



MOTH & THE FLAME
BABA RAM DASS

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October 23, 1968: Two days before departing for India, my friend Russell Perkins and I visited Ram Dass, the former Dr. Richard Alpert, then in retreat at his father's large New Hampshire estate. He had recently returned from a life-transforming trip with his Indian guru, Neem Karoli Baba. We found Ram Dass alone and unpretentious, in a small white cottage surrounded by rolling lawns and trees. As fellow wayfarers who had both gone East for wisdom, we discussed many commonalities of the spiritual journey.

Neem Karoli Baba, a powerful and enigmatic Hindu holy man, had shaken the foundations of Alpert's existence. He even renamed him Ram Dass (servant of God). The former Harvard professor and psychedelic pioneer turned to the path of devotion, spiritual practice, and *seva* or service—of the blind, service of those incarcerated in the prison system and service of the dying. Ram Dass gave Russell and I his opinion about the psychedelic movement, 'LSD opened doors for a lot of people, which was important in the context of the evolution of a materialistic, up-tight America, but acid (LSD),' he contended, 'cannot take one to the Goal of self-realization.'

While discussing particular spiritual practices, I asked Ram Dass if he were familiar with the little-known *Surat Shabd Yoga*—the yoga of the Celestial Sound-current. He affirmed that he had come across references to *Naad Yoga* in the *Naad Bind Upanishad*, one of the major Hindu scriptural commentaries, which declared that the *OM* or *aum* sound issued from *Brahma*, the Creator, and this divine music or vibration brought forth the three worlds—physical, astral and causal. *Nirgun bhagats*, or worshippers of the formless, meditate upon *aum* as the most direct and efficient means of returning to the Causal-Creator. Indeed, Ram Dass was experimenting with a variety of meditation techniques, including Naad Yoga, considering it acceptable to listen to any inner sounds, including those coming from the *left* side. He showed us a pair of yogic earplugs from India that he used to shut out external noise while engaged in this practice.

I respectfully pointed out that the Gurus in the ancient Sant Mat tradition had enjoined the practice of listening to the sounds coming from the right side or from the center of the forehead only. According to their teaching, the inner Melodies heard from the right or center of the forehead take one back to the Positive Power—*beyond* Brahm [*Par Brahma*], while sounds emanating from the left side were debasing.

While such terms imply conditions beyond intellect, we nevertheless discussed *samadhi*, *bhakti yoga*, *karma yoga*, and Sri Ramakrishna's allegory of the cotton doll and the salt doll. Ramakrishna had likened the meditator's *savikalpa samadhi* experience of God to a cotton doll—when it enters the ocean, it becomes saturated, yet still retains its original form; the higher *samadhi*—known as *nirvikalpa*, Ramakrishna likened to a salt doll—when it enters the ocean, it dissolves its separate identity, and becomes one with it.

I found the highly articulate Ram Dass warm and sincere, his presence quietly joyous. The company of those on the Way, regardless of outer labels, imparts a unique delight. After a while, we parted company.¹ As much as I and others had hoped, Ram Dass was never destined to meet Master Kirpal.

1. I was working on this short piece about Ram Das in a Baltimore hotel room in September of 1993. At about 2 AM I stopped and went to bed. Eight hours later, I serendipitously encountered Ram Dass in the lobby of the Baltimore Natural Foods Expo Hall! In the midst of a crowd of conventioners, we enjoyed an unfettered sharing. This was our third meeting, and our previous one in Vancouver in the early seventies was unsatisfactory, for fame and his Guru status had affected him, which he later acknowledged. Now I encountered a humbler, more down-to-earth, and joyous Ram Dass. We embraced. Later in the afternoon, at a packed public lecture for members of the natural foods industry, Ram Dass scattered food for thought and his presence more roundly exemplified 'being here now.'



Ram Dass, circa 1969

Spiritual practice and sincerity develop compassion, detachment, honesty, integrity, and dedication to service without thought of reward. While hilariously poking fun at himself and at established social values, he helped show the relevance of integrating eternal values into one's being and one's livelihood, regardless of vocation. Ram Dass has become increasingly imbued with a Buddha-like compassion, even after a stroke in 1998 rendered him partially paralyzed.