

BE HERE NOW...

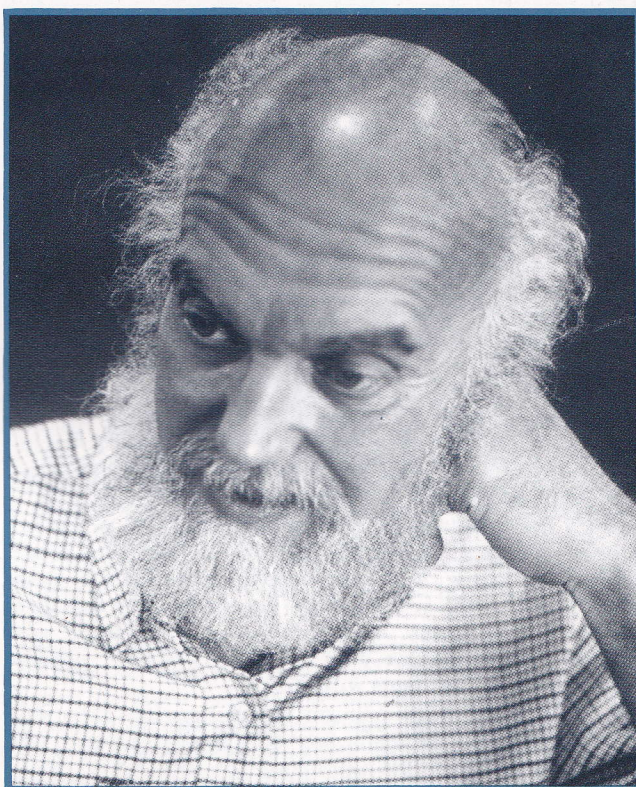


fifteen years on

Tana Edye interviews Richard Alpert—

BABA RAM DASS

At certain points along the path of history there appear prophets and visionaries—special people who seem to perceive life more clearly and who are able to shed their insight with particular potency. One such man is **BABA RAM DASS** (formerly Richard Alpert), whose philosophy "Be Here Now" was the banner and the catch-cry for the 'New Age' seekers of the '60s. Tana Edye caught up with Baba Ram Dass earlier this year in the departure lounge of Sydney's International Airport and recorded this enlightening interview.



In the talk you gave at Willoughby Town Hall January last, you described living on the same property as your parents, and the meat fumes wafting across from their kitchen whilst you were maintaining a lifestyle of rice, dahl and washing in cold water, the temptations of "just one pizza won't hurt me" and then sneaking away to have one. How did you finally resolve this situation?

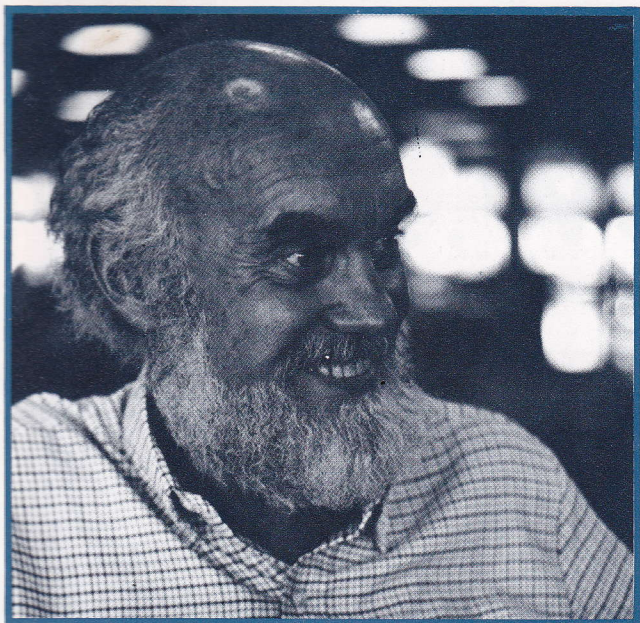
I was trying to hold on to my virginity as long as I could and then I saw that all the stuff I was trying to push away was in me and that I was going to have to come to terms with it and come into harmony with my whole being as in human incarnation, but I've done it very gently and slowly in stages. It's almost a timing matter where, as I open up to it, if I am conscious of it, I get done with it much more quickly. I get done with the more compelling quality of it, the compelling quality of food, the compelling quality of sex, the compelling quality of luxury or power or any of these things and I keep playing with them all the time. I keep playing with money and power and fame and sex and all of these

things, just because they are part of my cultural background, they're part of my habit structures of response. I can't push them away, I can't make believe they don't exist, nor can I get lost in them anymore. I've gone from being afraid of getting lost in them to almost taunting and teasing myself to see how lost I can get.

So you've come to accepting the child within yourself still growing and not getting hung up with the process?

Very much, accepting my humanity, desires and jealousy, fear, rage and anger. By accepting it, the consciousness that surrounds it stays clearer. The minute I don't accept it, I get caught up in throwing it away. It's a slow process. A lot of people who say I am doing contra are really just rationalising their lust, but there are ways of balancing between the space of awareness that you have and the identification with the impulses and desires, and so it's a very fine balancing act. You can go too far into horny celibacy or you can go too far into acting out — there is no simple rule of the

Cont'd over



"... the pendulum swings, so that in the '70s . . . you get the college culture that just want to drink beer, become lawyers and rip off the society."

game. Each person has got to listen in their heart to where they are at, what they can transmute and what they can't, because every act done with attachment, where you are primarily lost into the thing itself, strengthens the karmic problem. It just keeps creating more stuff and every act that is done with even a little bit of spaciousness around it, starts to extricate you from it. It would be nice if the percentage of spaciousness were 51%. Most of us are working with about 2%, just a rate of awareness, as lust takes over or desire takes over.

The whole game is truth with oneself. You can be successful in conning other people, but you can't really con yourself for too long. If you want to become free, you have to be really straight with yourself and sometimes it can be incredibly painful, because you see what a fraud you are, you see how you pervert spiritual language, spiritual role, everything.

With the accelerating degree of global stress we are all experiencing, the energy problems and food shortages which are becoming more widespread, what solutions can you see? Do you feel the best we can do is weather the storm and keep our individual acts together, or do you feel we can institute change through social reforms in time?

I agree that things will get much heavier, for many many reasons. The instability of the alignment of the power structures. The unfairness of the United States being 6% of the world's population using 40-50% of the natural resources. That kind of standing on the mountain top is very unstable. If economics can't be preserved by military might, you've got the change-of-power thing. All of it is up for grabs now, it can be very frightening or very exciting. It's very frightening if you are trying to hold on to the model of how it used to be. It's very exciting if you can flow with change, right? And if you realise you don't need much to survive and that if you don't survive — that's OK too — then you're really free — then you can really play — if you've died a few times.

Now in answer to your question specifically about social change. Gandhi's statement was very powerful: "If you reduce yourself to zero — your power is irresistible". If there's nobody doing it, then it's just dharma being done, it's the way of things — you are merely an instrument of the way of things. I don't know whether or not the world is to end or to come through, whether half the people are going to die, whether we're going to find peace. My part in it, the quieter I am, is to share dharma, is to work to relieve suffering. I will keep

doing that, but as the Gita says — there are two rules that are right on. One says, "do not identify with being the actor", and the other is "do not be attached to the fruits of your action". I will work to make peace in the world and help us change the political climate. I'm doing it because that is what I do. I'm sitting behind it, I'm not identified with doing it. I'm doing it because that's the part I do, just like my heart's beating, but I'm not beating it, and the other part is that how it comes out is how it comes out — that's in God's hands. All I am doing is my part to make it beautiful, because the minute I get caught in the good guys and the bad guys, the minute I get caught in the polarities, all I am doing is proliferating and extending the paranoia and separateness . . . and so you become the creator of the problem.

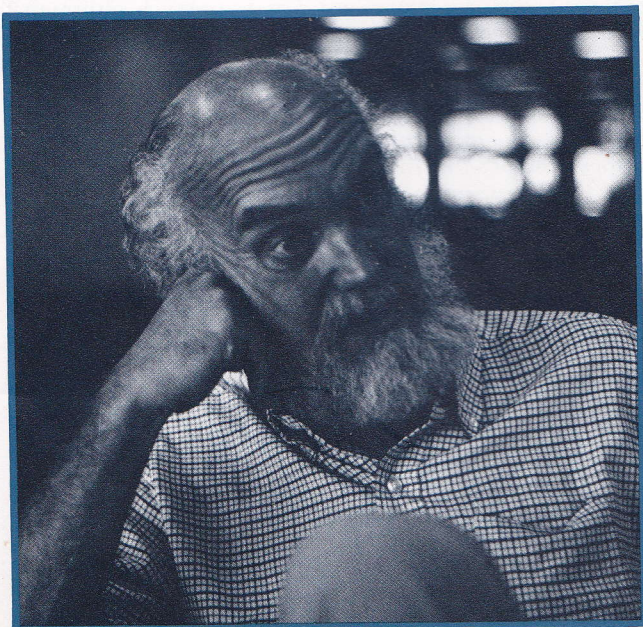
And not part of the solution . . .

You become the creator of the problem. The hippies created the police in the '60s and the police created the hippies. They kept saying "there is more of them, we need more of us", "there's more of us, we need more of them", and the whole thing got polarised and in '68 it was really polarised between the government and the Vietnam conflict and so on. And now I think there is a more sophisticated appreciation. Carter represented a more sophisticated understanding, in a way, of the fact that we are all one, but he didn't have the charisma or the toughness to play the other part of it, because there are many planes of reality simultaneously. Like Reagan is going to say, "Look, the fact that Russia is training more terrorists than anybody else in the world at this moment — we're going to have to fight this directly head on — we're gonna have to be strong". It's OK to play that part: even in Monopoly you've got to play your part to hold on to Park Avenue and Mayfair, but at the same moment you don't get lost in it and you realise that we're all one and you keep that consciousness going simultaneously. That's the difference between statesmanship and political power and unfortunately Reagan doesn't reflect the other balance of it. Now, for a while I backed Jerry Brown, but then I didn't feel his heart and I kept saying, "Jerry — I don't feel your heart" — "you say it beautifully, you're a nice Jesuit, you know you're as smart as hell, and you know just how to say it — but I don't feel your heart and I really feel we need compassion in our statesmen." So this year Wavy Gravy and I went to the Republican Primaries in New Hampshire and we ran a candidate — "Nobody for President" — (laughter) because nobody could solve our economic problems and nobody cares. There were a number of criteria by which one would elect Nobody for President. We had Nobody driving at the back of a Pinto because Nobody in their right mind would drive in the back of a Pinto and so on. You can make your political statements very lightly. I really don't feel that politics is the initiator of social change. I don't think it's a viable vehicle for social change. I think that the individual human heart is the only social institution worth its salt. All the rest of them come and go.

You mentioned the youth movement of the '60s and the uneasiness that developed out of that period. A lot of individuals resolved their differences with society and found a way to channel their energies effectively and creatively and a lot didn't, who were, and still are, at a loss to find a way to interact without feeling negative about it. What do you think about this situation?

During the '60s we all cased it and touched something. Rock'n'roll reflected it — we exploded into a new kind of consciousness — a relative reality, but we brought with us all of our karma — all of our ego tripping. One could observe that in America, for example, what happened was the minute this new way of seeing things started having any juice at all, it really attracted all the power players and it immediately got ripped off and it turned back into a worldly dimension, because we weren't then pure enough. I remember being a representative of the hippies to meet with the Hopis in Hoptavilla, which is where the elders are (the elders ranged from about 60 to 120 years old) to have a Hopi-Hippy Be-In in Grand Canyon. I was the representative of the hippies from San Francisco, Haight Ashbury, and I could feel that we couldn't get by the living room — we'd never get into the kitchen, where the action really was for the Hopis, because we were just slob. I mean, our groups were screwing by their well and we were handing feathers out to the kids and you just don't do that. They weren't sensitive enough to the culture, they were just too gross — we were just too gross and we were too greedy to tell of something that had happened to us, when we really had a lot of purification to defend. The impurities of the way we did it then had a reaction and the pendulum swings, so that in the '70s, in the US, you get the college culture that just want to drink beer, become lawyers and rip off the society. It's back to materialism again and it's hatred for the '60s, not just a rejection, but a hatred for it — and yet it's in everybody. Changes occurred and they are in everybody. It's really that the fad part of it had the pendulum effect and so people went from being phony holy to phony unholy — which is exactly the same thing. I mean, you'd meet the old Hari Krishnas in the bar drinking beer. They would still have that yearning for meditation and Spirit and God that they had touched, but they were reacting against that and so you see the pendulum. Behind the pendulum, in fact, something really has happened from the '60s and it's very widespread and still going on.

(At this point I was tempted to mention Ram Dass



downing a beer when I returned with him to the bar at the airport, but I had two thoughts, one was his answer to my first question which had allowed an ample degree of flexibility in life's situations and the other was the fact that our time was running out and I wanted to get on with it).

Then we experience the tragedy of John Lennon's death in NYC. Do you feel that these sorts of events are symptomatic of the deterioration of our society or that it's an unfortunate aspect of our lot? Is the whole system getting really screwed up?

I think that when you play with power, worldly power at all, you realise that you attract people and you are very vulnerable under those conditions. And that really is a condition of the human condition. You can't really see it necessarily as the beginning of the end . . . I don't see it as a great portent of horrible things to come — I think horrible things may well come — but I don't see John's death as that. I think John's death is something that could happen to anybody, under those conditions, and it's amazing it doesn't happen to more people. The way the media work, they allow for an identification that is almost obscenely intimate between the follower and the media figure and all the neuroses can then manifest in that way. That guy apparently literally thought he was John Lennon and the other guy was an impostor and he just had to get rid of the impostor. I've worked in mental hospitals and I know how real psychoses are, that's nothing, that is part of the times, just part of the nature of things. I thought it was a very powerful statement that touched a lot of people very deeply.

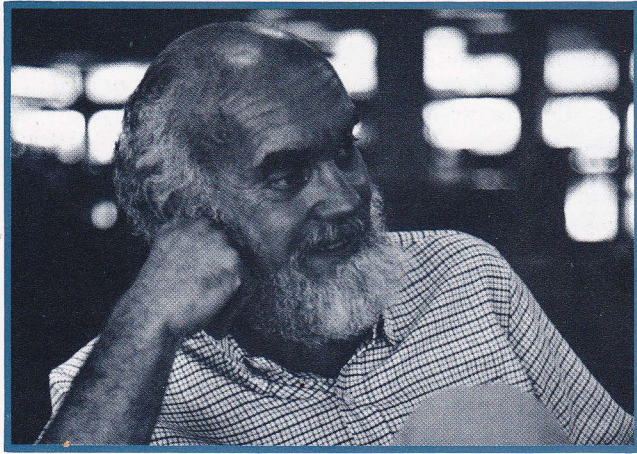
And the fact that it was him that died and not one of the others . . .

Oh yeah, 'cause he was the real poet. He was an incredible being and something of the '60s died at that moment too. And he was a symbol of that, no doubt we all felt that happen. The other part of that that is interesting is because of the intense relationship that John and Yoko had — John was really having a new birth. The only thing was, that that one wasn't going to be allowed to happen this time round. I think he was growing in an exquisite way. Yoko was the greatest thing that happened to John after his initial thing with the Beatles, because otherwise people just burn up in those situations.

I think Double Fantasy is evidence of that, particularly 'Woman' and 'Starting Over'. With 'Woman', John seemed to have reached a beautiful understanding within himself and achieved a rare balance between the male and female aspects of his own being.

I thought it was incredible. I met Yoko and John and I didn't really like Yoko and Yoko didn't like me because Yoko's a power tripper, but besides that, she is a hell of a good woman and she really cleaned up John's act a lot. He had the wisdom to surrender into it and the result was a new kind of power coming out. And we, maybe, are in a society that isn't ready to have that kind of power yet.

"Yoko's a power tripper but . . . she is a hell of a good woman and she really cleaned up John's act a lot. He had the wisdom to surrender into it."



Yet it could be the sort of quality that's necessary for our transcendence on a larger scale . . .

I don't write the script, I don't know. I just don't have any models about it.

Are you familiar with Dante's 'Inferno'?

Yes.

He depicts the final test before liberation as love (the virtue) or lust (the sin) and that having achieved purification on this level, then one passes into the garden of paradise. He says the trick is to be able to embrace, but not to get caught in the embrace and not to not embrace — to be able to let go . . .

Exactly. It's the garden of infinite delights.

In regard to the feminine aspect of our society, some religions and sects regard the birth of a female as a form of punishment for the parents, such as the Krishnas. How do you feel about this?

In the villages that I live in (in India), the women hang out in the kitchen and the men are in the living room. The women are the heart of the matter but they are segregated and when I look at the women they seem very joyful and harmonious with their part — they don't seem persecuted and put down at all, whereas I know that an American woman would shriek at the thought of this role. I think that you have got to see the cultural context in which things come and within that particular little segment which is the Krishna movement as interpreted by Bhaktivedanta, whoever he was, you've got the kind of quality which for Westerners seems a little bizarre. I certainly don't agree to it, I can understand the culture it came out of, but begging in airports feels inappropriate to the kind of cultures which they're trying to move their religion to.

What about in Western civilisation where women are still regarded pretty chauvinistically by men?

Yes, but less and less. The only thing that is the error of the women's liberation movement is that the game isn't to have everybody turn into a man.

No, of course not.

And the question is, what does it mean to honour the sexual differences? What does it mean to honour one's womaness? The more mature qualities of the women's liberation movement have gone beyond the — we want equal opportunities to change tyres and things like that — into a quality of 'vive la difference'. But just a respect for the difference, rather than a judgement against the difference.

I don't think women ever particularly wanted to go out and change the tyres. I think they were merely making a statement that tried to communicate their willingness to help with the men's work in return for the men helping the women in theirs. And also that women had realised the untruths behind the mystique of men's labours, and that they were really just as well

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equipped to deal with previously male dominated areas if they needed to without having to further compromise their dignity and independence, as they may have had to in the past.

We've got a long way to catch up and I don't think there's any doubt that women are a group that has been persecuted. The only thing you've got to be careful of is that the cure isn't worse than the illness and that the cure in America, for example, is very horrible. When you're seeing the cure, you see women who are very alienated from their biological beings and they have lost their kind of intuitive, emotional, emotive qualities, because they have been so identified with that kind of head trip.

In India, you see the marriages which are arranged by the astrologer. First of all, the couple don't even meet each other beforehand (in the village I live in), because it's not a personality marriage; it's understood that the woman provides the shakti, the emotion, the stability, the earthing, the grounding. The man tries to get as high as he can and if he gets high, she goes up with him. A woman has the ability to get high much easier than a man, but also she's got the earth pull because she has the nesting quality — to keep the species going — and so you have both pulls in a woman. The man is more caught in his head, he has a harder time getting out. When he gets out, there's nothing to pull him back, that's why it ends up that there are more men in caves in India and there's all that tradition. Now those are built into the quality of the incarnation — it doesn't mean better or worse.

What is your own attitude towards marriage?

Well, I perform marriages, I'm a 'marryer' although I don't do it very often. I understand a conscious marriage (which is the only kind that I am interested in) is where you come together with another person in order to become liberated. The two come together in order to recognise the one that lies within and then we dance as two, so that it's this flickering between one and two, one and two, and for that there has to be TRUTH, and for truth to exist, the relationship walks the very fine line between cosmos and chaos and to expect the relationship to be stable and comfortable, that has nothing to do with awakening, because awakening is very volatile, very volatile, and it's nothing you can put on the back burner. If you're going to use relationships as a vehicle for liberation, you've got to keep it right out front and if it doesn't feel good, you've got to scream like hell. You can't just make it nice and put it away. It's scary and demanding and a full blast . . . relationship yoga, which is tantra, not of the sexual sense, only of the broader sense, is one of the most exciting, but volatile and high risk types of sadhana (spiritual practice) you can imagine and to me that's what marriage is about, in the eyes of God. Most people have lost it and they've just made it in the eyes of human and it's like the difference between,

what I call acquired karma, a brother and sister. You can't trade each other in, but if you pick a partner, that's acquired karma. Friends are acquired karma; when you get bored with bowling, the friends you made at the bowling alley sort of fall away, because you don't have anything in common. On the other hand, you can't trade in brothers or fathers or children or things like that.

What about in the case of soul mates?

Well, historically, a relationship which was a marriage of soul mates — meaning it was something you enter into — you took it on as given karma. No matter how bad it got, you just worked with it. That was the way it was, even though it wasn't necessarily a rose garden, but you knew you had to work.

We in America, I know, have made it into a special kind of friendship — like Zsa Zsa Gabor — she just marries everybody instead of having lunch with them. (laughter). You can't knock it — you gotta hear that there are two different strategies, one is — if you and I started work together and then get to a place where we get stuck, maybe it would be better for me and you to go onto somebody else and work with them. The other thing is — it tends to stay somewhat superficial that way, whereas when you have to go through the pain and suffering of having closed up to each other so that you really hate each other. Then you've died and it starts to get interesting and that scares the hell out of us. We have pride and we have all kinds of stuff to protect. I find it thrilling and exciting and I'm just at the beginning of my play with Allah.

Do you think that the soul has a choice as to the sexual gender in each incarnation?

Oh, I think so. All of us have been everything, many, many times — at least on the planet — but everywhere else too. This planet is trivial compared to everywhere else.

How are we going for time?

We're doing fine . . .

OK. How much do you feel you are swayed or influenced by the appearance of things?

What do you mean by appearance?

The way something appears to be, the surface. How much do you feel you are influenced by the surface of things or do you feel you've reached the point where you can now cut through it?

No, I think that I am still very, very vulnerable. I don't think that I am free enough yet, to be able to speak directly from my heart, without vibrating. I still have to work with rejection and I still get stuck in my senses, in terms of looking at an aeroplane and seeing it as real and seeing and being at the airport as real. I can, if I stop for a moment, flip out, but still, it gets solid. It's a good dream sequence, really takes me on a trip.

Very convincing?

Yeh, it gets solid. It's the issue of remembering and it happens — the way I say it is — you forget just as often, but you remember sooner — so that forgetting into it and getting caught for twenty or thirty years — then it gets down to a year and then a month and pretty soon it's down to minutes. The minute you start to get stuck in the solidity of it all, you start to feel a thickness. It's like you've moved into a denser climate and you don't even know what you got stuck in. You just know you got stuck, but immediately you right yourself by whatever method you use.

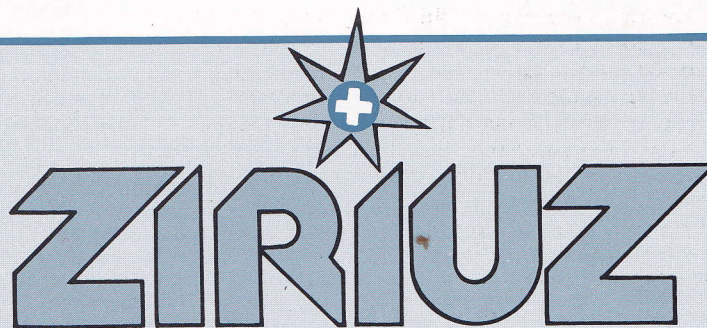
Just before you go, how did you feel about Australia this visit?

I was delighted, because I was here ten years ago and it felt like being in Boston in the '40s and now I come here and Sydney is like a clean San Francisco. I mean, it's not jaded and the relative culture felt pristinely open, maybe not with the juice necessary to make it all happen very fast, because there's neither enough malaise nor discomfort, nor is there enough acting out of impulse, everybody is very nice . . .

Is it a bit unnerving?

A little bit, but it's very pleasant. You kind of wish it would get a little more . . . you know . . . 'cause I'm juiced up from living in those kinds of places . . . but still . . . OK I gotta go . . . ॐ

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