those years, underlying Ram Dass' own stages and changes, there was always a profound sense of purpose and of commitment to the search for truth. He kept up his practice of meditation and compassionate service to others. Even his ongoing search was an offering: as he went through his various phases and changes, and even when he stumbled, it was always in full view of his followers--and always shared with his audiences. Many of those who watched and followed him were helped or, at least, encouraged, in their own struggle to develop and maintain a genuine spiritual foundation in a competitive, consumerist, and materialistic society.

During the seventies, Ram Dass deepened his meditation practices, experimenting with and practicing diverse methods and paths--an eclecticism he strongly advocates for finding the path of one's heart.

It is scary when you recognize that the vast part of yourself is nonconceptual. You can be it but you can't know it. The Tao says "the student learns by daily increments", "the way is gained by daily loss." You clean away the conceptual structures. It is like regaining or having innocence with what just is...

In a way the Zen koan, when you are confronted with something that the rational mind can't solve, is another way of Jana yoga--of forcing you to go beyond your thinking mind, to go

outside of it...A Kohan such as, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" or, "How do you know your Buddha nature through the sound of a cricket?" or whatever... And you keep trying, your mind keeps wrestling with it... When who you think you are dies, then you are what you are... This is weird stuff, it would seem a course in psychosis...¹⁰

This approach, consistent with Eastern philosophies and practices, was an attempt to relieve suffering by way of realizing that the conditions causing suffering are actually illusions created by our minds. The idea is that, by extricating oneself from the illusions of one's mind, one may avoid drawing other people into them and, perhaps, help free others from their own illusions. This did not entirely disengage Ram Dass from other people's suffering or obviate his acknowledging the burning social issues with which they were concerned. On the contrary, he often gathered with people to consider issues of relationship and responsibility. But in these consciousness-exploration gatherings, the question was always how to be involved in the world and the work and how to care while maintaining the perspective that: "It is all an exercise to awaken out of the illusions created by our minds."

The phrase "be in the world, but not of it", often heard among the "New Age" population, speaks to the perceived balancing act involved in helping, caring, and serving while remaining emotionally unattached and free from personal interests and outcomes. In his work with the dying (including tending to his sick father during the last years of his father's life) as well as with their survivors, and also in his work with people suffering from AIDS or cancer, Ram Dass has evolved this perspective:

When a person is facing death in the near future, the model they have that they are going to die creates tremendous suffering. And part of their healing process is to come so much into the moment of what their lives are about that they are healed into the moment and then whether they live or die is whether they live or die. Whether we are talking about healing into death or healing into life there is still a healing process that comes to heal out of your mind all the models you create that create all the fear that "I am dying" or that "we are about to die."

There is a way of living with death, which is like Don Juan¹¹ talking about living with death lurking over your left shoulder...or the presence of the bomb that is forcing people into the moment more...and sometimes that goes in the direction of, "let's get anything we can now because there'll be nothing later.". The other side of it is the incredible appreciation of the preciousness of each moment that, because there are no numbers you don't know, so, just the sweetness of the flower, or the laugh of a baby, just these moments are increasingly precious. ...And when I am sitting with somebody that is dying of Aids or of some form of cancer, or some brain tumor, always I think, "Am I ready for this? Can I keep my heart open in this condition? Can I stay conscious in it?" And I think what we in this country often do, we play King of the mountain and we figure in order for us to be happy we'll turn our vision away from people that are suffering. And I think that's a false sense of happiness. I don't think you are happy when you have to block out part of the universe. I think the art is to learn to keep your heart open in hell and not have to turn away from pain in order to be happy. I think there is a way to embrace the universe into yourself, it's hard because it's a lot to embrace suffering and, at the same moment, have that faith in the way of things that allows the joy to be there.¹²

All his unfolding explorations and endeavors represented a significant change in Richard Alpert--Ram Dass--from his earlier life of academic, intellectual, and primarily self-serving activities. His serious commitment to his spiritual path and to worldly service challenges the view that the contemplative mood and life-style of people who in the seventies "dropped out" from the mainstream represented no more than self gratification and escapism. In Ram Dass' view such contemplative pursuits were as direct a route to compassionate action as there could be:

...and what we have developed in this 'me generation' all these years is a certain sophistication, I hope, that consciousness studies--the work on oneself to become an instrument for the relief of suffering--so you have to do it on all levels at once...What I want to learn how to do more and better is to enunciate karma yoga in our society, that is the yoga of doing what you do and doing it in a way of becoming free. It's much harder to stay high in the marketplace, but if you want to get free you can go to the marketplace and use that as a vehicle to be free. ¹³

The "dropping out" of the seventies was not a reflection, of course, only of psychedelics or other drug use nor of a spiritual search away from the mainstream. The noted "hippie" clown, Wavy Gravy, a.k.a. Hugh Romney, who was in charge of security in the original Woodstock Festival, and since then still lives in a communal setting--truly devoted to service-- felt that such temporary withdrawal from the social arena responded to other, perhaps deeper, processes.

We had spent our entire lives trying to stop the genocide in Southeast Asia. We had no personal life. But I think the people involved through the 60S stuff have now had enough fun with yuppification--with their Porsches. They've gotten to know their kids, reacquainted themselves with their friends, and now they have reemerged with tremendous consciousness and a feeling of interconnection.¹⁴

Wavy never took time out. Relentlessly committed to involved social activism (with his Hog Farm commune where he still lives today, with his clown work with dying children and his summer camp for children, his active involvement in anti-nuclear activities during the 1980s, and his work with Seva foundation), Wavy Gravy observed, during the 1980's. a resurgence of socio-political-spiritual activism similar to that of the early 1960s:

... the '80s are the '60s twenty years later. It's like the same old feathers, but a very new bird. In fact, I think people have an awareness of themselves in relation to the planet and the ecosystem the likes of which never existed before in human history. People were first alarmed and freaked out and then resigned to how the mathematical chances for everything falling apart were so great. But now they're getting over the debilitating statistics and starting to move again... optimism is the best survival weapon...

...What really came out of the '60s is that people got a deep print about what peace and love and brotherhood mean...¹⁵

From the late 1970s, Ram Dass' life appeared to be focused primarily upon worldly activism and social change. His life as well as his lectures reflected a deep sense of social responsibility for the conditions that we in our society generate ourselves. No longer needing to emulate any particular philosophy or system--safe now in his own articulation and integration of Eastern concepts and practices within his contemporary Western context, he dropped his Hindu attire, his beard and long hair and, often, his Hindu name. But he has maintained, and deepened, his practice of meditation, the constant work on himself and on social issues--all this to sustain and support him in his ongoing mission--his monumental tasks of "feeding others," "serving others," and "loving others unconditionally."

His commitment to the practice of karma yoga found its ultimate expression in 1978, when he accepted the invitation to join the Board of Directors of an impressive organization through which to collaborate in relieving suffering in the world: the Seva Foundation. Seva's history (the name is Sanskrit for "service"), is truly fascinating but, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this work.¹⁶ Ram Dass was Seva's Chairman for more than two years, remains an active member of its board of directors, and participates in its numerous projects. A gifted and candid orator who still draws large audiences of fellow "consciousness seekers," he lectures widely about the spiritual path, his insights, and the service work he is committed to--and all the proceeds from his appearances go to the organization.

His transformation from his privileged-class status to involvement with truly disadvantaged groups and numerous contemporary issues was not an easy one, and it is still unfolding.

....I have watched how difficult it has been for me to shed my middle class aversions to involvement with the hungry, poor, disenfranchised, politically tortured, sick, and dying in the world. I have seen how clinging to the security of the relative affluence we in America enjoy was cutting me off from acknowledging all people as my brothers and sisters--my family. And

yet it was only through this ultimate acknowledgment that I could know the unity in which lie freedom and real peace.

So I listened for ways to engage with the suffering of fellow beings--ways that would not freak me so badly that my heart would close in fear and panic. Over the years, I worked with the dying (all middle class) and some prison inmates. And I traveled in countries where poverty is endemic. But I continued to feel I had much more growing to do around this issue, more opening of the heart, more surrendering.¹⁷

A definite sign of his own growth and his commitment to effective social activism is, in my view, the growing recognition of the *class* dimensions of society which was a direct outgrowth of his work with the Seva Foundation and his direct contact with truly disadvantaged people (such as Mayan Indians in Guatemala). This recognition was practically nonexistent in his early life as is the case for many of the people involved in the beginnings of of this movement in this country. It also shows the truly holistic spectrum of areas of social experience that are organic to planetization..

SEVA Foundation

Seva's ongoing work (with a budget from donations in 1993 and 1994 of \$2,629,374) is truly impressive. As an example, Seva collaborates to develop locally-run, self-sustaining programs which prevent and treat blindness in Nepal and India. Through these activities, Seva helps to bring sight to tens of thousands of people each year, and helps provide training and services in all aspects of vision.¹⁸ In these countries Seva also sponsors eye surgeries for children, screening them and providing culturally appropriate communication with their families.

In Guatemala and Mexico, Seva continues to help lay ground- work for community self-help efforts. Through the years, Seva's work with and steady support of communities of Mayan Indians, displaced by the country's war, has included laying basic ground work for living (such as providing for access to drinking water, building latrines, providing sheep for wool so that women could maintain or regain their

traditional weaving skills, helping with the marketing and selling of their products, and helping them return to their original lands and to be self sufficient). Besides this work in community development, Seva has a program to sponsor children in Guatemala. Seva is also providing assistance to ensure the safety of the first of the 100,000 refugees who left Guatemala during the violence of the eighties and have now returned to build an entirely new community with schools, gardens, clinics, and legal services. Seva also trains refugee women, many of whom are still in Mexico and may never return, in Spanish skills, organic gardening, and community organizing.

At the local level, Seva gives small grants to individuals and community groups who are involved in creating neighborhood change--serving the homeless, addressing basic needs, and working on education and empowerment. For example, in 1993, Seva trained shelter residents to become professional chefs, and in Massachusetts it gave a grant to help prepare drop-out youth to become James Baldwin scholars at Hampshire College. Seva has also supported Native American communities since its inception, supporting self-reliance projects and community groups. Projects in this area included a land-recovery project in Minnesota, helping to build a primary health care facility on the Pine Ridge reservation, traditional gardening and food production in Nevada, and a native language preservation project in California.¹⁹

In the last few years he has also been actively involved in inspiring, guiding and anchoring people in local service projects by way of special courses and training seminars.

I think that there is a sense in this culture that what we have been feeding upon in our political and media world is a quality of sentimentality rather than a quality of compassion. I mean we have been sentimental about America but we have not felt the depth of the compassion among ourselves as a people for example and this is obvious in the way that we are dealing with homeless, with developing countries, with people starving to death, and so forth...Our image of the world and our image to ourselves is frustrating something in our hearts that needs feeding

and there is a felt need in the culture that I feel at this moment. In the past it was the peace corps, Kennedy played with that and Carter tried to play with that. There are times when that is available , you can play with that feeling in the culture and it's ripe now. And it starts with compassion with what is around you. It cannot be done abstractly with the mind, it's got to start with the heart--and the heart has to be opened immediately.

Commentary

Ram Dass can be seen as a "bridge builder" for a whole generation of people who, stage after stage, were following in his footsteps--following his example, from his early involvement in the social sciences, through psychedelics, through "dropping out," turning to the East for spiritual guidance and nourishment, and social activism. His highly-popular lectures and classes, and the numerous editions of his books in various countries and languages attest to the countless people who were influenced by him. They constitute an amorphous but distinct "consciousness network." For many of them, he is a spiritual teacher who has helped them rediscover perennial truths in our era of accelerated change. He is a gifted articulator of the integration of Western cultures and Eastern philosophies, and a voice for a life process that many are sharing.²⁰ Foremost, he is a model as to how to direct the holistic experiences of the sort studied here into compassionate service and effective social action.

First of all, in his own psychedelic experimentation, Ram Dass is a powerful example of another major avenue for what has been called as the "new spirituality" that emerged in this country, and in the San Francisco Bay Area, during the 1960s. Experiences and insights, induced in a variety of ways, including the moonshots, the practice of yoga and meditations, drug-induced--or simply "spontaneous--shifts in consciousness or perception (the so-called *altered states* experiences) resulted in insights and "revelations" that, when articulated, paralleled--often almost precisely ancient writings such as Buddhist scriptures or Vedic scriptures of Hinduism.

Many researchers have claimed that this latter phenomena has been confirmed as evidence, and that this evidence validates the theory that perennial truths actually exist, (as thought forms or the Akashik Records, or Jung's "universal archetypes") and can be accessed or "tapped into." To many this connection between contemporary and ancient "spirituality" is more interesting and more significant than the historical continuity of the various philosophical societies.

One question I once often heard posed by Western observers--especially those who lacked direct acquaintance or experiential awareness of our new youth--was why American youth, mostly white, middle-class youth, were turning to Eastern religions. I suggest that, initially, at least, Western youth were not drawn to Eastern religions as such--not as institutions or establishments. Rather, they were turning to Eastern concepts (mostly from India, Tibet, Japan, China and, to some extent, Korea) for some alternative explanation of the universe--for some new ways to look at the universe, at their expanded experiences of interconnectedness and the implications regarding their daily lives--their ethics and their actions.

These people were turning to Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, yoga, and martial arts, for example, which are, in fact, not religions in the Western sense of going to church to passively receive the church's dogma. These people were relating directly to concepts and practices for the development of human potential--of mind over matter--and to the core of inner experience that Western religions did not offer, at least not in their exoteric, institutionalized forms. There were issues that many of the youth of the time were confronting in their daily lives and among their peers for which they found no interpretive system or support in the mainstream conceptual framework of the West.

Religion, among these Eastern cultures, contains all sorts of teaching and information on relationships, psychology, nutrition, medicine and healing, psychophysiology, and so forth. The Vedic scriptures, for example, contain explanations of the nervous systems, enzymes, atoms, molecules, and proteins. Tibetan Buddhism

contains a sophisticated, complex, and meticulously articulated science of psychology. All this is an integral part of Eastern religion, albeit Westerners have not necessarily thought of religion in this context. It was only after people were drawn to these as philosophical and cosmological systems, and as they were already disenfranchised with their Judeo-Christian institutional religions that the search eventually became a quest for religion.²¹

Starting in the early sixties many, like The Beattles, went to India or some other Eastern country, and discovered gurus, meditation, martial arts, and psychophysiological exercises. Eventually, most of the Far East seekers returned to the West. They returned with some new spiritual anchor or direction, or some new Eastern religion. In the beginning these pursuits often drew ridicule, particularly when the interest was manifested in the superficial imitation of Eastern ways--expressions and images including the attire, some of the diets, the food, the terminology, etc, of an imported culture. Within a very few years, in any case, most of us in the West became familiar--at least with the words, if not with their full meaning--with such pursuits as meditation, martial arts, relaxation, mind-over-body, etc.

Around the eighties the trend towards the Easternization of the West started to slowly give way to an increased integration of wisdoms. In spiritual terms, there developed a renaissance of Judeo-Christian mysticism, and this was accompanied by a growing ecumenism (though this remains in stark contrast to the rising confrontational fundamentalisms in the world.) At the same time, there developed a growing trend toward involvement in contemporary local and global issues--of assuming a responsible role in the affairs of our society, country, and planet.

Ram Dass learned from his guru that LSD may have been what was necessary for people living in this Western culture to "pull them across the bridge"--to show them that there is another reality, some other way of looking at things. In the materialistic context of the West, that role could not be fulfilled by a teacher, an abstract teaching or a

philosophy; it had to be, in his view, something material, something tangible, something one could buy, sell, consume, and, preferably, *ingest*.

To the extent that Ram Dass participated in this, he became a guide for masses of people who were following him closely, step by step. He played a role that probably would have been filled by someone else if not by him, as the time was right for such a following--and thus, for such a guide.

With the advent of the "psychedelic revolution", that resulted in home production of LSD by many ex graduate students who had been originally exposed to the chemical as subjects in official research programs (a significant number of them funded by the CIA²² as in writer Ken Kesey's case), its widespread street use reached massive proportions, in possibly the worst set-and-setting conditions.²³

In retrospect, Ram Dass says that LSD also served another function at one time--it provided an avenue of escape from the overwhelming feeling of pain that our system engenders. To be a constantly diminishing middle class island of affluence in an endlessly growing ocean of poverty and destitution carries a heavy cost: the closing off of our hearts. To consciously incorporate the pain of the fact that 35,000 women a day, every day, all over the world, watch their child die of malnutrition appears almost unbearable; and there are the wars, the injustices, the contemporary genocides, the environmental abuse and degradation, and the increasing annihilation of entire species. Therefore, Ram Dass explains, he and many others attempted to disconnect from these realities at that time by simply getting "high."

Yet, as we have described, the "highs" of psychedelics, though potentially transformative, perhaps providing glimpses of interconnectedness and unity and moments of deep compassion and understanding, were always, inevitably, followed by "downs". The psychedelic "high" could not itself provide context or direction for people who were feeling such compassion to translate their perceptual experience into

appropriate action. This required a much more profound and effortful, personal transformation.

Again, following Ram Dass through the next phase of his search, many of the "new" people turned onto new roads, new paths, in search for the answers that were pulling them--and pulling on their lives.

It is important to consider that the *experience* of which I write about here--even if highly subjective--is not meaningless just because it is subjective or hard to verbalize. Subjectivity itself may be indicative of intuition in some cases. The sense of interconnectedness of which I have written is an intuitive awareness. It is a "tuning into" and participation in the *reality* that Emerson called *the stream of consciousness*, that Jung referred to when he wrote of *universal or collective archetypes*, and that Ira Progoff referred to when he spoke of the *underground stream* that he taught groups of students to reach, together and collectively, by "going down the well." The popular fascination in experience for experience's sake--that seemed to me to be particularly prevalent in the San Francisco Bay Area from the 1960s and 1970s--confused the issue, I believe. Experience was sought and highly valued, no matter it's content or its effect. One could say, "I experienced the presence of the Devil and I had a feeling that I really wanted to shoot my mother," and be told, "That's really profound. Thank you for sharing your experience."

Such a collective dimension of the spiritual subjectivity allows, in fact, to establish some criteria by which to assess the depth--or even the authenticity-- of reported spiritual experiences, according to how close are they to the collective or unitive core of human experience.

Some experiences are indeed closer than others to an experience of Oneness and to an organic value orientation towards universal caring and empathy. It is for this reason that I describe it in this work phenomena distinctly separate from any organized group behavior or affiliation, and exclude others-- such as the emergence of satanism, or

more self-centered groups such as EST, and any form of particularism, such as any fundamentalism (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or whichever).

From this perspective, a generalized *empathetic understanding* of religious symbols and meanings, as characteristic of the general phenomenological-hermeneutical approach-- and to some extent also of Bellah's "symbolic realism"--results in a reductionism of the spiritual experience. These approaches radicalize situational truths to such an extent that they therefore result in a lack of a universal or even quasi-universal critical dimension which would allow to differentiate the authentic from the less authentic engagements. Hermeneutics, as transpersonal theoretician Ken Wilber suggests, "denies that such a critical or universal dimension exists, thereby relativizing all cultural truths with the quite illogical exception of its own claim that such is always (i.e., universally) the case."²⁴ Therefore, under the guise that it is being "non-reductionist," hermeneutics tend to slide into the notion that "all religions are true." This, as Wilber accurately points out, precludes any sort of sustained critical appraisal.

In fact, from my perspective, Ram Dass' (or back-to-Alpert) "discovery" of the socio-economic dimension of class, and the complex of social inequities and injustices that constitute it, is crucial to the unfolding to his planetary spirituality.

In many of my interviews, even the mention of Capitalism was generally omitted--and seemed, in fact, to be avoided. People spoke of materialism, consumerism, and so forth, but were apparently disinclined to consider Capitalism or to even say the word. The question of Capitalism, its role in human problems and its effect upon others outside its own realm of function and, in fact, upon the entire planet, must be faced head on. Capitalism, as, among other things, a system of profit and acquisition, is a driving force inducing steady growth and expansion. It requires an ever-increasing accumulation and consumption of the planet's resources--and thus of the planet itself.²⁵ The absolute requirements fundamentally inherent in Capitalism must, of necessity, maintain the sort of rationalization that is blind to anything outside of itself.

Alpert's recognition of his own class bias and the suffering of those deprived by such an unequal system of distribution and opportunities was, in fact, a major reason for my choosing him as a model of the emerging planetary spirituality. It highlights the extent to which a truly universal empathy, with its blurring of boundaries between the "I" and the "Thou", has to encompass central aspects of social stratification. Of course, his own case also illustrates that such a recognition is taking decades to unfold and mature, and any early observation of this phenomenon resulted by historical necessity in a partial--and distorted--view. From the perspective of the contemporary unfolding of planetary consciousness, it is plausible that Ram Dass' role as a "bridge" and a model for a whole consistent minority within a generation will also apply in the area of more "conventional"--or materialistic-- social consciousness as well.

¹ The present report is based on lectures, conferences and books. I did not personally interview Ram Dass and it was not truly necessary as there is a wealth of published and available material about his transformation, experiences and social activism.

² Ram Dass. *Journey of Awakening. A Meditators Guidebook*. (New York: Bantam Books, Inc. 1978):

³ He took Psylocybin, one of the psychedelics, a synthetic of the magic mushrooms produced by Sandoz, provided to him by Leary.

During the early 1960s, LSD research was conducted, legally, in various locations in the United States and Europe, and it was believed to offer a mirror of the unconscious and to provide significant insights about the human psyche, the mind and consciousness. Even in Prague, Dr Stanislav Grof was engaged at the time in medical and mental LSD research in hospitals, which also evolved into consciousness research and exploration of the transpersonal realm. For some researchers, this presented a picture of a chemically-induced "model psychosis" and, for some, an access to the deepest unconscious conflicts, desires, and traumas as well as access to transcendental pursuits. On the West Coast, USA, such research was conducted among private groups of people and semi-private organizations as well as in places like the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, which had grants from the National Institute of Mental Health. The researchers, often drawing from their own experiences as well, began to regard LSD as a tool for studying states above or beyond every-day consciousness, and LSD sessions became sophisticated experiments in self-exploration.

Also at the Harvard Research Center in Personality, Timothy Leary, a young psychologist at the time, started conducting psychedelic research (with the substance known as psilocybin, a synthetic form of mescaline) after he and his group met Aldous Huxley when the latter visited M.I.T. They studied the reactions to psychedelics of many prominent artists and thinkers. They also conducted the "Prison Project" with inmates in a maximum security Massachusetts prison. Leary then embarked upon a free-wheeling program, administering some thirty five hundred

doses of psilocybin to volunteers, many of them Harvard students. (Truett Anderson, 1983, pp. 74-75)

During the 1950s and early 1960s, psychedelics were quite frequently used in psychotherapy, and seemed to be useful when in the proper dosage and context and, by the mid sixties, more than one thousand papers had been published on the subject. The most famous of psychedelics, LSD, was first synthesized by Dr. Albert Hoffman at the Sandoz Pharmaceutical Company in Basel, Switzerland, and he was also the first person to experience the effects of LSD, on April 1943. (Fields, Rick, "Flashback and Fast Forward, Psychedelics in the 80s", *New Age Magazine*, vol 8, # 12, July 1983, p. 38)

4 Ram Dass, op. cit.

5 *An Evening with Ram Dass*, transcript, (J.F. K. University and Original Face Video, 1986).

6 Ibid.

7 Seva, *Newsletter*, 1987-88, # 1, p.2.

8 Ram Dass, op cit.

9 Ram Dass with Levine, Stephen. *Grist for the Mill*. (New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1979). pp. 18-19.

10 *An Evening with Ram Dass*, op. cit.

11 He is here referring to the Yaqui Indian *brujo* whose wisdom and teachings were reported in the popular and ground-breaking series of Juan Carlos Castaneda's books.

12 *An Evening with Ram Dass*, op. cit.

13 Ibid.

14 "The Last Best Hippie: Wavy Gravy at 50". *Image*, (SF Examiner, 2/16/86), p.39.

15 Ibid.

16 SEVA was founded by a team of doctors who had been previously involved in the successful world smallpox eradication (out of work, so to speak, after their mission was accomplished!). One of them was a fellow devotee of Neem Karoli Baba, and the others had spent most their adult lives serving the neediest of the needy; notorious among them was Wavy Gravy a.k.a. Hugh Romney, an old timer anarchist, beat and hippie who was in charge of security in the original Woodstock Festival and truly devoted his life to service and to promote love and peace since by way of involved community activism in practically every area of social life.

17 *An Evening with Ram Dass*, op. cit.

18 Seva helped found and fund Nepal's Lumbini Eye Hospital and the Aravind Eye Hospital in India. In either those facilities for \$30 it is possible to carry out a sight restoring operation, with a week of caring post-operative rest and transport home when needed.

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- 19 SEVA, *Newsletter*. 1993, 1994.
- 20 Ram Dass, "Introduction", 1992 talk on *The Path of Service in the Nineties*.
- 21 Aldous Huxley is a good example of this trend. Originally an atheist, he became interested in Eastern philosophies and eventually a member of the Vedanta Society after his mind-over-matter experience of healing himself from legal blindness. This achievement earned him the mockery of the official medical institutions.
- 22 The CIA carried out a psychedelic research in Harvard and other universities and hospitals. Noted author Ken Kesey and poet Allan Ginsberg were introduced to psychedelics by these kind of programs. Rick Fields, "Flashback & Forward: Psychedelics in the 1980s", *New Age Magazine*, Vol 8, # 12, (July 1983), p. 41.
- 23 Indeed, only in a very specific and appropriate context, if at all, a comparison between contemporary psychedelic use can be compared with the use of sacred medicinal plants for consciousness expansion in ancient, shamanic, cultures. In fact, nothing could be farther removed from it than indiscriminate street use in the midst of urban America. The "hippie" phenomena drew national attention, and the Height Ashbury in San Francisco was flooded by tourists, media, and "drop-outs," representing a very mixed bag of motives and purposes. Commercialization, consumption and alienation abounded. The original search for consciousness and communal living was progressively displaced by a mere search for episodes, for "a trip" and, eventually for just drugs—for "a fix." This led to extensive drug use that did not distinguish between "heavy drugs" (such as heroin, crack, cocaine, amphetamines, etc.) and consciousness-expanding ones (such as LSD or marijuana) and, subsequently, to a devastating drug-addiction. As this coincided with the closing and outlawing of most psychedelic research programs, there was no help available from among the medical or therapeutic professions for the thousands of youth that were experiencing "bad trips", "freak outs," and a great deal of disorientation, confusion, and fear in their casual LSD use. Dr. Grof himself, who arrived in the USA as a visiting scholar in 1967, was appalled to witness LSD street use and he was unable—by law—to offer the valuable help and guidance that his expertise might have provided. The therapeutic and benevolent transformative potentials of LSD and other consciousness-expansion substances were lost, at least temporarily. Personal communication.
- 24 Ken Wilber, *A Sociable God: Toward A New Understanding of Religion*. (Boulder & London: New Science Library, Shambhala, 1984). pp. 12-16.
- 25 I am reminded of a widely-distributed advertisement for a large energy-producing corporation that appeared some years ago in popular periodicals throughout this nation. It showed the Earth, cut in half and impaled upon an orange-juice squeezer, and there were the words: "We can always squeeze a little harder." This communication, intended to give a sense of security through the assurance of fuel and heat, etc., at least for some years to come, ought to have been terrifying.