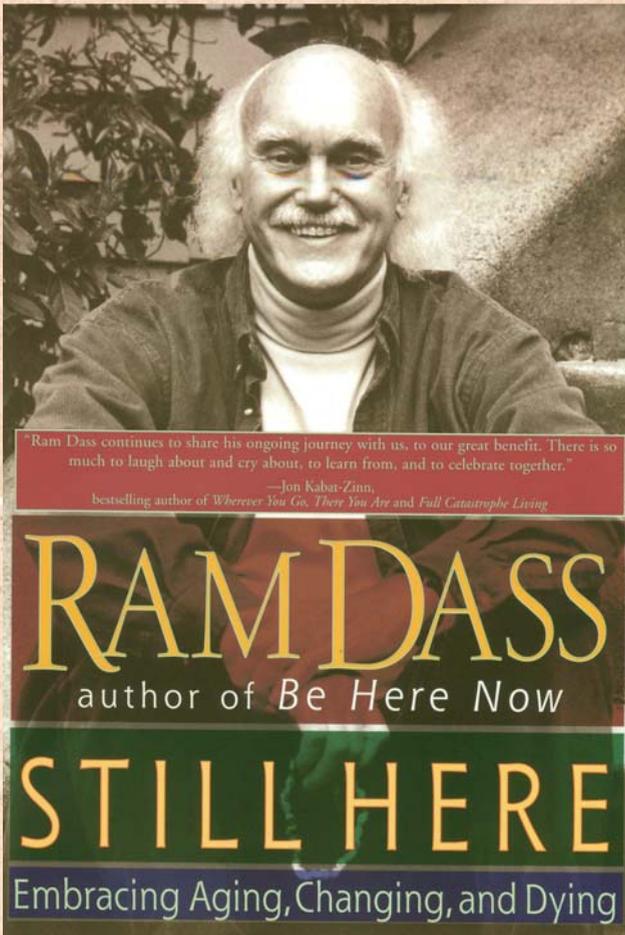


Be Here Maui

Ram Dass Embodied on Maui at Present

By Joseph W. Bean



"Ram Dass continues to share his ongoing journey with us, to our great benefit. There is so much to laugh about and cry about, to learn from, and to celebrate together."
—Jon Kabat-Zinn,
bestselling author of *Wherever You Go, There You Are* and *Full Catastrophe Living*

Ram Dass, earlier known as Baba Ram Dass, and still earlier as Harvard professor Dr. Richard Alpert, has been a name to conjure with in the world of spirituality for 35 years. Although he is the author of the classic spiritual guidebook *Be Here Now*, it is tempting to think of Ram Dass as somehow belonging to then and there—to The Sixties, say, and maybe to San Francisco or India. In fact, Ram Dass is very much here—recently settled on Maui—and very much in the “now.” Our talk with him was not an exercise in the romance of reminiscence, nor did it revolve around speculation about the future.

Ram Dass, the holy man who gave the Western world the most popular and most accessible “translation” of the Eastern understanding of the human spiritual journey, is now a confirmed Maui man.

At a glance, you might be inclined to think of him as wheelchair-bound, but that’s not the real Ram Dass story. He calls himself, “island-bound.” We had been warned that his physical condition might make it hard for him to talk. He had a severe stroke in 1997 which left much of the right side of his body paralyzed. The stroke also left him with expressive aphasia, a condition that makes normal speech and normal word-use difficult. Often, people suffering with this kind of aphasia have trouble coming up with words, especially nouns and names. We were prepared for all possibilities. Maybe he’d be unable to speak, leaving us with estimated replies to our questions spoken for him by caretakers or students. Maybe he’d try to speak, then trail off or get lost or give up.

Anything was possible, so it was heartening to see Ram Dass rolling himself into the living room of his north shore home. He was just coming in from walking himself around his house—a major accomplishment, to be sure, but it did nothing to dim his sincere smile or the light of intelligence in his gaze. Most of all, it was a pleasure to hear Ram Dass speak with clarity of both mind and voice. There were moments when he paused. They could have been mistaken for aphasic moments, but they weren’t. Thirty years ago he did the same thing. He stops sometimes to consider what he’s saying, to ensure the absolute appropriateness of a term.

The degree of his healing was startling, in fact.

“Maui is said to be a healing place,” I said. “Is it being that for you?”

“It is,” Ram Dass said. “I think it is,” he answered sweeping his functional left arm over himself from neck to knee. “Maui is the heart of the world.”

“For 20 years,” said Myrna Stone, my editor, “I’ve heard from people that the moment they set foot on Maui, they felt ‘at home.’ Is that what it means to say it is the heart of the world?” Ram Dass nodded and smiled.

Without being asked another question, Ram Dass continued to speak. “I began to yearn about Maui—oh, dear—twenty years ago. I came here... then. I know how good it feels to think, ‘someday, someday...!’ And that someday has come, and I have made a pact with myself that I’m not going to fly any more. So, I’m island-bound.”

When I suggested that once the Superferry is running he might at least see other islands, he said, “I might.” From his expression and tone, it was perfectly clear he was not thinking of his non-flying pact that way. It is meant to make him island-bound and he is glad to have it just that way.

“I have loved ones in the Mainland,” he said, “loved ones and important things...!” When his voice trailed off this time, it was clearly not stroke-related. It seemed like a step in the reconfirmation of the whole complex of decisions represented by his pact with himself to remain island-bound.

I reminded him that he used to fly planes and that he had once described himself as “not the kind of pilot I’d want to have taking me up there.”

“Yes,” he said, “I used to fly... and I’d look at the beautiful clouds, and the instruments didn’t matter.” The sparkling smile that followed convinced me I didn’t need to wonder any more whether he was well enough to talk with us.

“To speak of suffering can be to name the state and work of human life, but can you relate your physical suffering of recent years to that philosophical view?” I asked. “Does painful suffering from moment to moment have value? How can we see it as other than a limiting affliction?”

“Ahh,” he said, gazing at the ceiling. “My suffering and The Suffering? My suffering is very minor. All it requires



A special kind of radiance came to Ram Dass when editor Myrna Stone asked to be photographed with him.

is getting used to it and having a different philosophy about myself. Uh, the first two weeks after the stroke, I was in a severe depression. Before the stroke, I was living what I considered a graced life, and the stroke didn't seem to be grace. It gave me a feeling of falling from grace." He stopped for a longish time, thinking. "In the hospital, I had a picture of my guru. He always graced me. I started to realize that the stroke was negative for me because of the people around me, the nurses and doctors. It was negative for them."

I suggested they were just doing their job. He nodded, making it clear their job was not his job.

"Right. This was grace. It turned my life around." After a moment of reverie, he added, "You know I wrote a book called Can I Help You? Now I'm the dependent one. Can you help me?"

"You said once, some years ago, that you couldn't find the grace in that, in being dependent. Have you found it now?" I asked.

"Yes. I have. We fulfill roles. I'm the dependent one. They are the helpers. And we can meet in the soul. The roles don't matter."

"In the soul," I said, "the acts and roles don't exist?"

"Yes," Ram Dass said. "Souls... human beings... when we meet, we can reinforce each other's spiritual path." To clarify further, Ram Dass told us about going to the grocery store, putting his groceries up—"up" because he was in his wheelchair—in front of the clerk. "She's the clerk. That's her role. I was the customer. Then I looked into her eyes.... Everyone is moving around us. They're all busy being clerks and customers, moving around. But, if you could look at it as a temple, here are these souls around you going about their soul business." He gave us a moment to grasp the implications of his fresh assessment of everyday life.

A little later, the conversation turned (as it had to do) to the book, *Be Here Now*. Even though Ram Dass has written many books over the past 35 years, that one book, published in October 1971 still dominates. Ram Dass has paid homage to the original in the titles of later books, tapes and videos. Between *Be Here Now* and the echoes of that title, he wrote *Grist for the Mill* and *The Only Dance There Is* among others. Along the way, he's used *Remember, now be here, now be here; Abide as Thyself;*

Here We All Are and most recently, *Still Here*.

"Ah, in the book, *Be Here Now*..." Ram Dass said. Then with a gesture, he indicated he wanted to start his story at an earlier point. "When I went to India the first time, and I had been with my guru a few months, he said, 'I give my blessing to your book.'" Ram Dass explained that he had, at that time, no intention of writing a book. But, back home in America, he did write a book. He submitted the book to nine publishers who all rejected it. Then, speaking of Neem Karoli Baba, his teacher in India, Ram Dass added, "I said to myself, 'If this guy is who I think he is, he's the publishers and he can't be turning

down his own book.'" Then he said that, after giving a lecture series based on his time in India, a woman came to him, a court stenographer, and gave him a huge stack of paper.

He asked what the paper was, and she said, "These are your words."

With that stack of paper in the trunk of his car, Ram Dass went to Esalen (one of the important centers of spiritual exploration in the West at the time) where he was assigned to share a cabin.

Ram Dass continued the *Be Here Now* story. "They said, 'you're staying with this couple.'" He found himself housed with a man who was a gardener at Esalen, but otherwise an author from New York. The man asked what the stack of paper among Ram Dass's belongings was. He was told what the stenographer said about the lecture transcripts.

"He marked them," said Ram Dass, indicating that the man underlined sections. "And he said, 'This is where the juice of it is.'" After a moment's delay, clearly for dramatic effect, Ram Dass added, "That's the brown pages in the book!" The brown-paper pages of the book—ever since the 1971 original edition of *Be Here Now*—are truly the "juice" in the book. In those pages, Ram Dass lays out the psycho-spiritual map to the heart of conscious life, the Tao of the New Age, if you will. In those pages, frankly, he ignited a passion for awakened living in literally millions of people.

Dr. Larry Brilliant, founder of the SEVA Foundation, once said (and he wouldn't have said it if it weren't true), "*Be Here Now* was at one time the best selling book in the English language except for Ben Spock [Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care*] and the Bible." That was in the 1970s, and it's still selling strongly today.

After Esalen, Ram Dass went to the Lama Foundation in New Mexico, another of the amazing "nodes" in the network of people journeying toward "awakening." There, he showed the marked pages to six artists who got together and made the drawings that went into the book. "So, it was my words and their art. We made it... It was a box, not a book, a big box that we gave away. So, then, Crown Publishers wanted to make a book of it."

Next time Ram Dass was in India, he showed *Be Here Now* to Maharajji (the familiar title of Neem Karoli Baba, his guru). Maharajji reacted to a single page. Ram Dass explained, "You're printing lies," he said, and there was the one page. I didn't know when I wrote it that it was not true, but then I knew, and he said, 'you're printing lies. It's all right when you're publishing a book where you think everything is true, but once you know it's not true, you can't go on.'"



So, Ram Dass called the publisher about having the one page changed or taken out of the in-progress printing of the book, but they said it was already too late. They could change the next printing, but this one was already being done in New Mexico. Changing it on the current printing would mean losing a lot of money.

Ram Dass went back to Maharajji. He tried to explain that it was too late, promising a change in the next printing. The guru said, "Money and truth have nothing to do with one another."

Then, as it happened, the plates from the original edition were being used to make the second printing, and one plate was missing, the specific plate that included the "troublesome" page. As they had to make a new plate, it was no problem to delete the "untrue" page.

It seemed that we were winding down. We'd kept Ram Dass for over an hour already, despite our 30-minute appointment. One of the caretakers dropped by to mother-hen the interview, but said nothing at first. Ram Dass felt her behind him and shifted into the business of making real use of the interview. He explained that he is launching a new Web site that will include streaming video from Maui, RamDass.com. He told us he is "the head of the board of the Hanuman Temple in Taos," and has used a Web cam to be there for meetings. He has also attended other important gatherings by Web cam, proving that he can be island-bound and still do the work of being Ram Dass. Ironically, there is that element of

Maui Style | *Living Maui*

being "there-then" rather than being here now in all of this, but that's the way technology applies language to life.

Ram Dass has already had three retreats at his north shore home with people from the Mainland coming. He's pleased by that. Stone asked if that is hard on him. Ram Dass answered, "It's my living. I can't afford to think that way." Then, waving his hand around the area of the interview, he asked, "Is this hard on you?"

One Sunday a month, he said, he has satsang, a meeting where spiritual seekers sit with, chant with or study with their teacher.

After the lurking caretaker finally spoke up about calls waiting for Ram Dass and appointments coming up, he wanted to speak of conscious aging, the subject he was thinking and writing about at the time of the stroke.

"I get, and I'm sure you do too," Ram Dass said, "the AARP magazines and things. Our culture has got a thing about youth. In the magazine, old people surf and everything. And I don't like that. I'm an uncle for the boomers. So, I stop. I stopped. I meditate. I don't fly around. I don't surf. The age-stage is a good thing," said Ram Dass, "because you don't have to be ruled by all these things. You can sit. You can sit. We go to the beach in Kihei, and I don't surf."

While Stone went to another room with a caretaker to look into publishable photography and future events at Ram Dass's home and Unity church, he and I talked about people we've known in common, places where our paths have



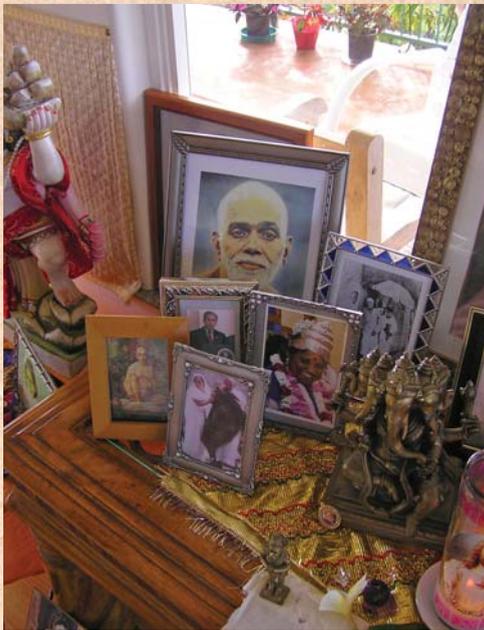
Ram Dass rolled himself into the room to meet with Real Estate Maui Style. He had just walked around his house, too, despite a stroke that nearly made even such simple acts impossible. Maui is a healing place.

crossed before and, most significantly, his next book.

The working title of the new book is *Tell the Truth, Love Everyone*. That title conjoins two lessons Ram Dass was repeatedly assigned by his teacher. Telling the truth is not so difficult when you live your life in the limelight as a spiritual teacher does. To love everyone is another matter. "Bush is my test," said Ram Dass. Then he directed me to the altar across the room, dominated appropriately by a large photograph of Maharajji. There were images of Hindu gods and pictures of holy men of several faiths. Then, I saw the test. There, among the devotional images was a picture of President George W. Bush in his usual, formal pose behind a podium bearing the Seal of the United States.

Love everyone? Love your teachers and the gods he worshipped for a lifetime? Love the Dalai Lama, a Buddhist, even though you're a Hindu? Love the President? Yes to all the above. If you turn your eyes a few inches in either direction from the photos on the altar, you see seemingly endless, magnificent north shore views and are silently invited to also love Maui, the heart of the planet, and the world beyond.

Ram Dass often says, "My life is my message." It is a message of peace in a warring world and joy in the midst of suffering. Short version: Be here now. **REMS**



The test of Ram Dass. Can you love everyone, even the man pictured at left in the second row, the president of the United States?