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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Ram Dass, spiritual seeker who brought Eastern mysticism to the masses, dies at 88

By **Bart Barnes**

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Ram Dass, a popular author and white-robed apostle of Eastern mysticism who began his transcendental journey more than 50 years ago as the right-hand disciple of psychedelic-drug advocate Timothy Leary, died Dec. 22 at his home on Maui. He was 88.

His death was announced on his [official Instagram account](#). He had a paralyzing stroke in 1997, but the immediate cause of death was not disclosed.

“[Be Here Now](#),” Ram Dass’s signature book, described his improbable evolution. Born Richard Alpert, the son of a railroad president and pillar of Boston’s Jewish elite, he grew up as a self-described “closet homosexual” in a “Jewish anxiety-ridden, high-achieving tradition.”

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He gravitated to a lifestyle of heavy drug use in the 1960s while working as an associate professor of clinical psychology at Harvard University but found inner peace and spiritual enlightenment through meditation and yoga. An Indian guru gave him a new name, Ram Dass, which means “servant of God” in Hindi.

The book came out in 1971, just after the peak years of the sociocultural revolution that dominated the 1960s, and sold 2 million copies. Decades later, New York Times book critic Dwight Garner called it the [“counterculture bible.”](#)

A seemingly inexhaustible speaker, Ram Dass led marathon-length workshops and retreats that drew thousands of followers. He stood 6-foot-3 and was sinewy from years of disciplined eating and weight training, and wore robes that eventually gave way to cardigan sweaters and trousers.

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His talks were filled with self-deprecating quips — “I’m not a guru. I’m only a student, and I give a good rap.” — and he noted his own personal story while delivering a message that centered on self-reflection and finding meaning in a superficial, chaotic world.

In the Chicago Tribune, journalist Paul Galloway once described his teachings as an “Americanized Eastern philosophy” that was “nonthreatening, nondogmatic, positive and cheerful, a kind of I’m-OK-You’re-OK approach with a Zen spin, an assortment of comforting, if vague, prescriptions.”

His message, sprinkled with phrases such as “planes of consciousness,” resonated in particular with his generation. “When I got into these planes in earlier days,” he told one audience, “it was called getting high.” But he added that he later learned “the game isn’t to get high; the game is to become free.”

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Becoming free, he said, was to have contact with our “heart-mind source,” or “who you are at your deepest level.”

Richard Alpert was born in Boston on April 6, 1931, and was the youngest of three sons. He had a history of tension with his controlling father, George, a high-powered Boston lawyer, president of the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad, and a founder of Brandeis University. His father harangued him to become a doctor, while the younger Alpert expressed interest in psychology.

After graduating in 1952 from Tufts College (now University) in Medford, Mass., he received a master's degree in psychology at Wesleyan University in 1954 and a doctorate in psychology at Stanford University in 1957.

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He developed a reputation in graduate school as a spellbinding teacher, and in 1958 joined the Harvard faculty as an assistant professor. "I had an apartment that was filled with antiques and I gave very charming dinner parties," he later wrote in "Be Here Now." "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."

But he never realized how unhappy he was, he said, until he began tripping and "felt a new kind of calmness" and "a place where 'I' existed independent of social and physical identity."

He befriended Leary, a Harvard clinical psychologist a decade older who had sampled psychedelic mushrooms during a summer in Mexico, and the two set about establishing a psychedelic program at Harvard. Leary became America's best-known proselytizer of LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs. "Turn on, tune in, drop out" was his perennial exhortation to millions of followers of the "flower-child" generation. "You have to go out of your mind," he said, "to use your head."

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As colleagues, Leary and Dr. Alpert preached a gospel of drug-fueled, consciousness-raising sensory perception and mental expansion. Both men were enthusiastic users — Dr. Alpert at one point said he had used LSD 328 times in five years, journalist Don Lattin wrote in a 2010 book, “The Harvard Psychedelic Club.”

The duo ran experiments on LSD with Harvard graduate students, and even tried to solicit the participation of eminent Harvard Divinity School professor Paul Tillich in their LSD trials. He turned them down.

But a 1963 article about their psychedelic experimentation in the Harvard Crimson, the daily student newspaper, led to Dr. Alpert and Leary’s dismissal. The former was fired for dispensing LSD to an undergraduate student in violation of his agreement with the university, the latter for dereliction in his teaching duties.

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Within two years they were running an LSD research and experimentation center at a farm near Millbrook, N.Y., where Dr. Alpert undertook a study that led to his disenchantment with the hallucinogens.

As told by Lattin, he locked himself in a bowling alley with five others, where once every four hours for two weeks they ingested huge doses of LSD. But it turned out that the larger the dosage, the less effective it was. The highs were no longer so high. Moreover, by the end of two weeks all of the participants had come to thoroughly hate one another.

“It was the beginning of the end of the dream,” observed Lattin. “Alpert was starting to see that LSD would not save the world.”

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He went to India in 1967 to seek the guidance of an Indian guru, who gave him a new name. Back in Boston, he was met by his father, aghast at the sight of his son, then 39, with his hair and beard long and unkempt. He was barefoot, wearing a long white robe and carrying a tamboura for chanting.

“Quick! Get in the car before someone sees you,” George Alpert told him, according to an account in the Times. The father mocked his son as “Rum Dumb.” Other family members adopted more profane variants.

Ram Dass devoted the rest of his life to teaching, lecturing and writing about the techniques and principles of his new lifestyle, which he described as staying fully present in the moment.

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He wrote sequels to his first book, including “[Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing and Dying](#)” (2000) and “[Be Love Now: The Path of the Heart](#)” (2010), and was the subject of several [documentary films](#).

His personal life was complicated. In a 1977 Times article, he said he was bisexual and intimated that he had been involved with a female follower, but also pronounced himself celibate because his “sexual hangups would have a negative influence on my teaching, my followers.”

Unbeknown to him for a half-century, one fling during graduate school produced a son. In 2009, DNA testing showed that Peter Reichard, a banker in Greensboro, N.C., was indeed his offspring. They stayed in touch on Skype.

Long based on San Francisco, Ram Dass made his home in later years on the Hawaiian island of Maui and received visitors regularly. He came there, he said, to die.

“The game,” he once told the Times, “is not about becoming somebody. It’s about becoming nobody.”

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