

Ram Dass: Living the Life You're Given

Date?

It may be strange for a Zen person to be talking about Ram Dass, but I saw a documentary about his life recently. It's call "Fierce Grace" and it has some interesting lessons.

Ram Dass (Richard Alpert before he was Ram Dass) was an instructor at Harvard. He had an office next to Timothy Leary's and began to take psychedelics with Leary. Both were psychologists interested in the effects of this drug on the mind. Ultimately they were fired from Harvard: Leary for missing classes and being a general embarrassment and rabble-rouser; Ram Dass for supposedly giving LSD to a student.

At this time in our national life, I was a graduate student and part time hippie. Looking back, it was a strange time. There were plans of putting LSD in the drinking water. The fact that people thought this would be a wonderful help, that it would open things up politically and would answer society's problems, tells you something about what kind of time it was. There was a lot of craziness going on. On the other hand, there was also an immense opening in our culture for many people.

After Ram Dass got fired, he and Leary and a bunch of other people moved to a mansion in New York 's Dutchess County. They hung out with their friends and took LSD. At this time, Ram Dass hatched a plan for people to take LSD for 24 hours--a continuous high--to see what would happen. One thing that happened was Ram Dass got physically sick. As one of the other participants said, "If you're sick, exploring your consciousness isn't going to help. You need a doctor."

Soon after that experience Ram Dass and Leary parted ways.

Ram Dass went to India. He had experienced a spiritual opening with drugs. But at this time, he said, "I saw the limits of LSD and went to India to find some other way of exploring spirituality and there I found people who knew many levels of consciousness. But they didn't take LSD. "

Eventually he met Maharaji Neem Karoli Baba, a Hindu teacher. He studied quite a while with Maharaji and then came back to the States. He said, "When I went to India my spiritual method was LSD, but when I returned it was inside of me."

He soon wrote *Be Here Now*. It was an immensely popular book. In some ways it was a simple book, straightforward, putting a big emphasis on being present for each moment. At one point it was selling more copies in English than the Bible and Dr. Spock. I had my own little purple copy.

The film opens with Ram Dass in complete hippie garb--flowing white robes and beads, long beard--looking very spiritual, his eyes closed. He's talking to a group of spiritual aspirants. Then the film cuts to him as an old man. It shows him sitting in a car dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt; he's picking up his leg with both hands and moving it to the ground. An attendant comes around with a wheel chair. The major thing that has happened between these two poles of his life is that he has had a massive stroke. And he has moved from being spiritual with a capital "S" to ordinary life as practice.

The film has many teachings. It shows the slowness and caution Ram Das has had to learn. He needs a lot of patience because before his stroke, simple physical things were easy for him. But suddenly he has many limitations. We see Ram Dass at different stages of dealing with his stroke. He shows a certain kind of acceptance of the reality that there are now long pauses between his words because of his stroke. For older people who forget

words--I do it all the time--it's easy to get angry, embarrassed and frustrated. Ram Dass exhibits tremendous grace and good nature with his accelerated form of this general aging problem and uses a lot of creativity in working around this hindrance. If he can't think of a word he'll give a description, an analogy or a metaphor that will clue the hearer in to what he's talking about. Another thing I found impressive is that he continues to give public talks. This must be the scariest thing in the world for someone who can't always count on their speech. It shows great courage.

He says, "This isn't what I expected for when I got old." Well, all of us have some idea of what it will be like when we get old. For most people it's probably similar to what I thought when I got pregnant. I thought it would just be the regular me only my stomach would get big. Forget that. Your whole body changes. And imagining what it will be like to be old, when you're not, is probably equally limited. You think you'll be you but perhaps just a little creaky, but many things will change. There's a well known feminist poem, "When I Grow Old I Shall Wear Purple." It's a nice upbeat poem about dashing old ladies with great character, but on the other hand it doesn't take into consideration some realities of growing old that aren't so pretty. Maybe under your purple hat you won't have hair because you just had chemotherapy. There's more than one side to growing old.

For Ram Dass, despite the fact that what he got wasn't what he expected, he uses his physical disabilities to help him focus on what's real. He says, "The difficulty comes when I try to hold on to things I can't do anymore." It's when there's resistance to accepting the present reality that there's a problem. When he can accept things, it's okay.

The film shows him in a physical therapy session. You know how physical therapists move your arms or legs to see how much range of motion you have. So they're bending his arm and

pushing and pulling and at some point the therapist says, "Does that hurt?" And Ram Dass shouts, "YES, YES." But there's no agitation in his voice, no anger. He's kind of laughing as he says it. But there's also the sort of joking suggestion that: "Of course, it hurts, you idiot." Many old people get very querulous and don't put up with much. Ram Dass is sweet natured, but not sappy.

The film also teaches us about emotional openness. Ram Dass has been through so much but he hasn't closed down around his suffering. He cries frequently in the film for joy and for sorrow. He laughs freely. He's very warm.

My first Zen teacher once told me he cried more after he got involved in Zen than he ever cried before in his life. He was in his 60's when I first met him. He was a big tough guy who said that navy boot camp was one of the supreme experiences of his life. He had a big square jaw--a macho guy. I wouldn't call him sweet and gentle. Rather, he was pretty fierce. But it's true, he did cry easily. Ram Dass does the same. This is clearly a man with a full emotional range.

The film also shows his devotion to serving others. Right before he had his stroke he had an idea to write a book about aging. Even though he wasn't sick yet, he was getting older. Then he had the stroke, and had a lot more to write about. He did indeed write the book on aging. It's called *Still Here*, a kind of sly play of words harking back to his original title, *Be Here Now*. The subtitle of *Still Here* is *Embracing Living Change*. It's from that book that the film gets its title "Fierce Grace." He calls it *fierce* because the stroke was such a strong, overwhelming experience. He combines this adjective with *grace* because he sees his stroke as a gift since it has taught him so much. He says that he's now living his life as an example for others about how to live and not be frightened by what he calls "the chances of old age." Many people are frightened by those chances. When you talk to older

people they will express this--I don't want to be in a nursing home--if I get Alzheimers, take me out and shoot me. They're not so afraid of death. They're afraid of what will happen between old age and death.

Ram Dass says the stroke turned his life inside out and upside down and yet he says, "I'm more at peace now than ever and that comes from settling into the moment." He feels what has happened to him is a chance for spiritual teaching--as indeed everything in our lives is, if we can see it that way. He explains that there have been two great facts in his life. First, his spiritual path. Second, the stroke. "This has been my practice since the stroke--bringing together these two facts." What he's talking about is the discipline of living his stroke as practice. He says, "The stroke was a worthy adversary for my spirit." He has a kind of gratitude to it. He says he's an advance party coming back to report to the baby boomers about old age because it's coming to them sooner than they think.

The baby boomers have perhaps resisted aging more vigorously than other generations. The high point of many of their lives was a youth movement--Don't trust anyone over 30--and it's hard to give up thinking of themselves as young. But Ram Dass is forced to be realistic about his aging because he is so radically changed by his stroke. One of the hallmarks of his dealings with this stage of life is his honesty about it. He's especially honest about what he sees as his failings. Spiritual teachers are often reluctant to divulge the parts of their lives that aren't so enlightened, but Ram Dass is very forthright.

Right at the beginning of the film he talks about when he had the stroke and was taken to the hospital. Apparently he was near death. He says all he can remember is being on the gurney in the hospital, looking up at the ceiling and seeing the pipes that crisscrossed there. He is disappointed in himself for this reaction.

He feels he should have been having spiritual thoughts because he's facing death. "Here I was, Mr. Spiritual, and I didn't have a single spiritual thought. I didn't orient to the spirit. This is the test and I flunked it," is how he puts it. A lot of traditions say facing death is the supreme spiritual test. Tibetans for example put a lot of emphasis on final moments. Ram Dass continues, "All that was on my mind were the pipes in the ceiling. This showed me I had more work to do." That's a very honest confession though from the Zen point of view, he's probably mistaken: he didn't flunk the test. He probably passed with flying colors. Having spiritual thoughts would be a kind of abstraction an intellectualization of his situation. Just seeing the pipes is being present--being here now.

There's a famous Zen story about a guy who tumbles over a cliff and finds himself holding onto a fragile branch at the edge of the cliff. If he lets go, he'll fall thousands of feet to the ground. He see a wild strawberry right before his eyes growing on the cliff side, lets go with one hand, plucks the strawberry, eats it and says, "Ah, how delicious." Then the branch breaks and he crashes to the bottom. A Zen metaphor for complete presence, for thoroughly experiencing every moment until the last. So probably Ram Dass didn't fail the spiritual death test, but he also didn't fail in honesty. He talked about his supposed failure when he gave public talks. He allowed himself to be vulnerable to others. This is a great example.

The reason the film is a great one for Zen practitioners is that it shows a person who is completely authentic, completely relaxed in a difficult life, completely present, very much himself. He doesn't passively accept his suffering, but he doesn't push it away either. He completely inhabits the life he is given even though it isn't the life he would have chosen. Very difficult to do. I sometimes think all of Zen practice is learning to live the life we're given, not the one we think we want.

So if you want to see a good film--I got it from Netflix --try "Fierce Grace." Look and learn how to live.