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# Tripping in the Moment: The Spiritual Journey of Baba Ram Dass

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Ram Dass, the iconic, countercultural, spiritual seeker, brought the wisdom of the East to those of us in the West through his many books and frequent, charismatic dharma talks. This view of his spiritual journey describes the transformation of Richard Alpert, clinical psychologist and product of the Western milieu's often-shackling conventional expectations, into Ram Dass, the free, embodied soul who, through explication and example, and with witnessing attention, tries to guide us all to the always present abode of loving awareness. Ram Dass's idea of self in existence was transformed: first, from a psychological object of clinical study, to a shared experience of co-discovery, and finally, to the witnessing soul who, with full attention, came to recognize the self in, and as continuous, moment to moment spiritual transformation.

**Keywords:** *Ram Dass, Richard Alpert, counterculture, 1960s, wisdom of the East, LSD, psychedelics, R. D. Laing, Neem Karoli Baba, spirituality, consciousness, soul*

Ram Dass appeared on the American scene not so much as a product of the 1960s psychedelic movement but as one of its vanguards. His spiritual journey crossed the paths of many others: notably, with the king of psychedelics, Timothy Leary; with the radical Scottish psychiatrist, R. D. Laing; and, ultimately, with his guru Neem Karoli Baba. In his journey, Ram Dass's idea of self in existence was transformed: first, from a psychological object of clinical study, to a shared experience of co-discovery, and finally, to the witnessing soul who, with full attention, came to recognize the self in and as continuous, moment to moment spiritual transformation.

In keeping with the counterculture era that it reflects, this tribute is written in eight sections, or Trips. It begins by asking you, the reader, to imagine a scenario that occurs at the beginning of time, when you first become aware of your existence as the pure experience of Reality. These are moments of time that witnessing awareness recognizes as present in any act of meditation. So please sit up, attend to your self, and enjoy the trip.

## Trip I

### The First Three Moments of Time

It is always difficult to know where to begin when relating a spiritual journey. And it is often difficult to know how to relate a spiritual journey. It is often best to let a spiritual journey choose its own beginning and to let it speak for itself. For it is often in its very telling that we find the truth of it, the love in it, the Divine in it. Let us see if we can start this one right where we sit, in this very moment. Let us simply be here now.

Let us imagine that I am sitting here, at the beginning of time, gazing at the vastness of the cosmos in its infinite stillness. The sun's glow is lighting my face and a primordial wind is brushing my cheek. I sit as silent witness to the unfolding universe. I am one with existence, part of the eye of God. I am a being fully enveloped in universal Oneness; fully merged into cosmic Consciousness. I sit empty of all thought, empty of all tension. All is tranquil. All is bliss. I breathe in; I breathe out.

And then something *stirs* within me. I feel a desire to *respond* to what it is that I am witnessing. In

this wonderful, glorious feeling of the here and now, and with my heart wide open, I feel infinitely and eternally grateful: grateful for the universe, grateful for my life, grateful for this moment. And like a ripple in a clear, still mountain lake, caused by the gentlest of breezes, preceding any thought, and welling up from the depths of my being, a simple word carries forth on my softly intoned breath: "Reality." My spoken word, "Reality," breaks, and breaks into, the utterly still silence of this eternally present moment. And like the eruption of the cosmos at the moment of its big bang, with this utterance, in this moment, all is forever changed.

In this first moment, what I have just done, but without yet recognizing it, is that in expressing the oneness of the pure experience of this unified cosmos as a noun: "Reality," I have used the word to transform my experience of it into a small bundle, a label. I have named it. I have given it form. And contained in this *moment-ous* experience of the universe, a universe in all of its magnificence and with all of its myriad manifestations; a universe in which I have just spoken the word "Reality," is the potential of it all becoming *merely* one word after another. Yet in this first moment, my first word, my primal utterance, is still divine. My word "Reality" is simply a natural part of the vast Unity, a part of cosmic Consciousness. As such, its being spoken is a natural unfolding of the universe, part of the Tao, part of the Dharma, an expression of the Kingdom of God. For as John tells us: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." (Jn 1:1)

And now, in this *next* moment, with my gaze still upon the unity of the cosmos, reposing in the awe and wonder of this Present, my *stirring* becomes a verb: I inhale and on the exhalation, I utter "Reality *moves*." So, with a noun and a verb, in this second moment of time, I have created my very first thought. And with this first manifested thought, the ripples on the mountain lake, and the ripples of the entire cosmos itself, have been transformed into ripples in and of my mind.

But in this second moment, with this first thought, the thought remains divine, as part of the Dharma, as part of the divine law, as simply another manifestation of universal Consciousness. For a

thought, too, like any word, can remain divine, unified as an aspect of the cosmic Whole. But contained in this *second* momentous experience of the universe, a universe in all of *its* magnificence and with all of *its* myriad manifestations; a universe in which I have just spoken two words and thought my first thought, "Reality *moves*," is the potential of it all becoming merely one *thought* after another. For without a second thought, things *will* return to their natural unity, their divine Oneness. The ripples on the serene, placid pool of my mind, will become calm again. Just as they have arisen, these ripples will pass away.

And now, although I do not recognize it yet, the very next moment is absolutely and ultimately de-cisive. Etymologically, de-*cision* means to cut away from. Contained in this next moment is a choice: Do I cut my thinking short and return to my eternal gaze as part of the eye of God, and simply watch the ripple of the thought subside on the surface of my mind? Or do I cut short my eternal gaze and continue my thinking?

So, of course, and *dharmically* so, for this is so natural, I am compelled again by my wonder. I think again, that is, I *cognize* again and ask: "Who or what does 'Reality *move*'?" And within this question is implied the answer; after all: who or what is doing the asking? And so here and now, in this very next moment is a second thought, a thought in the form of a question about my first thought: literally, a re-cognition; where, revealed in the flash of the asking, I re-cognize that "Reality moves ... *me*."

And now I am more astonished than I have ever been in my life. This awe and wondering incited a *witnessing* re-cognition; that is, transpiring simultaneously: a re-cognition *by me of me*. Two moments before, I was just part of the vast cosmic Union, part of the universal Whole. But now with my thought one moment ago and my re-cognition of it in this present one, everything has changed. For in my amazement, the first ripples of a separate *self in Reality* and not as Reality have come into existence.

So once again, and as *always*, the very next moment is de-*cisive*. Do I cut my thinking short and return to my eternal gaze as part of the eye of God and simply watch the ripple of recognition subside

on the surface of my mind? Or do I cut short my gaze and continue my thinking? Has my sense of awe and wonder become too attractive to let it go? Have I begun to like what I am witnessing? Have I begun to enjoy the very moving inspiration I am feeling? Or, can I let it go; can I let it be? Can I stop clinging to this thought; can I stop craving the wondrous feeling I am having?

Well, I *think* we know what happens: “I’ve got to think about that.” And in that thinking, we see that in these first three moments of time — my first word, my first cognition and my first re-cognition — a lot has happened. For if we look at the moment of re-cognition more deeply, we see now that my universe, at the speed of light, like the big bang, has expanded exponentially and paradoxically. Because what may be even more astounding than this instant of re-cognition, is that *in* this very same moment, not in the next one, is contained not only one’s re-cognition but also the transformation, (*pariṇāma*, in Sanskrit) of that re-cognition to witnessing Realization: “I just created that thought! I just made it Real! And I watched the whole thing happen!” Contained in this recognizing Realization is a transformation that consecrates the moment, making it (part of) God’s kingdom, (part of) the flow of cosmic Consciousness.

Those beings for whom every moment is fully consecrated, fully Realized, for whom (this) awareness is continuously re-cognized are what Baba Ram Dass calls *gurus* (Ram Dass & Das, 2010). Gurus transform every moment into the here and now by re-cognizing one’s creation in each and every moment. Beings who are able to practice continuous Realization remain in the infinite here and the eternal now; they remain in the Real and are one with the unity of cosmic Consciousness. Gurus exist as “Realized beings” (pp. 96–97; capitalization added). For gurus, each moment is the beginning of time.

And, as we shall see, in a certain way, the beginning of time for Ram Dass, author of the iconic American classic, *Be Here Now* (1971), as well as many other books and numerous dharma talks, came to be when he met his *guru* Neem Karoli Baba. For in that moment, time stopped for Ram Dass; and then in a moment of re-cognitive transformation, fully

Realized, time became no-time at all: time became Eternity. It was a moment of *pariṇāma* in which not only was the unity of the cosmos revealed to Ram Dass, a unity which, as we shall see, was not new to him, but was also a moment made even more profound because it was the moment in which he first re-cognized the *possibility* that God, that the Divine, could be continuously present, present in every here and now. Fully Present, for Ram Dass, was an existence as “loving Awareness” (Dass & Das, 2013, p. 72). And as Ram Dass witnessed, such an existence was embodied in the person of Neem Karoli Baba.

## Trip II

### The Fourth Moments of Time

If I return to my gaze even now and sit in continuous witnessing awareness as I watch the universe continue to unfold, then all remains fully Real; all remains a *dharmic* part of infinite Consciousness, part of the eternal, cosmic Oneness. In the fully present here and now, I can witness simultaneously my creating, as I witness creation itself. I can witness my self creation infinitely and eternally: that is, any naming, any cognizing, any re-cognizing is of my doing. Being fully aware means continuously recognizing that I am doing the creating, that I am making it real. For if I fully Realize every here and now, then I remain fully conscious of my actions, fully mindful of my creations, fully aware of my unity with the cosmos.

But I do not. I fail to remain vigilantly re-cognizant. Instead, now, in the fourth moment of time, and faced with the choice intrinsic to this and every moment, I cut short my gaze as I begin to *like*, to crave, my thinking. And with a widening smile and a delight that reaches my eyes, I begin to grow attached to my thinking: “Hey, that’s pretty good.” And with *that* fateful de-cision, in that very moment, I have eclipsed the infinite light and eternal youth of the here and now. I stop Realizing the moment. I cease existing as a Realized being. For until this fourth moment I have been acutely conscious, alert, and fully aware, in a unified, divine Wholeness. I have never, before this fourth moment of time, been “self” conscious or “self” aware. Yet now, all of a sudden, there is a me *and*

there is a universe. For the first time ever, I now have a subject and I have an object. There is now something separate from me. Prior to this moment, separateness never existed. Everything simply was, unified. But now, lo and behold: duality has emerged; duality has come into existence. And I was the one who created it! I created duality by not tending to my thinking, by not witnessing and recognizing the very act of my creating. And with this newly self created duality, the stage has been set for suffering to make an appearance for the first time ever. You can just feel it. This has all the makings of a tragedy.

So now, starting with this fourth moment of time, what do I do? Well, first off, I create more nouns by labeling more things. I label the senses. I label their objects. And I begin to generate more verbs to describe my new labels' inter-relations so that I can say things to *others*. So now, not only do I have a subject and an object, but I have a self and I have an other. And because I am beginning to see my self as a separate entity in the cosmos and not as an integral part of it, very quickly my nouns and verbs are no longer just my thoughts: taken together, they become concepts. And then the thoughts, the words, and the concepts become fashioned in my mind into a kind of interpretive template or grid that I overlay and *impose* on up-until-now undifferentiated Reality. And I begin to cling onto the superficial lattice work of that grid itself instead of seeing though it, instead of re-cognizing the Reality underneath that it now enshrouds.

Put in other words: if I am not continuously attentive and watch my thoughts; that is, if I do not recognize my self recognizing, and do not continually witness that it is I who is doing the creating and the imposing, then I am very likely to *con-fuse* my newly-created, overlaying grid with Reality itself. I am apt to identify my thoughts with what is really Real. My re-present-ations come to re-place the true Present. If I stop re-cognizing that words re-present me, my here and now in Reality, and just use them without witnessing re-cognition, then I *mis-take* them for Reality; they become abstractions of and from Reality. And thereby, my unre-cognized use of words, thoughts, and conceptions, results in my pulling Reality from both its situation and its moment.

But now, just a few precious moments after the beginning of time, I have let it happen. In fact, I have begun to forget to re-cognize all the time. And now I am constantly inattentive and unaware. More and more, I move out of present stillness and dwell in abstraction. I think about what is real instead of living in It. My words and thoughts proliferate. And now I begin to create thoughts about thoughts and words about words. More and more often, my mind ripples and flows: so that with all this noise going on in my head, I end up living in a "committee meeting"<sup>1</sup> of my mind. *In other words*, what is worse, I think, and this is not hard to believe, I think, is that I start to *believe* what I think—I think. (You see? It gets silly!) And when I do that, I create stories and narratives about myself; I give birth to and *in-habit* a world of my self(s) conception. I label and interpret – invent – my self; I describe my self in words; I become self creating: "I can do this; there's no way I can do that; I am this, I am that." In such invention, I attach, pile on, and aggregate (*skandhas*, in Sanskrit) in ever more layers, conceptions about my self to an ever larger and more complex self constructing and self constructed self. And I end up dwelling in, and living my life from, a continuously unre-cognizing and unre-cognized self interpretation.

And then, what is worse, is that I test these attaching, bundling, self accreting thoughts of what I have come to call my self, as identities, as roles. And I compare my identities to the identities of others (that is, other selves that I actually also create in my own mind, but which I attribute to others) in order to judge how I measure up to the words, conceptions, and thoughts that re-present them. So that finally, in relation, I project an idealized self on and into a comparison with her, and I love my neighbor only as much as my completely thought-fabricated self can allow. In my own *self* creative thinking, I judge my self as better or worse than she. And so, my inattentive, non-re-cognizing self creates happiness or suffering for myself, *and* for others, in relations that are built upon these un-Real thoughts and comparisons. I create happiness or suffering based on these thoughts and comparisons. And so, as an individual, I am then: "happy" or "sad," "elated" or "angry," "fulfilled" or "despairing." It turns into



a constant round of satisfaction / dissatisfaction; satisfaction / dissatisfaction; a *saṃsāric* carousel of *sukha / duḥkha*; *sukha / duḥkha*. My relationships, then, become as abstract as my thoughts! Real, loving intimacy is obfuscated. And I do not see those close to me in their (or my) own Reality, but rather only through and in terms of my self-suffering, miasmic lens. As a result, my awareness becomes obscured, my lens distorted. The interpretative grid through which I now view the world reflects these embedded distortions, and I project these through my now obfuscating lens as biases onto the world. And, of course, in being attached to them, I prefer that *my* biases are valued and given privilege. And presto! In the snap of a finger, in just a few moments after the beginning of time, I have created a universe that is a totally, thought-filled, self fabricating illusion. As a superficial self-construct, this made-up, make-believe world is now empty of any and all Reality.

And all the while, others and others and others are doing the very self same thing. And soon we have come to construct a culture in-formed by the *con-fusions*, the *mis-takes*, of me, of them, of you, and of all our forbearers from throughout the ages. And together we have fabricated and continue to create not only a self, not only a grid of interpretation, but now a repository of all fourth moments of time that we share as our *milieu*, a milieu that consists of and is constituted by these mis-takes. It is subtle and it is insidious, but we continue to reinforce and perpetrate this illusion, this *con-fused re-present-ation* of Reality. For as persons and as a culture, we are in-formed by this reservoir, this milieu of implicit biases, as it continues to act as the well from which we draw all subsequent manifestations of our so-called selves.

What happened here? What happened to me? What happened to the Oneness? How did I go from serene, apprehending Awareness mere moments ago to a separate individual in the world with thoughts of dominating it by privileging my point of view? How and why did I forgo the presence of tranquil, empty witnessing re-cognition to filling this awareness instead with all these self aggrandizing thoughts?

It only takes a moment. And most certainly, if I choose to return to my gaze of just a few moments

before, in detached, witnessing observation, in respect, I can see clearly that I am NOT who I *think* I am; and never have been. In Reality, I exist, and have always existed, prior to any thinking, prior to any word formation, in the Light of the Moment, in the marvelous and vast empty awareness of present Reality.

### Trip III

#### The Fourth Moments of Ram Dass

Usually, the spiritual journeys of what we call selves do not begin at the beginning of time. They begin as we are drawing our sustenance from the tainted reservoirs of our milieus, in the full, unfortunate flowering of the fourth moments of time. And as we shall see, in the case of Ram Dass, his spiritual journey began in a circumstance and milieu in which, as a college professor named Richard Alpert, he was busy constructing his “normal” self, his mundane, everyday self. He was busy adding layer upon layer of achievements and accomplishments, adopting layer upon layer of social roles, and accumulating layer upon layer upon layer of personal possessions. He was fabricating a self created by aspirations and yearnings, by his craving desire to hold fast onto something in this roiling and turbulent world. He was creating a self by and of convention and social custom. He was constructing a self that simply could not witness his cosmic Unity, that was too encumbered to recognize his oneness as cosmic Consciousness. And he was *feeding* that self which, as a trained psychologist, he called his ego. Dick was on one big ego trip and having the time of his life (cf. Ram Dass, 1974, 2000).

This soul, who would later become a college professor, and even later become Ram Dass, took form in the womb of Gertrude Alpert and came into this world on April 6, 1931 (Lattin, 2010). “Little Dickie” (p. 6) was the third of three boys, his older brothers being a relatively distant five and ten years his senior. Financially, the family was prosperous: his father, George, was a prominent lawyer who went on to co-found Brandeis University and to become president of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad (Lyall, 1988). George was also an honorary Chairman of the Albert Einstein School of Medicine and was active in various Jewish philanthropic

charities and associations (Brandeis University, n.d.). And so, as he reported in his brief autobiographical account in *Be Here Now*, as part of this affluent, New England, Jewish family, Dick was born into an “anxiety-ridden high-achieving tradition” (Ram Dass, 1971 prose, p. 3).

As a young teen, Dick was sent to Williston Academy, a boarding school in Easthampton, Massachusetts. Quickly, he quickly discovered that he was gay, a fact of life that caused him further anxiety. Given the mores of the day, he kept this fact secret and closeted well into his 30s (Lattin, 2010). He attended Tufts as an undergraduate where he was only a mediocre student. He received his Master’s degree in psychology from Wesleyan University, in Middletown, Connecticut where he also did not particularly distinguish himself (Lattin, 2010). But he did well enough that a professor there, David McClelland, was able to call in a few favors and get him into the Stanford PhD program (Lattin 2010). At Stanford, he hung in there to get his PhD in psychology, writing his work on the subject of *academic anxiety* (Charet, 2013). Upon receipt of his degree, Dick became a psychotherapist (Ram Dass, 1971, prose, p. 2) and was appointed professor in the Stanford psychology department (Lattin, 2010). By all accounts, Dick was a superlatively successful teacher because he was such a riveting and compelling lecturer (Lattin, 2010).

So, by March 1961 he was almost 30 years old. And of that time, Dick wrote:

I was at perhaps the highest point in my academic career. ... [After just leaving Stanford and] being a visiting professor at the University of California at Berkeley ... I had been assured of a permanent post ... at Harvard... [where I was to hold] appointments in four departments ... the Social Relations Department, the Psychology Department, the Graduate School of Education, and the Health Service (where I was therapist); I had research contracts with Yale and Stanford. In a worldly sense, I was making a great income and I was an avid collector of possessions (Ram Dass, 1971, prose, p. 1).

By “collector of possessions” Dick meant he was avid: “I had an apartment in Cambridge...

filled with antiques and I gave very charming dinner parties. I had a Mercedes Benz sedan and a Triumph 500 CC motorcycle and a Cessna 172 airplane and an MG sports car and a sailboat and a bicycle [and] I vacationed in the Caribbean where I did scuba-diving” (Ram Dass, 1971, prose, p. 1).

Wow! Perhaps this guy was seeing the kingdom of God and the unity of the Cosmos! At least at this moment in time he certainly *thought* so. As far as he was concerned, Dick was smack dab in the center of it all: the world seemed to revolve around *him*. Dick was born into wealth and into the lap of luxury, was delivered into a milieu that promoted and sustained it, and found himself continuing to enjoy all of the worldly accoutrements associated with it.

We see that Dick was defining and creating an ego in terms of his attachment to possessions: cars, boats, planes, antiques; much like the slogan of one who ends up with the most toys wins. Dick was further constructing his ego-self, a personal narrative and history, in terms of social roles: consummate dinner host, airplane pilot, sports car driver, motorcycle rider, PhD holder, professor, brilliant lecturer, psychotherapist, and researcher. This anxiety-ridden individual, in craving to find permanence, predictability, and stability in a world that simply has none—and also, in a desire to *achieve* a sense of renown, of “immortality” by gaining revered social prestige—fabricated an ego-self by holding onto, by grasping, possessions and by generating social roles. But as we know from the wisdom of *aparigraha* (non-grasping; “grasp” and “grab” are cognates of *graha*) espoused by the Eastern sages: a self constructed by grasping at these figments and illusions will certainly invite and undergo a large measure of despair and suffering.

So, at this point in Dick Alpert’s life, while he may have seen himself on top of the world and was convinced he was being seen by others that way, it seems safe to say that in this world of self construction he was not finding a lot of infinite Stillness or universal Awareness. Indeed, in the midst of all his apparent successes, Dick said, “I felt something was very wrong in my world, but I couldn’t *label* it in any way so as to get *hold* of it” (Ram Dass, 1971, prose, p. 2, [emphasis added]).

Somehow, in some way, Dick felt unfulfilled, and he suffered. But ironically, as he soon discovered, it was his very perspective of the world that was the problem, and that the remedy for his despair was neither to “label it” nor “to get a hold of it.”

A change in the perception of who he was as a person, that is, a transformation of his self perspective, the first of several in his life, was about to lead him to a spiritual place that he had never imagined. For right down the hall at Harvard, in an office very close to his, was that of another professor of psychology and researcher by the name of Timothy Leary. Dick Alpert was about to witness the unfolding Cosmos in its full glory *and*, juxtaposed in stark relief, to see the ego/self of his creation for what it was: an utter fabrication of a grasping mind in a very cushy milieu.

#### **Trip IV Tripping over His Self**

As a budding researcher, Dick was enthralled by conversations with Tim Leary about LSD; particularly, by Tim’s comment: “I learned more in the six or seven hours of this experience than I had learned in all my years as a psychologist” (Ram Dass, 1971, prose, p. 5). Extremely intrigued, Dick wanted to discover what Tim meant and decided to try the psychedelic drug, one later referred to as an “entheogen” (etymologically: “inner-god-creating”), called psilocybin. Psilocybin is a compound derived from mushrooms and was manufactured by Sandoz of Switzerland, the company that under the direction of Albert Hofmann also synthesized LSD. In Dick’s first “spiritual” trip, a journey that for him also lasted six or seven hours, he saw the many roles and identities that comprised the ego / self called Richard Alpert. In his trip, he *recognized* and quite literally *dis-covered* these roles and identities for what they truly were: superficial self constructions. In so doing, he watched them fall away. He became witness to their dissolutions. Dick recounted in his riveting tale:

I saw a figure standing about 8 feet away, where a moment before there had been none. I ... recognized none other than myself, in cap, gown and hood, as a professor. It was as if that

part of me, which was Harvard professor, had separated ... itself from me. “How interesting ... an external hallucination.” I thought. “Well, I worked hard to get that status, but I don’t really need it ...” [And then] at that moment the figure changed ... Now it was that aspect of me [a role] who was social cosmopolite. “Okay, so that goes too.” I thought. Again and again the figure changed and I recognized all the different [roles] I knew to be me ... cellist, pilot, lover, and so on. With each new presentation, I again and again reassured myself that I didn’t need that [aspect, role] anyway.

Then I saw the figure become that in me which was Richard Alpert-ness, that is, my basic identity that had always been Richard ... My parents called me Richard: “Richard, you’re a bad boy.” So Richard has badness. Then “Richard, aren’t you beautiful!” Then Richard has beauty. Thus develop all these aspects of self.

[Then I thought:] Oh what the hell—so I’ll give up being Richard Alpert. I can always get a new social identity. At least I have my body ...

But I spoke too soon. As I looked down at my legs for reassurance, I could see nothing below the kneecaps, and slowly, now to my horror, I saw the progressive disappearance of limbs and then torso, until all I could see with my eyes open was the couch on which I had sat. A scream formed in my throat. I felt that I must be dying ... .

The panic mounted ... but along with this, a voice sounded inside—inside what, I don’t know ... [that] asked ... “... but who’s minding the store?”

[And in that moment] I realized that although everything by which I knew myself, even my body and this life itself, was gone, I was fully aware! Not only that, but this aware “I” was watching the entire drama, including the panic, with calm compassion. [A witnessing recognition!]

Instantly, with this recognition, I felt a new kind of calmness...I had just found that “I,” that scanning device ... a place where “I” existed independent of social and physical identity, that



which was I was beyond Life and Death. ... 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... was over. Now I need only look within to that place where I Knew. (Ram Dass, 1971, prose, pp. 6–7).

Up until this point the self had been an abstract concept. For Dick and psychologists like Dick, the self had been an excellent *object* of research and study. But only now, even after all of his years of study, did Dick finally recognize his ego-self for what it was, and perhaps more importantly, for what it was not. It was *not* his true “I.” It was *not* who was “minding the store.” Rather, Dick witnessed and recognized—and he recognized that he witnessed—that his self creation was *his* fabrication, *his* self construction, and as such, a veiling illusion [*maya* in Sanskrit]. He recognized that all he had to do to find his true “I” was to “look within to that place where I Knew.” And now, after taking this entheogen he had found a way to get to where he Knew.

And so, in his spiritual quest, in his desire to live with witnessing awareness, Dick tripped over 300 times during the next several years (Ram Dass, 1974). And he saw more and more of his self creation in the revelatory moments of every trip. He knew that this cognizance was marvelous and Real. He was the unfolding cosmos and fully Aware. But after each trip, once the effects of the drug had waned, Dick found that he could not sustain the “high,” the higher level of consciousness of the All Aware perspective; that is, Dick could not maintain the recognition of his cosmic Self; the “I” that “Knew.” After the high wore off, his false I, his ego self, was back in charge and directing his actions. He wrote: “I would get high and come down, get high and come down, touching that state of being love but unable to stay there. I wanted to be free not high. Ultimately, I realized this method wasn’t working for me, and I began to sink into a deep despair” (Ram Dass, 2013, p. xx).

At the same time, as the number of trips he took increased, his association with Timothy Leary increased Dick's notoriety. Leary was becoming more and more vocal about the spiritual benefits of

psilocybin, LSD and other entheogens, even going so far as to speak to subcommittee of Congress about their legalization (Dillingham, 2013). In fact, in their advocacy the two had become infamous: Phillip Goldberg (2010) called them “the Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid of the psychedelic era” (p. 145). And at this point, Dick’s position as an expert on hallucinogens at an austere institution such as Harvard was being called into question by his more “academic” associates. His new dual roles of researcher of LSD and relator of LSD experiences were conflating and, as such, conflicted with his role as college professor and employee of the college, and with the tacit role of one who must obey the rules of this conservative cultural milieu. As a bastion of the latter, Harvard privileged conventional roles. In 1963, seeking to ostracize and punish the pair, Harvard dismissed these two brash, fun-loving renegades (Latin, 2010). Dick reported that at the news conference announcing their dismissal, all of the press regarded the two of them as “total losers” (Dillingham, 2014). In that moment, Dick remembered feeling sorry for the lot of them, that they were missing the point entirely (Dillingham, 2014). So, from Dick and Tim’s countercultural point of view, Harvard’s action was a vindication of their message. Among their followers, it had the effect of heightening their infamy. It gave even more meaning and widening of appeal to Leary’s mantra: “turn on, tune in, and drop out.” Tim and Dick were paragons of what the 1960s counterculture embodied and celebrated.

Once “exiled,” Dick and Tim very quickly found solace and a home in a fabulous estate at Millbrook, New York, owned by the heirs of the Mellon fortune (Lattin, 2010, p. 111). There the two of them, together with many others, lived communally. Now, without the “cover” of Harvard, they continued to carry on “unsanctioned” experiments with these drugs. They spent the next three years at Millbrook, and many fellow journeyers like Ralph Metzner, Huston Smith, and jazz musician Maynard Ferguson, visited them and/or lived with them periodically (Lattin, 2010). However, during that time, Dick was noticing that it was gradually taking more and more dosages to “stay high” (Lattin, 2010, pp. 113–114). At one point they took 400

micrograms of LSD every four hours for two weeks (Lattin, 2010). But afterwards, instead of becoming One with the cosmos forever and feeling the bliss of infinite Love as they had hoped, it was reported that they “came to thoroughly hate each other” (Lattin, 2010, p. 116).

Dick was becoming increasingly dissatisfied as he seemed to be going nowhere, taking these drugs to achieve a temporary happiness but always coming back down. He embodied the *samsāric* wheel of satisfaction / dissatisfaction, satisfaction / dissatisfaction, *sukha / duḥkha; sukha / duḥkha*. And with this recognition, he knew he needed a change. Ironically, it was again through a need to grasp or cling onto something certain in the turbulence of a fast moving world, a world now consisting of ephemeral, fantastic, psychedelic, spiritual experiences, that Dick found himself suffering more and more deeply (Lattin, 2010). But now, in *re-viewing* this second substantial bout of suffering, he came to *re-cognize* despair’s deeper signification, and began to view it as a “wake-up” call. In an almost Kierkegaardian metaphor Dick said: “Despair is what motivates the next step: ... when [a person] finishes being totally enamored of his power, of his intellect and he can buy or control or master or get anything he wants ... . Then comes the dawning thing—that it is all [an illusion, all] ephemeral” (Ram Dass, 1974, pp. 149–150). And in that despair, comes the recognition that “how you thought you would make it isn’t going to make it” (Ram Dass, 1974, p. 150). But the straw that finally broke the camel’s back was a break in the friendship of Tim and Dick promulgated by a view that may be regarded as counter to Timothy’s usually wide-eyed universal perspective: that is, Tim’s strong disapproval and castigation of Dick’s homosexual behaviors in their “group home.” Tim went even so far as to call Dick “evil” (Lattin, 2010, p. 117). And so, Dick left the estate (Lattin, 2010, p. 118).

### Trip V

#### Tripping over My Self

This trip begins with a kind of disclaimer. Before writing this work, I was certainly familiar with Ram Dass’ (1971) *Be Here Now*, but only in that I had heard those words and knew of that title

as a counterculture reference. I never had read any of Ram Dass’ other works, or listened to or watched his lectures. But it was the words of Ram Dass expressed in those readings and lectures that inspired the writing of this work, which, as it turns out, has come to include a reconsideration of my own spiritual awakening. Therefore, with your kind indulgences, I would like to take a brief side trip and talk about that for a moment.

My spiritual journey began when I first became aware of my appallingly naïve, superficial, and conventionally created self around the second semester of my freshman year in college. At the time, I was studying hard to become a doctor, a wonderfully accepted vocation and social role, by taking biology and zoology, two undergraduate requirements for admission to medical school. But as an eighteen-year-old, I had been sheltered in a middle-class upbringing and was succumbing to the temptations that being away from home for the first time presented. To sum it up, by the Spring of 1971, I was enjoying all of the so-called freedoms introduced in the 1960s: sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll. In the case of the drugs part, alcohol led to marijuana and marijuana led to LSD.

During that spring semester, we began to have what we called “Starship” parties, so named for the lyric in Jefferson Starship’s album (formerly, Jefferson Airplane) *Blows Against the Empire*: “[I’m sitting] ... on the deck of a starship, with [my] head hooked into Andromeda.” At these occasions, we would smoke pot and/or take hallucinogens, go sit on the deck of our starship, (the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of our dorm), gaze into the clear sky above, and marvel at the sparkling stars in the vast, expansive cosmos. During those times, I tried a lot of various drugs; in particular, the hallucinogens I did were mescaline and the form of LSD known as orange sunshine. While those experiences were amazing, and most certainly served as preparation of what was to come, they were more social and interactive, similar to just sitting around smoking joints and/or drinking beer: we looked after each other. But on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1971, the day after finals, I took a 500 microgram capsule of pure, windowpane LSD. While not going into the whole experience here and now, really because words cannot express it, let me just say

that I saw God; and that the experience changed my life. The Universe opened up; my body dropped away. I was the light of pure consciousness floating in the wondrous, expansive cosmos. The witness in me was able to recognize that my consciousness, that my awareness, was (an integral part of) the universe as it unfolded; that there was a me in the middle of it all who was doing the watching. The experience bore witness to the simultaneity of all of God's creation and my perception of it as one and the same. As the universe unfolded, so did I. I was truly Present with (and as) the Present. *THIS* was the consciousness to live a life with.

Well, having turned on and tuned in, I found myself growing increasingly dissatisfied with, and despairing of, the path I was currently taking. While the practice of medicine was appealing from a conventional point of view, it now seemed that there was so much more to experience and understand. And so, after receiving a high lottery number in the Vietnam War draft (which meant I would *not* be called up), I dropped out. During the summer that followed I worked and saved \$900, and then hitchhiked through Europe for five months, trying in vain (an apt word), to "find myself." It was an absolutely wonderful journey, full of marvelous adventures and escapades (and especially hashish). But with no real "success" in this quest, I returned to college for another semester. I soon discovered, after the "high" of the vagabonding wore off, that I was still dissatisfied. And so, through various coincidences, serendipities and synchronicities, and with traveling now re-cognized as, and thereby transformed into, a way to get that high feeling back, I ended up in London in the fall of 1974 to study at R. D. Laing's Philadelphia Association.

R. D. (Ronnie) Laing, (1927–1989), a Scottish medical doctor and psychiatrist, was himself regarded as a kind of counterculture hero at that time, having authored many books on existential psychology, a point of view of sanity and madness—schizophrenia, in particular—that differed from the conventional disease-based, medical model. His books and articles and consequential public lectures and interviews had earned him considerable notoriety.

In Laing's viewpoint, many diagnoses of

schizophrenia were made for the "convenience" of a patient's family. That is to say, once the Reality of the situation was abstracted by and with a label—a diagnosis—then two things would happen: first, with this newly applied label, the "patient" would discover and be allowed the latitude to "fill out," to "complete," the full meaning of the overarching, imposed diagnostic label with symptoms she or he previously may not have shown. This label of conventional medicine thereby sanctioned a self created and self creating exacerbation of one's symptoms. In the event, the patient got worse. Second and simultaneously, with this diagnostic label a physician could then take charge; that is, be allowed the responsibility and given the authority to consign the patient to an asylum; or, alternatively, confound her or his often disruptive behavior with drugs or electric shocks. By these means and measures the family's "problem" would be mitigated and/or simply "go away." Thereby, the family would get "better." Succinctly put, the diagnosis and resultant re-actions succeeded in making the patient worse while the family's condition "improved." To paraphrase, Laing likened this to *treating the label instead of the patient*. In these situations, the real problem, in being abstracted, was never addressed truthfully; the situation was never given honest attention.

At the heart of Laing's understanding was the view that schizophrenics simply often saw things from a different grid, from a different perspective or perspectives; that schizophrenics' various manifest expressions were reactions to a recognition of the perpetration of illusion present and resident within their immediate milieus, that is, within their families and society-at-large. In their dis-coveries and re-cognitions of illusion, that is, in their *dis*-illusionments, schizophrenics found the conventional viewpoint difficult to hold. Instead, and in response, their view of the world flipped from one perspective to another, and then back again: from a re-cognizing, alternative vantage point back to the illusory, "common view." This resulted in the person living in, seen from a conventional point of view, a *saṃsāric* well / not well, well / not well merry go round. From the perspective of the prevalent and conventional diseased-based medical models, these "patients"

appeared as of two or more minds. (Hence, *schizo*: split; *phrenia*: mind.) If they stopped flipping and froze, immobile, exhausted from their flipping, then they were deemed catatonic schizophrenics (*cata*: down, downward; *tonic*: tone, tension, or holding). If they stopped flipping by “totally flipping out” into another vantage point and acted within and from this alternate perspective, they were deemed psychotic (*psyche*: mind; *osis*: abnormal). From the conventional viewpoint, one might say that schizophrenics were groundless; that they traversed the planet a few feet off the ground with their heads hooked into Andromeda. Indeed, parts of their individual experiences could be compared to a “bad” acid trip: for them, these experiences were all too real and often very terrifying.

Laing understood this and wanted to give value to these individuals’ points of view, these alternative perspectives, and not allow the commonly shared view or conventional grid of reality to exist as the view that was privileged. Put another way, many psychiatrists of the 1950s and 1960s were viewing their patients’ worlds through the diseased-based model; that is, that their patients’ emotional and psychic distress must have at their source a physical root cause, one that could be “cured” through physical means. But Laing thought differently. Dis-illusioned of conventional thinking, Laing re-cognized, in the sense I have used here, that any lens, any perspective, can be as distorting as it is distorted. Therefore and instead, Laing believed that it might be beneficial if the “psychiatrist” were to try viewing the world through the lens of the “patient.” Laing believed that the *patient’s* lens is what needed to be dis-covered and then, re-cognizing its value and perspective, be given one’s full attention. This meant that the psychiatrist or psychologist, to the extent possible, would meet in the “*patient’s*” viewpoint, in the “*patient’s*” here and now, in the “*patient’s*” presence, without presumption, on *her* or *his* terms. Whereupon and wherein, the “psychiatrist” and “patient” might find a way forward, together, in co-discovery. In Laing’s view, this is what constituted authentic psychotherapy.

In order to put his understanding of therapy into practice, Laing founded what he called the Philadelphia Association, (etymologically, an

association of brotherly love). As its core component, the Philadelphia Association established a series of group homes, with Kingsley Hall being the first and most famous. Laing’s group homes served as places where “psychotherapists” and so-called “schizophrenics” lived together.

Part of the Philadelphia Association’s mission was to reach out to the greater public, not only just to educate people but perhaps to transform the prevailing milieu. To fulfill that objective, the Philadelphia Association offered classes, workshops, lectures, and psychotherapy. While I was not resident in a group home. *per se*, I became a “student” taking classes and participating in the workshops which were offered in one of the homes on Portland road. As a part of my education, I was asked to spend time with some of the residents who lived in them.

I remember specifically one night very early on in my time there, we were taking turns spending the night watching over Conor (not his real name), a young man with a diagnosis of “catatonic schizophrenia.” Of *course*, it was a dark, stormy, and spooky night. Two others were in the house, but they were asleep; so, it was just Conor and me. This was now decades ago but I remember it vividly to this day. I recall sitting quietly, a bit nervously, and then saying to Conor, “Don’t be scared.” (This, said to a guy who barely moves and does not speak.) Well, Conor turned up his lip ever so slightly, ever so subtly. Perhaps a wry smile? And in that instant, I re-cognized my imposition on him and the situation: it was I who was scared, not Conor. That moment of utter, simple truth was communicated by Conor’s silent move that be-ried my speech as false, as my self’s projection and creation.

The next morning Ronnie came over to the house with a colleague, David Goldblatt. David asked, “How did it go last night?” I carelessly tossed out something like, “Great. No problem.” (What an articulate, useful response!) Then I looked at Ronnie, and when I did, he gave me a dispassionate but penetrating stare, right *above and between* my eyes; a stare that seemed in that moment like an eternity. So, with nowhere to turn ... *he* did. Unsettled, time slowed; it felt like an eternity: I was forced ... to pause. And, as with Conor the night before, in



that flash of an instant, in that re-cognition in the moment, I Realized that my response had been false, poorly considered, unwatched, unwitnessed in its construction, and as such, not Real. I was speaking from the grid, automatically.

In my first reconsideration of the two instances, it appeared that Conor and Ronnie respectively “communicated” with a wry smile and penetrating stare. But upon further reflection, the contents of those moments revealed themselves as projections on my part, of my self. After all, neither had spoken a word. And it was only in new and subsequent reflections, that I came to re-cognize that these two individuals were acting—actually they were *not* acting—as mirrors that reflected through my superficial exterior self to the depths of my Soul; no nouns, no verbs. In silence, I was simply mirrored! In the moment, I re-cognized that my ego was hanging out there — *instead* of the Real me. And so, in the moment, with Ronnie’s penetrating gaze, in silence, I was somehow in-formed: “That’s *not* how we do it here, son.” So, in the naked truth of Reality, my ego was called out and smacked down: I was fully humiliated; instructed by two persons—instructors *equal in value*, but whose conventional labels represented values in opposition and with a privileging rank—and neither had said a word.

Over the next many months, six in all, and especially in my marvelously excellent sessions with the psychologist, Steven Gans, moments like these were profoundly important, but felt excruciatingly painful as they were experienced. After each of these compelling, ego-shattering moments, these encounters in, and lessons of, sharing words and also profound silences, I was left with: Who is really doing the instructing? How do I re-cognize the instructor? I struggled for and with my answer as more and more reflective, mirrored experiences (again and again!) presented themselves for re-view and re-cognition.

As one might guess from our first trip together, our Trip I, the answer, paradoxically, lay in the mirrored re-cognizing (its) self. It goes something like this: When you rattle off the first thought that comes into your head, you are speaking from the grid of conventional interpretation. A thought is simply expressed out loud, more or less automatically. But

when you think about your thinking, you literally re-cognize. That is, you slow down and attend to your thoughts; in equanimity you witness your thinking as it occurs. You do not just think or remember a word; rather, you watch it *come* to you—like it does in the first moment of time. It comes to you in search of meaning; it appears to you, unknown until that moment, rising from the foggy field of the imminent, seeking re-view, in-spection, re-cognition. Once your attention and gaze bless and consecrate the word, you have given your permission for it to go out into the world, becoming part of the Dharma, part of the Tao. You can speak it, think it, write it: “OK word; you’re good to go.” And with that release, with that expression, it comes to re-Present you. But *just as importantly*: whether that word is judged by others in the world of convention as good or bad, wise or inanely insipid, is simply out of your control. You cannot be attached to its outcome, to the interpretation of it by others. You cannot cling to any intention or consequences. But you Know that the attention, the re-view, and the re-spect you give to your words make them Real; they exist as honest, truthful, expressions of your Self in and as Reality, and that is all you can do.

Reality was recognized every day at the Philadelphia Association because *attention* was a *practice*; attention was a primary constituent of this milieu. You re-cognized Truth when you spoke It; and what was really amazing and wonderful is, that just as well, you re-cognized Truth when you heard It. Attention *holds* truth-full and honest expression: it transforms communication into authenticity. Authentic expression re-cognizes the moment as a witness to honor and honesty. For me then, my discovery was that *this* is what loving your neighbor, loving the other, loving the patient, loving the outcast, is all about: thinking with attention; speaking with attention; listening with attention. This imbues each and every moment with honest re-spect and awareness, thereby bestowing upon each moment the fulness of love and meaning.

### **Trip VI Parallel Universes**

In reading Ram Dass’ (1974) *The Only Dance There Is* in the preparation of this work, I came upon an

account which both startled me and most certainly pleased me: synchronicity at work. In it, Dick recalled an episode before he became “Ram Dass:”

I’ve got to [mention] one experience that I had that seems relevant. I was in England and I was with a psychiatrist by the name of Ronnie Laing. Ronnie and I decided to take LSD together...

What?! Ronnie Laing? You’re kidding! I read on.

So we take [our doses] and the first thing that happens ... is he takes off all his clothes [except] his shorts and he starts to stand on his head. This doesn’t fit into my model of what you do when you have psychedelics. [At this point,] I don’t know anything about yoga [*asana*] and it all seems absurd to me ... So I watch with a certain, you know, disbelief. Then he walks over to me and he looks into my eyes and his face looks like the most defenseless child ... [And I’m thinking that] I’m going to have to take care of him ... I’m going to be the [trip] guide ... . I’m not *saying* anything but I’m like [feeling], “Ronnie, it’s all right, ‘I’m here.” ... He’s just like a little child, wide open. And we were no sooner in that role than his face takes on the subtlest change, just muscle patterns like it’s as if a thought in his head manifests [as] a change in his face ...—he now looks like the most protective, fatherly, warm, nurturant being—and he arouses in me all those uncooked seeds of being a little, dependent child ... . And I become, “Oh Ronnie, oh, wow, you will take care ... [of me]. You are going to be my ... [guide]. The minute I’m in that, his face changes again, and he is now the student and he’s asking the questions. This is all *silent*. It’s all mime and all just facial things. It’s all thought forms (Ram Dass, 1974, pp. 22–23).

Dick went on to say:

Well, Ronnie and I in the course of the next six hours went through, I don’t know, perhaps eighty or so different social roles. What we did was we’d go into a role, a symbiosis, like therapist and patient, and then we’d flip it around and be patient and therapist. We’d be

executioner and prisoner and then prisoner and executioner. Some of them really scared us, believe me. ... And I began to see that Ronnie and I *were establishing a contact in the place where we were behind all of that*. (Ram Dass, 1974, p. 24 [emphasis added]).

Dick concluded by saying:

So ... now and after that experience with Ronnie, people come to see me and they are hung up in some way. .... I’m trained as a psychotherapist, so I’m still a psychotherapist. And I’ve been guiding the psychedelic sessions so I’m still in some sense a guide of consciousness journeys, even though I’m not working with drugs anymore... [But] now I’m doing an interesting thing. I look into somebody’s eyes ... but when I look into their eyes, I’m not really looking into their eyes. ... I’m looking at a point right *between* their eyes. Slightly above, right here. (Ram Dass, 1974, pp. 24–25 [emphasis added]).

Wow! I was absolutely thrilled when I first read that. So, as it turns out, Ram Dass and I both received a form of the mirroring “silent treatment” from R. D. Laing. So, of course, in extremely sublime irony, the very mentioning of this fact does *exactly* what it is *not* supposed to do: It feeds my ego!

In Dick’s review of the eighty or so roles that were played out between Ronnie and him, we recognize clearly that each of their roles is created by each of them. In Dick’s rendering of their shared experience, one can re-cognize that they re-cognize it. For it is in such re-cognition, that our true Selves, “behind all of that,” become effectively circumscribed and pointed-to by the very self constructing and self constructed roles we assume. It is from this more encompassing perspective that Dick and Ronnie, in effect, dis-attach from their egos and meet on a higher, deeper plane of consciousness; a plane of consciousness that they recognize and co-dis-cover together in their sharing. Although perfectly silent, this level of consciousness appears to be the same level of authentic communication that I experienced during my time at the Philadelphia Association. Existing in and on this level, it becomes clear to both of them, and us, that they are much more

similar than different; they are much more together than separate. Dick and Ronnie come to see the Oneness, the Unity, that lies behind the separateness of their individual masks and the roles that they, here, quite Self consciously create. This is the level of consciousness, the perspective, in which one truly sees one's neighbor, in which one truly loves one's neighbor, where truth resides in and as (an) authentic, witnessing love. Dick and Ronnie's self creating thought forms are reflected fully in their silent mirroring of each other and point to the unifying Self that lies behind any and all socially defined selves. Here, the truth of Reality that lays hidden behind the veils of culturally constructed illusions is dis-covered / revealed together.

### **Trip VII A Universe Revealed in the Sparkling of the Night Sky**

This brings us to the next trip, and to the most fully transformational moment in Richard Alpert's life. It was the moment where the moniker Ram Dass had not yet been applied but where in Reality he was so named; it was in 1967, when he traveled to India and met his *guru*, Neem Karoli Baba (cf. Ram Dass, 1971, prose, pp. 20–27; Ram Dass, 1974, pp. 104–110).

Dick had heard about the marvels of India, and the spirituality of the place from Tim and others who had ventured over and come back. Despairing of his present circumstances and now, quite literally, dis-illusioned of convention, Dick decided to travel to India. Although he may not have recognized it at the time, Dick was searching for a metaphor, a context, a language, in which to understand, make sense of and interpret the ineffability of his psychedelic experiences.

Upon arriving in India, Dick wrote: "For the first three months, I traveled with a friend who had a Land Rover shipped to Teheran and invited me to join him. We traveled through Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Nepal amidst a haze of hashish. But it was just another trip—more of the same, getting high and coming down—more of my own reality, leading to more despair" (Ram Dass, 2013, p. xx). His friend went back to the States but left his car with Dick. It was then that Dick met a wandering young sadhu

from Southern California named Bhagavan Das, who "had been living in India for several years. After a short time with him, I knew he *knew* about India. I decided to travel with him to see what I could learn" (Ram Dass, 2013, p. xx).

In this event, Bhagavan Das invited Dick to meet his guru, a man by the name of Neem Karoli Baba. Dick, who regarded himself as more of a Buddhist based on his readings and studies so far, was a bit reticent; he and his Western mind were a bit skeptical: "[We were on our way to meet with] a Hindu guru, [but] my whole leaning [had been] towards Buddhism because Buddhism is very neat and clean and intellectually exquisite, [whereas] Hinduism generally is kind of sloppy" (Ram Dass, 1974, p. 106).

Nevertheless, Dick agreed to tag along and handed Bhagavan Das the keys to the Land Rover. Off they went. The journey took almost two days. During their stopover for sleep on the first night, Dick had to go outside to relieve himself. When he did, he gazed up into the clear sky above and marveled at the sparkling stars in the vast, expansive cosmos. As he gazed up into the night sky, he thought about his mother who had just passed away several months before from cancer of the spleen. Said Dick "As I was thinking about her, I experienced a powerful feeling of her presence" (Ram Dass, 2013, p. xxi). Going back inside, he went back to sleep. He neither spoke of nor thought about his mother again for the remainder of their trip.

In the morning the pair continued their journey to see Neem Karoli Baba. When they arrived, Bhagavan Das jumped out of the car, burst into tears, and ran weeping up the hill to where Neem Karoli was sitting. Bhagavan Das kept sobbing as he kissed and rubbed the feet of his guru. Dick followed Bhagavan Das up the hill, but stood back a bit, not really knowing what to make of the scene. Neem Karoli was patting Bhagavan Das on top of the head in acknowledgement and greeting. Then he asked Bhagavan Das how he had gotten there. And Bhagavan Das said: "With my friend in his Land Rover." Although they were speaking in a language Dick could not understand, Dick's ears perked up when he heard the word "Land Rover." Neem Karoli then asked Bhagavan Das if he could have the Land

Rover. Bhagavan Das said: "Of course, Maharaj-ji! It's yours if you want it!" Well, Dick understood enough to recognize what was going on and said something to the effect of: "Now wait one minute! It's not even my car!" Dick's exclamation got the guru's attention and Neem Karoli asked, through a translator: "Who are you?" Dick responded: "I'm Richard Alpert." Looking back at the car Neem Karoli asked: "Do you make a lot of money?" Dick, still speaking from the reservoir of an ego amply engorged in a milieu of notoriety, puffed up his chest and replied: "Why yes!"

Then Neem Karoli made a series of statements that transformed the expansion in Dick's chest to something different: in re-view, Ram Dass remarked that it was "the opening of my heart" (Das & Das, 2010, p. 12). Neem Karoli Baba through the translator then said: "You looked at the stars last night." Dick cautiously replied that yes, he had. Neem Karoli said: "You thought about your mother. And about how she died."

In this moment, Dick was wholly astonished and astounded. He had not said a word to anyone – *not anyone*. He had not even given last night's experience a second thought. How could Neem Karoli possibly know about this? Dick's rational, deductive Western mind came to a sudden and absolute stop; it could go no further; this made no sense whatsoever. Dick, with eyes and mouth agape, just stared at this man wrapped in a blanket. Then this guru uttered a word that he himself never had spoken nor ever even had heard before. Neem Karoli Baba looked Dick in the eye and uttered in English: "Spleen!" As in the moment of the big bang, Dick's world reeled exponentially and paradoxically. In the very *next* moment Dick found himself aside Bhagavan Das, prostrated at the guru's feet, crying, weeping, sobbing uncontrollably in astonishment and in total cathartic, kenotic Realization. "How on earth ... ?!"

What conduit of higher consciousness delivered that English word to Neem Karoli Baba at that particular time and place? How in the world did "spleen" arise from the foggy field of the imminent, to consecrate Dick's here and now in Absolutely Perfect Revelation? How did "Spleen" become the new "Reality?"

This marked the beginning of time for Ram Dass. Of this moment he says: "I looked up at Maharaj-ji, and he was looking back at me with total love. [And in that instant,] I realized he knew everything about me, even the things I was most ashamed of, and yet he wasn't judging me. He was just loving me with pure unconditional love" (Ram Dass, 2013, p. xxiv). "He looked ... at me with so much love, love that was unconditional, all knowing, and completely accepting. ... With that one glance the House of Cards of my ego collapsed and suddenly for the first time in my adult life I saw myself as a pure soul" (Dass & Das, 2010, pp. 12–13). Dick had found his guru, and his guru had discovered him, Ram Dass, "servant of God." In the third moment of this moment-ous divine *pariṇāma*, in the third moment of this transformational theophany, when Ram Dass's head finally unhooked from Andromeda and he "came back to earth," Ram Dass recognized that he was Bhakti, fully devoted to, fully loving and loved by his guru. He was in the guru's presence in and as witnessing Realization of the place behind all egos. He was fully sharing (in and as) the love of a co-arising self as the Presence of Neem Karoli Baba. (Such a moment is called *darśana* in Sanskrit.) It was clear to Ram Dass, that after all of his psychedelic experiences of the ineffable, here in the Present was a man who gazed at the Cosmos in every moment; who could converse with, through, and in the Infinite and Eternal Consciousness, just by sitting there. Here was a Realized Being, who was nothing but Realization, who was aware of everything and all. It was in this moment that Ram Dass Realized that Consciousness is pure Love, that Reality is "Loving Awareness" (Ram Dass, 1971, p. 22); and that the embodiment of Loving Awareness was Neem Karoli Baba.

### Trip VIII

#### Witnessing Awareness

Dick came back from India transformed: transformed in name, in appearance, and in his understanding of what he knew and how he knew it. He immediately began telling others and attracted throngs to his gatherings. He was a charismatic figure reborn, and he was revered as Ram Dass, America's guru and guide.



As a trained psychologist and professor, and raised as a Jew, Ram Dass's Western perspective was now infused by the teachings of the Buddha learned during a subsequent six-month stay in Bodh Gaya, by the Hindu teachings through the (also) silent tutelage of Baba Hari Das, and by the diverse Buddhist and Yoga teachings, to include many Christian references from Neem Karoli Baba himself and his close followers (Ram Dass, 2004). Ram Dass's learnings were therefore presented to his Western audiences as an eclectic mix of labels, verbs, and concepts, a spiritual potpourri, much like the words used in the opening paragraphs of this paper. But his teachings included themes that recurred in most of all of his "dharma" talks.

In these talks, Ram Dass spoke of five perspectives in which one can "hang out," from which one can view the world. These perspectives have been discussed thoroughly throughout this paper but deliberately have not yet been given labels. Ram Dass called these perspectives "planes of consciousness," (2002, pp. 128–154) or "levels of reality" (2004, pp. 195–203; 2013, pp. 41–46).

In the first plane of consciousness we see ourselves most separate from each other: it is the plane of our bodies, our "packaging," our physical characteristics, how we are situated in the world (Ram Dass, 2004, p. 195; Ram Dass, 2013, pp. 41–42). It is what we see when we look in a mirror. The second plane is the plane of the roles we create, the egos we fabricate, the personal narratives, histories, and identities we construct (Ram Dass, 2004, pp. 195; Ram Dass, 2013, pp. 42–43). Plane three is the level of our culture, the milieu, the illusory world into which we are born, the vast collective "reservoirs" from which we do the creating of level two (Ram Dass, 2004, p. 196; Ram Dass, 2013, p. 43).

Plane four is the level of the soul or *jivatma*, the level where we truly see each other behind our physicality; that place behind the roles we play, behind that part of the ego that is created by the circumstances and the enculturations of our milieus (Ram Dass, 2004, pp. 196–197; Ram Dass, 2013, p. 45). Plane four is the realm where Ronnie and Dick co-dis-covered their Self in their silent role-playing trip. It is in level four that it becomes obvious that we are much more similar than different. Ram Dass

said that in this fourth "soul" plane as he called it, we see that: "Souls love. That's what souls do. Egos don't" (Dass & Das, 2013, p. 23). We look into each other's eyes (or even the place right above the eyes) and see simply another being, just like one's Self.

Plane five is the Ultimate Plane. Plane five delivered "Spleen" to Neem Karoli Baba and Ram Dass in their shared moment of *darśana*. Plane five is a place of Oneness, of Unity, of the Universal Self, the Brahma, the Atman (Ram Dass, 2013).

Ram Dass said that most of us in our daily lives exist in planes one and two, in our physical and ego planes. Catching a glimpse of planes four and five, hidden behind the illusory veil created by, and now inherent in the fabric of, planes one, two, and three, is the moment that awakens us to the possibility of the full Realization of each and every moment. As we have seen, LSD provided a generous first glimpse for Dick, but he simply could not sustain that perspective.

The path of any spiritual journey moves up through the five levels of consciousness by means of a series of transformative insights, of Realizations, of *pariṇāmas*—yet, in each and every *pariṇāma*, in all moments of re-cognitive Realization, we exist on all five planes at once and in Unity. This is how we may understand that this kind of "ladder" of Consciousness, of Ultimate Realization, is paradoxically, at once, both the way to, and the goal itself, of any spiritual journey.

Ram Dass came to know, spiritually as well as psychologically, that suffering occurs as a result of dissatisfaction with and as a result of one's attachment or clinging, to one's self-created perspective, to one's conceptions of one's ego, an ego that in Reality only exists at the second level of consciousness. Suffering and despair always accompany a spiritual journey (Ram Dass, 2013). The despair one feels in a spiritual trip arises as a consequence of having experienced the Oneness of the universe in level five, knowing for sure that the kingdom of God, the Present, is at hand, but not being able to continuously access it (Ram Dass, 2000). Ram Dass said that suffering is good for more clearly recognizing and Realizing our similarities as beings who, knowingly or not, share existences in plane four; suffering is thereby good for recognizing

and more truthfully embodying the soul (Ram Dass, 2013).

But as a person who recognized that suffering may be a part of another's spiritual journey, Ram Dass believed that as a part of one's own trip, one must do what one can to relieve suffering wherever it is faced (Ram Dass, 2004). Providing relief to suffering begins in the here and now by gazing with one's soul, at and into any suffering one encounters; that is, by embodying an authentic psycho-therapy. Any relief one hopes to provide begins by viewing and attending to any suffering from the fourth plane of consciousness, from that place where we witness our similarities much more than our differences. Then with one's gaze fully on the suffering but rooted in the unity of the eternal Self, in universal Love, one does what one can to help the being who is suffering. That help is provided by meeting the suffering other, on whatever plane he or she is on, and by being witness to whatever suffering he or she may be undergoing. In this attention, one provides the love that one can as Love Itself. One provides what one can in the moment by being wholly Present and therefore fully focused on the suffering but necessarily *without regard* to the outcome of one's Presence (Ram Dass, 2004). The ego's satisfaction or feeding can never enter into it.

The presence of Ram Dass no longer graces our planet in the flesh. On December 22, 2019, the first day of Hanukah, Ram Dass's soul left his body to join the vastness of the eternal Cosmos. With the end in sight, Ram Dass said of our egoistic incarnations: "We're all just walking each other home."<sup>2</sup> However, Ram Dass believed that when we become fully Realized Beings we become liberated; we get off the *samsāric* merry-go-round and our spiritual journeys, our worldly reincarnations come to an end. Then, he said: we are "all finished" (Ram Dass, 1974, p. 81). And so, we may have taken leave of Ram Dass, a beloved human being, but it is with the sparkle of his joy and love, that his soul will continue to shine and emanate as a beacon eternally, here and now, appearing brilliantly above, in the vast expansive Cosmos of the Night Sky.

## Notes

1. Thanks to my friend, Hank Stratton, for this image.
2. In our milieu's vernacular ... <https://www.ramdass.org/ram-dass-quotes/>

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