

Baba Ram Dass, Proponent of LSD and New Age Enlightenment, Dies at 88

Born Richard Alpert, he returned from a trip to India as a bushy-bearded, barefoot, white-robed guru and wrote more than a dozen inspirational books.

By Douglas Martin

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Baba Ram Dass, who epitomized the 1960s of legend by popularizing psychedelic drugs with Timothy Leary, a fellow Harvard academic, before finding spiritual inspiration in India, died on Sunday at his home on Maui. He was 88.

The death of Ram Dass, who was born Richard Alpert, was announced on his official Instagram account.

Having returned from India as a bushy-bearded, barefoot, white-robed guru, Ram Dass became a peripatetic lecturer on New Age possibilities and a popular author of more than a dozen inspirational books.

The first of his books, “Be Here Now” (1971), sold more than two million copies, and established him as an exuberant exponent of finding salvation through helping others.

He started a foundation to combat blindness in India and Nepal, supported reforestation in Latin America, and developed health education programs for American Indians in South Dakota.

He was particularly interested in the dying. He started a foundation to help people use death as a journey of spiritual awakening and spoke of establishing a self-help line, “Dial-a-Death,” for this purpose.

When Mr. Leary was dying in 1996 — and wishing to do it “actively and creatively,” as he put it — he called for Ram Dass. Over the years, Ram Dass had alternately been Mr. Leary’s disciple, enemy and, at the end, friend. In a film clip of the two men preparing for Mr. Leary’s death, Ram Dass turns to Leary, hugs him and says, “It’s been a hell of a dance, hasn’t it?”

A year later, Ram Dass suffered a cerebral hemorrhage that left him partly paralyzed, unable to speak and needing a wheelchair. From his home in Maui, Hawaii, he learned to “surf the silence” at first, he said, but over time and painstakingly he reacquired a halting form of speech and was able to lecture on the internet and make tapes.

Richard Alpert was born in Boston on April 6, 1931. His father, George, a lawyer, was a founder of Brandeis University and president of the New Haven Railroad. Richard had a bar mitzvah, but said he had no religious convictions as a youth.

A “spit and polish” son of a corporate executive, as he described himself, he graduated from Tufts University as a psychology major in 1952 and studied for a master’s degree in the subject at Wesleyan, only to flunk the oral exam.

Nevertheless, Mr. Alpert, as he was known then, was accepted as a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford and earned his doctorate, staying on afterward to teach. That was followed by twin appointments, in psychology and education, at Harvard.

He was soon riding high, with an apartment full of exquisite antiques, a Mercedes sedan, an MG sports car, a Triumph motorcycle and his own Cessna airplane.

It was at Harvard where he crossed paths with Mr. Leary, who was lecturing there in clinical psychology. They became drinking buddies. Mr. Alpert admired Mr. Leary’s iconoclasm, telling Tufts University Magazine in 2006 that Mr. Leary was “the only person on the faculty who wasn’t impressed with Harvard.”

Mr. Leary, while working at the University of California, Berkeley, had done research on psilocybin, the main psychoactive ingredient in some species of mushrooms, and he continued the work at Harvard. Psychiatrists were interested in mind-altering drugs as clinical aids because they mimicked schizophrenia, but Mr. Leary wanted to see if they could be beneficial.

He invited some friends — including Mr. Alpert and the poet Allen Ginsberg — to his house in Newton, Mass., on Saturday, March 5, 1961. In his kitchen, he distributed 10-milligram doses of psilocybin.

After taking his, Mr. Alpert recalled, he felt supreme calm, then panic, then exaltation. He believed he had met his own soul. “It was O.K. to be me,” he said he had realized.

The Harvard work led to many articles in newspapers and magazines, but it also provoked criticism. A Harvard dean suggested that psilocybin, LSD and other psychedelic chemicals could cause mental illness.

In May 1963, both Mr. Leary and Mr. Alpert were fired — Mr. Alpert for giving drugs to an undergraduate, and Mr. Leary for abandoning his classes.

In the fall of 1963, after visiting Mexico to sample psychedelic mushrooms, the two men and a group of followers moved to Millbrook, N.Y., finding quarters in a 64-room mansion on a 2,500-acre estate provided by Peggy Hitchcock, an heiress to the Mellon fortune.

Residents took lots of LSD, which did not become illegal for recreational use until 1968. Don Lattin, in his book “The Harvard Psychedelic Club: How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith and Andrew Weil Killed the Fifties and Ushered in a New Age for America” (2010), called the commune “a Disneyland of the Psychedelic Sixties.”

But Mr. Alpert found that after coming down from a high, he was depressed. As his tolerance to LSD increased, the thrill had diminished. And as the drug experience deteriorated, tensions between Mr. Leary and Mr. Alpert rose. One issue was Mr. Alpert’s acknowledged bisexuality.

Mr. Leary accused Mr. Alpert of trying to seduce his 15-year-old son, Jack, whom Mr. Alpert often took care of while Mr. Leary, a single parent, traveled.

“Uncle Dick is evil,” Mr. Leary told Jack, according to Mr. Lattin’s book.

“Oh, come on, Dad,” Jack replied. “Uncle Dick may be a jerk, but he’s not evil.”

Mr. Alpert went to India in 1967 more as a tourist than as a pilgrim. Events led him to a twinkly, old man wrapped in a blanket: Neem Karoli Baba, who was called Maharajji, or great king, by his followers. Maharajji appeared to read Mr. Alpert’s mind by telling him that his mother had recently died of spleen disease — information he had told no one in India, he said.

The experience sparked a spiritual upheaval in Mr. Alpert, who forever after considered Maharajji his guru. It was Maharajji who gave Mr. Alpert the name Ram Dass, or servant of God, and added the prefix, Baba, a term of respect meaning father.

Ram Dass gave Maharajji some LSD, but it had no effect. Ram Dass surmised that the guru’s consciousness had already been so awakened that drugs were powerless to alter it.

In 1968, Maharajji told Ram Dass to return to the United States. When he got off the plane in Boston — barefoot, robed and bearded — his father, he said, told him to get in the car quick “before anyone sees you.” He moved into a cabin on his father’s estate in New Hampshire. Soon, as many as 200 people were showing up to chant with him.

Ram Dass hit the lecture circuit, his presentation a mix of pithy wisdom and humor, often joined in the same sentence. “Treat everyone you meet like God in drag,” he said in one talk.

Wavy Gravy, the eccentric poet and peace activist, once said, “Ram Dass was the master of the one-liner, the two-liner, the ocean-liner.”

Ram Dass’s biggest public success came in 1971, when the Lama Foundation published “Be Here Now,” originally issuing it as loose pages in a box. It has had more than three dozen printings, with total sales exceeding two million.

Here, in its entirety, is Page 2: “Consciousness = energy = love = awareness = light = wisdom = beauty = truth = purity. It’s all the SAME. Any trip you want to take leads to the SAME place.”

By the 1980s, Ram Dass had a change of mind and image. He shaved off the beard but left a neatly trimmed mustache. He tried to drop his Indian name — he no longer wanted to be a cult figure — but his publisher vetoed the idea. He said that he had never intended to be a guru and that Harvard had been right to throw him out.

He continued to turn out books and recordings, however. He started or helped to start foundations to promote his charities, several to help prisoners, and to spread his message of spiritual equanimity. He made sure his books and tapes were reasonably priced.

The old orthodoxies slipped away. He said he realized that his 400 LSD trips had not been nearly as enlightening as his drugless spiritual epiphanies — although, he said, he continued to take one or two drug trips a year for old time’s sake. He said other religions, including the Judaism that he had rejected as a young man, were as valid as Eastern religions.

In a 1997 interview with the website “Gay Today,” Ram Dass said he had always been primarily homosexual, despite earlier statements that he was bisexual. “I always had a front to go to faculty dinners and things like that,” he said. He said he had had thousands of clandestine homosexual encounters.

In 2010, he received a letter from a man, a stranger, saying that Ram Dass might be the father of the man’s brother. DNA tests proved that Peter Reichard, a 53-year-old banker in North Carolina, was indeed Ram Dass’s son, the offspring of a liaison with a Stanford graduate student.