

Ram Dass

PROMISES AND PITFALLS OF THE SPIRITUAL PATH

Friend, please tell me what I can do about this world
I hold to, and keep spinning out!
I gave up sewn clothes, and wore a robe,
but I noticed one day the cloth was well woven.
So I bought some burlap, but I still
throw it elegantly over my left shoulder.
I pulled back my sexual longings,
and now I discover that I'm angry a lot.
I gave up rage, and now I notice
that I am greedy all day.
I worked hard at dissolving the greed,
and now I am proud of myself
When the mind wants to break its link with the world
it still holds on to one thing.
Kabir says: Listen my friend,
there are very few that find the path!

KABIR, The Kabir Book

International Transpersonal Conference in Santa Rosa, California, in October 1988. In it he draws on his profound personal experience as well as his work with countless people in the United States and abroad.

In the 1960s, we underwent a major shift away from absolute reality. We realized that what we saw and understood was only one kind of reality and that there were other kinds of reality. William James said many years before that “our normal waking consciousness is but one type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence, but apply the requisite stimulus and at a touch there they are in their completeness.”

Up until the 1960s, the primary containers of spirituality and ethical constraints in our culture were organized religions. These institutions motivated people to ethical behavior through fear and internalized superego. The mediator between you and God was the priest. And what the 1960s did, through the use of psychedelics initially, was blow that whole system apart. That era once again made the relationship to God a direct experience of the individual. Of course, the Quakers have had a history of such experience, as have

other traditions. But in terms of the mainstream, a new concept was coming into the culture, one that was spiritual and not formally religious.

Most of the time prior to the 1960s, mystical experience had been denied and treated as irrelevant in our culture. I was a social scientist, and I also spurned it. Rainer Maria Rilke said of that period:

The only courage that is demanded of us, is the courage for the most strange, the most singular, the most inexplicable that we may encounter. Mankind has in this sense been cowardly, has done life endless harm. The experiences that are called visions, the whole so-called spirit world, death, all these things that are so closely akin to us, have by daily paring been so crowded out of our life, that the senses with which we could have grasped them are atrophied, to say nothing of God.

But in the 1960s many of us recognized something in ourselves that we had never known before. We experienced a part of our being that was not separate from the universe and we saw how much of our behavior was based on the desire to alleviate the pain that came from our own separateness. For the first time many of us broke out of the alienation that we had known all of our adult lives. We began to recognize the health of our intuitive, compassionate hearts, the health that had been lost behind the veil of our minds and the constructs we had created about who we were. We transcended dualism and experienced our unitive nature with all things.

But it is interesting how mainstream those ideas have gotten in the twenty-five years since that time. When I was lecturing in those days, I was speaking to an audience between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, the explorers of that time. These lectures were like meetings for the explorers club, and we were comparing maps of the terrain of our travels. Today when I speak in a place like Des Moines, Iowa, there are fifteen hundred people, and I am saying roughly the same thing that I was saying back then. I would say 10 to 80 percent of those people have never smoked dope, have never taken psychedelics, have never read Eastern mysticism, but they are all shaking their heads in agreement. How do they know? Of course the reason they know is that these values – the shift from our narrow view of reality into a relative reality – have permeated the mainstream of the culture. We now have many more options about reality, reflected in the many new kinds of social institutions for education.

To understand what was happening to us twenty-five years ago, we started looking for maps, and the best ones available to us at that time seemed to be Eastern maps, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism. In most of the Middle Eastern religions, the maps about the direct mystical experience were part of the esoteric rather than the exoteric teachings, and were guarded. The Kabbalah and Hassidism were not as popular as they are now. So in those early days we were going to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita. We turned to varied forms or practices in order to further experience or to integrate what had happened to us through psychedelics. In the early 1960s, Tim Leary and I had a chart on our wall at Millbrook, a geometric curve that showed just how fast everyone would get enlightened. It did involve LSD

being put in the water supply, but other than that it was not very dramatic. Collective enlightenment seemed so inevitable and irrevocable, because of the power of the psychedelic experience. We surrounded ourselves with other people who had experienced transformation and were soon considered a cult at Harvard, due mainly to the fact that people who had not experienced this type of breakthrough could no longer communicate with us. Having gone through the experience to the other side, our language had changed, thereby creating an unbridgeable gulf.

On another level, there was a kind of naive expectation that the process was going to be over immediately, This expectation was negated by the information that we read, but we felt that psychedelics were going to work where Buddhism and Hinduism fell short.

When the Buddha described how long humanity had been on the Journey, as he spoke of reincarnation he talked of a mountain six miles wide, six miles high, six miles long, Every hundred years a bird would fly with a silk scarf in its beak and run it over the mountain once, The length of time it takes the scarf to wear away the mountain is the length of time you have been on the path. If you apply that to this life, you begin to see that it is less than a blink of the eye, each birth being a moment, much like still-frame photography, With that kind of time perspective, you relax and take the chart off the wall. Yet at the same time, much of the spiritual literature speaks of urgency Buddha says, "Work as hard as you can," Kabir said:

Friend, hope for the guest while you are alive,
Jump Into experience while you are alive...
What you call "salvation" belongs to the time before death,
If you not break the ropes while you are alive,
do you think
ghosts will do it after?
The Idea that the soul will
join with the ecstatic
just because the body is rotten—
that is all fantasy,
What is found now is found then,
If you find nothing now,
you will simply end up with an
apartment in the city of death.
If you make love with the Divine now, in the next life you
will have the face of satisfied desire.
So plunge into the truth, find out who the teacher is,
Believe in the great sound!

So there was this desire to get on with it, which we interpreted as taking the entire spiritual journey and turning it into an academic course. There is a lovely story of a boy who goes to a Zen master and says, "Master, I know you have many students, but if I study harder than all the rest of them, how long will it take me to get enlightened?" The master said, "Ten years." The boy said, "Well, if I work day and night, and double my efforts, how long will it take?" The master said, "Twenty years." Now, the boy talked of

further achievement and the master said, "Thirty years." The boy replied, "Why do you keep adding years?" and the master said, "Since you will have one eye on the goal, there will only be one eye left to have on the work, and it will slow you down immeasurably." In essence, that was the predicament we found ourselves in. We got so attached to where we were going that we had little time to deepen our practice to get there. But over the years we have grown. We have developed patience, and as a result, we have stopped counting. That in itself is great growth for a Western culture. I do my spiritual practices because I do my spiritual practices; what will happen will happen. Whether I will be free and enlightened, now or in ten thousand births, is of no concern to me. What difference does it make? What else do I have to do? I cannot stop anyway, so it does not make any difference to me. But one concern is to watch that you do not get trapped in your expectations of a practice.

There is a lovely story about Nasrudin, the Sufi mystic slob and bum. Nasrudin goes over to his neighbor's to borrow a large cooking pot. His neighbor replied, "Nasrudin, you know that you are very undependable and I really treasure this big pot. I don't think I can give it to you." And Nasrudin said, "My family is all coming, I really need it. I will bring it back tomorrow." Finally, begrudgingly the neighbor gave him the pot. Nasrudin took it home very appreciatively and the next day he was at the door with the pot. The neighbor was delighted and said, "Nasrudin, how wonderful." He took the pot, and inside the big pot was a little pot. He said, "What's that?" Nasrudin said, "The big pot had a baby" So the neighbor of course was very pleased. The next week Nasrudin came and said, "I would like to borrow your pot. I am having another party." The neighbor said, "Of course, Nasrudin, take my pot." So he did, and the next day Nasrudin did not appear. The day after that, still no Nasrudin. Finally, the neighbor went to Nasrudin and said, "Nasrudin, where's my pot?" Nasrudin said, "It died." See how you can get sucked in by your own mind?

Starting in the 1960s, there was an influx of Eastern spiritual teachers into the West. I can remember going to the Avalon Ballroom in the company of Sufi Sam to hear Alan Ginsberg introduce A.C. Bhaktivedanta, who was going to chant this weird chant called Hare Krishna. The Beatles were jetting with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. At one point, I went with a group of hippies from the Haight Ashbury to meet with the elders of the Hopi in Hota Villa. This was to arrange a Hopi/hippie be-in in the Grand Canyon. We were honoring them as our elders, but they did not really want to be honored by us, I do not think. Because when we went there we made terrible mistakes, we gave feathers to the children and some of us made love by the well. We did not know how to honor lineages properly.

Over the years we learned how to honor lineages through our connection with Eastern traditions. Our problems with lineages came from the question of how much of them we would incorporate as they were, and how much we would modify them. You must modify traditions from within, not from without. What many Westerners started to do was take a tradition from Mahayana Buddhism and say, "That is fine for Tibetan Buddhists, but really what we should do is . . ." We attempted these modifications before fully understanding the practice from the deepest place within both ourselves and the

lineage. Carl Jung writes about Richard Wilhelm in his preface to the I Ching. He calls Wilhelm a Gnostic intermediary, saying that Wilhelm had incorporated the Chinese being into his blood and his cells. Wilhelm had transformed himself in the fashion that is necessary to properly approach lineage.

Many of us were so eager to get ahead that we thus did violence to a number of the lineages. We went to the East and brought them, but kept modifying them for our own convenience and comfort. In the West, we are a cult of the ego. We are more focused on "what I want, what I desire, what I need." This attitude is not equally true of Eastern cultures. Many of the Eastern spiritual practices are not focused around personality and therefore are not immediately transferable to the West.

At first I did not really understand the importance of lineage. I remember doing a television show with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. We were talking about nonattachment as a highly desirable quality of mind, I said to him, "Well, if you are so nonattached, why don't you give up your lineage?" He said, "I am not attached to anything but my lineage." And I said, "Well, you have a problem." My judgment came from my lack of appreciation for the intimate love affair one has with a method. One goes into method as a dilettante, becomes attached to it in a rather fanatic way, and then emerges from the method and "wears" it without being attached to it.

In the 1960s, we gathered together around our newfound spiritual awakenings and all the ways we knew about how to get high. You would find groups gathered around sexual freedom, drugs, chanting, and meditation. We used Eastern names like the satsang and the sangha, but eventually our activities formed boundaries around them. Often there was a sense of elitism, a concern with who was and was not a part of our group. There was a common assertion that "our way" was the only way. Many of us recognize how much violence can be done with this attitude of exclusivity.

I am reminded of the story of God and Satan walking down the street, and they see this brilliantly shiny object on the ground. God reaches down, picks it up, and says, "Ah, it's truth." And Satan says, "Oh, yes. Here, give it to me and I'll organize it." That is roughly what it felt like, when "truth" started to become institutionalized and structured in the 1970s. It became fashionable to be part of these large spiritual movements (which were beautiful and got people incredibly high).

The predicament came from the fact that many of the Eastern teachers that came over had come from primarily celibate, renunciate paths. They were not ready for Western women, who were in the middle of experiencing sexual freedom and feminism. The teachers were absolutely vulnerable and fell like flies.

These people were teachers, not gurus. A teacher is pointing the way, while a guru is the way. A guru is a cooked goose: the gurus are done. We, however, took the concept of guru and limited it with our need for a good father in a psychodynamic sense. We wanted the guru to "do it to us," when the guru in fact is rather a presence that facilitates or

allows you to do your work. Depending on your karmic predispositions, you "do it" to yourself.

We eventually brought our judging mind into the spiritual scene. I, personally, was surrounded by gossip about this spiritual teacher or that one. It seemed as if everyone was becoming a connoisseur of clay feet. Many of us were busy deciding whether or not we could afford to take a teaching from someone who was impure in our eyes. We misunderstood the concept of surrender. We thought that you surrender to someone else as a person, when what you do is surrender to the truth. Ramana Maharshi says, "God, guru, and self are one and the same thing." So what you are surrendering to is your higher truth or higher wisdom in the guru. Surrender is an interesting issue. We in the West see it as a very unpleasant idea. We associate surrender with images of MacArthur and the showing of the neck in vulnerability. The fact that surrender is such an important facet of the spiritual path is something that we have had to stretch to understand.

As we learned more about the traditions, we realized that if we were to incorporate what happened to us through psychedelics, we were going to have to do a great deal of purification. At first we were reluctant, but we began to see that we would have to stop creating karma to get ourselves into a place where we could get high and not come down. There was a big push for renunciate practices. There was a feeling that this earth-plane was the illusion and the source of the problem. There was a consensus that it was an error that we had ended up here anyway. The best thing to do was to get "up there, out there." where it was all divine. People began to feel that if they gave up worldly possessions, they would become purer and better able to have deeper experiences. Many did, but the problem again was that such experiences collected like achievements.

Master Eckhart said, "We are to practice virtue, not to possess it" We tried to wear our virtue like marks on our sleeves to show how pure we were. Nonetheless, our practices and rituals affected us and we started to have many more spiritual experiences, leading to a time when everyone was in a state of spiritual bliss.

We reacted to that experience by becoming enamored of all the phenomena that occurred as a result of our practices, meditation, and spiritual purification. We were very vulnerable to spiritual materialism. If we had a Ford in the garage, we had an astral being in the bedroom. The traditions warned us about this attitude; Buddhism, for example, cautions against getting stuck in the trance states, because you will experience omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence. Buddhism advises that we simply acknowledge these states and move on. But the temptation to cling to such experiences as achievements persists. It is very hard to understand that spiritual freedom is ordinary, nothing special, and that this ordinariness is what is so precious about it.

With all these powers came a tremendous amount of energy, because when you meditate and quiet your mind, you start to tune into other planes of reality. If you were a toaster, this experience would be like sticking your plug into 220 volts instead of 110 volts, and everything fries. Many people have had incredible experiences of energy or shakti, or what is often called Kundalini, the cosmic energy rising up the spine. I recall the first

time it happened to me; I thought I had damaged myself, because it was violent. As it started up my spine, it felt like a thousand snakes. As the Kundalini reached my second chakra I ejaculated automatically and it continued to rise. I remember being really frightened, mainly because I had not expected anything so horrendous.

I get phone calls all the time, as I imagine the Spiritual Emergence Network does, from people who are having Kundalini experiences. For example, a therapist from Berkeley called and said, "This thing is happening to me and I am riding my bike six hours a day, I don't get tired, I can't sleep, I cry at the strangest moments, and I think I'm going insane." I said, "Let me read you a list of all the symptoms, I have a Xerox." And she said, "I thought I was the only one having this experience." I said, "No, it's Xeroxed. Swami Muktananda published it a long time ago, and it is just mother Kundalini at work. Don't worry, it will pass. Just breathe in and out of your heart and keep it soft."

These phenomena started to happen to us, and they scared or excited or trapped or enamored us, and we stopped to smell the pretty flowers. Many people brought their egos up with them when they went to experience this plane; they claimed the power available in these realms as their own. They then went into a messianic journey, trying to convince everyone that they were "the One." These episodes were very painful for everyone. I remember a moment with my brother when he was in a mental institution, because he thought he was Christ and he was doing terrible things as Christ. There was a point where the doctor, my brother, and I met in a hospital ward. The doctor would not let my brother see anyone without being present himself.

I came in with a beard, robe, and beads, while my brother was in a blue suit and a tie. He was locked up and I was free, the humor of which did not escape any of us. We talked about whether the psychiatrist would become convinced that my brother was God. All the while, the doctor was writing on his clipboard, obviously uncomfortable, because my brother and I were really out there floating. Then my brother said, "I don't understand, why am I in a hospital and you are out there free? You look like a nut." I said, "You think you're Christ?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, I'm Christ, too." He said, "No, you don't understand." I said, "That's why they're locking you up." The minute you tell someone they are not Christ, watch out.

Many people, when the energy became so intense from their spiritual practices, lost their grounding on this plane. The Spiritual Emergence Network has been assisting people in the process of getting back to a grounded place. In India, people who experienced this type of separation were called "God-intoxicated." Anandamayi Ma, One of the greatest saints of all times, was a very dignified Bengali woman who spent two years doing cartwheels in her front yard. She was known to have thrown off her sari during that time as well. In our culture, such behavior is Bellevue material. In Indian culture, they say, "Ah, there's a God-intoxicated saint. We must take care of him at the temple."

In our culture, we do not have a support system for this kind of transformative loss of ground, the process of which you need to go through at times. Of course, a great many people have just gone into outer space and not come back. The complete process is one of

losing ground and then moving back to this plane. In the early days the whole game was to get people out there, to get them to let go of their minds and the heaviness they had taken into their lives. Then you looked out and everyone was floating. I look at half the audience and I want to say, "Hey, come on up for air, it's okay. It's not so heavy in life." To the other half, I feel like saying, "Come on, get your act together, learn your zip code, go get a job."

When spiritual practices work a little bit, but you are not stable in your transformative experience, your faith flickers and the mosquitoes of fanaticism breed strongly. Most disciples fall victim to this kind of fanaticism, whereas their teachers have long ago left it behind. When you meet a spiritual master in any tradition – Zen, Sufi, American Indian, Hindu, Buddhist – you recognize another mensch. They do not sit around saying, "Well, you're not following my way, so you are lesser." But all the disciples right under them usually do; they have not gone deep enough in their faith, or come out the other end. **For a method to work, it has to trap you for a time. You have got to become a mediator – but if you end up a mediator you have lost. You want to end up free, not a mediator. There are many people who end up mediator: "I have meditated for forty-two years..."** They look at you with earnestness, the golden chain of righteousness having caught them. A method must trap you, and if it works, it will self destruct. You will then come through the other end and be free of method.

That is one of the reasons Rama Krishna's gospel is so wonderful; you get to see him go through Kali worship, come out the other end, and then explore other methods. **Once you come through your method, you see that all methods lead you to the same thing. People say, "How come you are a Jew, do Buddhist meditation, and have a Hindu guru?" I say, "I don't have any problem, what's your problem? There is only one God, the One has no name, so there's no form and that is nirvana. I don't have any problem with that."**

The way in which we were approaching the spiritual path had an element of righteousness to it, and there were teachers who assisted us in moving through that dilemma. The one who probably helped me most was Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. What you look for in a really good teacher is that quality of rascalness. Not scoundrelness, but rascalness. I remember when I was teaching at Naropa that first summer, I was having a hard time with Trungpa Rinpoche. One of the problems was that he had all of his students drunk all the time, busy gambling, and on heavy meat diets. I thought, "What kind of a spiritual teacher is this?" I came out of a Hindu renunciate path. The Hindus are always afraid of falling over the edge. Yet here was this man taking them all down the path to hell, as far as I was concerned.

Of course, I was sitting in judgment. When I looked at those same students several years later, I saw them deep in the Hundred Thousand Prostrations and the heaviest spiritual practices. Trungpa Rinpoche had taken them through their obsessions and on to deeper practices. He was not afraid, while most of the other traditions avoided such risks for fear that someone would get lost along the way. **A Tantric teacher is not afraid to lead us through our own dark side.** Thus you never know whether the Tantric is an exquisite teacher or hung up on his or her own obsessions. There is no way that you can know. If

you want to be free, all you can do is use these teachers as hard as you can, and their karmic problems will remain their own. That is the secret you finally find out about teachers.

You get to the point where you see that you can proceed on the spiritual path only so fast, because of your own karmic limitations. Here you begin to recognize the timing of spiritual work. You cannot get ahead of yourself, or be phony-holy, because it comes back and hits you in the head. You can get very high, but you may fall.

So many people say that they have "fallen off the path." I say to them, "No, you didn't fall off the path. The impurities have had their karmic effect. This is all the path, and once you have begun to awaken, you can't fall off the path. There's no way. Where are you going to fall to? Are you going to make believe it never happened? You can forget for a moment, but what you think you have forgotten will keep coming back to you. So, do not be upset, just go ahead and be worldly for a while."

One of our expectations was that the spiritual path would get us healthy psychologically. I was trained as a psychologist. I was in analysis for many years. I taught Freudian theory. I was a therapist. I took psychedelic drugs for six years intensively. I have a guru. I have meditated since 1970 regularly. I have taught Yoga and studied Sufism, plus many kinds of Buddhism. In all that time I have not gotten rid of one neurosis – not one. The only thing that has changed is that, whereas previously my neuroses were huge monsters, now they are like these little shmoos. "Oh, sexual perversity, I haven't seen you in days, come and have some tea." To me the product of the spiritual path is that I now have another contextual framework that makes me much less identified with my known neurosis, and with my own desires. If I do not get what I want, that is as interesting as when I get it. When you begin to recognize that suffering is grace, you cannot believe it. You think you are cheating.

Along the way on the spiritual path, you begin to get bored with the usual things of life. Gurdjieff said, "That's just the beginning." He said, "There's worse to come. You have already begun to die. It is a long way yet to complete death, but still a certain amount of silliness is going out of you. You can no longer deceive yourself as sincerely as you did before. You have now gotten the taste for truth."

As this growth happens, friends change and you do not grow at the same rate. Thus you lose a great many friends. It can be very painful when people you have loved, even in marriage, are not growing along with you. It is a pitfall that caught many of us feeling guilty about letting go of friends and realizing that we needed new kinds of relationships. Along the way, when you can no longer justify your existence with achievements, life starts to become meaningless. When you think you have won and find that you really haven't won anything, you start to experience the dark night of the soul, the despair that comes when the worldliness starts to fall away. Never are we nearer the light when darkness is deepest. In a way, the structure of the ego has been based on our separateness and our desire to be comfortable, happy and at home. Trungpa Rinpoche said in his rascally way, "enlightenment is the ego's ultimate disappointment"

That is the predicament. You see the fact that your spiritual journey is an entirely different ball game than the path you thought you were on. It is very difficult to make that transition. Many do not want to. They want to take the power from their spiritual work and make their life nice. That is wonderful and I honor it, but that is not freedom and not what the spiritual path offers. It offers freedom, but that requires complete surrender. Surrender – of who you think you are and what you think you are doing – into what is. It is mind-boggling to think that spirituality is dying into yourself. But there is a death in it and people grieve. There is a grief that occurs when who you thought you were starts to disappear.

Kalu Rinpoche said, "We live in illusion, the appearance of things. But there is a reality, and we are that reality. When you understand this, you see that you are nothing, and being nothing, you are everything." When you give up your specialness, you are part of all things. You are in harmony, in the Tao, in the way of things.

Mahatma Gandhi said, "God demands nothing less than complete self-surrender as the price for the only freedom that is worth having. When a person loses himself/herself, they immediately find themselves in the service of all that lives. It becomes their delight and recreation. They are a new people never weary of spending themselves in the service of God's creation."

I am reminded of the story of the pig and chicken that are walking down the street. They are hungry and they want breakfast. They come to a restaurant and the pig says, "I am not going in there." And the chicken says, "Why not?" "Because there's a sign that says 'ham and eggs.'" The chicken says, "Oh, come on, we'll have something else." The pig says, "That's okay for you, 'cause from you all they want is a contribution. From me they want total surrender. "

One of the things we develop along the way is the witness. The ability to quietly observe the phenomena, including our own behavior, emotions, and reactions. As you cultivate the witness more deeply, it is as if you are living simultaneously on two levels. There is the level of witness, then the level of desire, fear, emotion, action, reaction. That is a stage in the process, and it gives you a great deal of power. There is another stage beyond that, which is surrender. As a Buddhist text states, "When the mind gazes into the mind itself, the train of discursive and conceptual thought ends, and supreme enlightenment is gained." When the witness turns in on itself, when it witnesses the witness, then you go in behind the witness and everything just is. You are no longer busy with one pan of your mind watching another. You are not busy watching, but rather just being. Things become simple again. I am having the most extraordinary experience these days. I have tried so many years to be divine, and lately I have received an enormous amount of letters saying, "Thank you for being so human." Is that not far out?

One of the big traps we have in the West is our intelligence, because we want to know that we know. Freedom allows you to be wise, but you cannot know wisdom, you must be wisdom. When my guru wanted to put me down, he called me "clever." When he

wanted to reward me, he would call me "simple." The intellect is a beautiful servant, but a terrible master. Intellect is the power tool of our separateness. The intuitive, compassionate heart is the doorway to our unity.

The spiritual path at its best offers us a chance to come back to the innate compassionate quality of our heart and our intuitive wisdom. The balance comes when we utilize our intellect as a servant but are not ruled by, or trapped in, our thinking mind.

What I have done here is try to show that the spiritual path is a graceful opportunity for us. The fact that you and I have even heard that there is such a path is such grace from a karmic point of view. Each of us must be true to ourselves to find our unique way through. If you get phony-holy, it will end up kicking you in the butt. You must stay true to yourself.

We have the chance to become the truth we are all yearning for. One of Gandhi's strongest lines is, "My life is my message." The rabbi said, "I went to see the Sadie, the mystic rabbi in the other village. I did not go to study the Torah with him, but rather to see how he ties his shoes." St. Francis says, "It doesn't pay to walk to preach, unless our preaching is our walking." We must integrate the spirituality into our daily life, bringing into it equanimity, joy, and awe. We must take with us the ability to look suffering in the eye and embrace it into ourselves, without averting our glance.

When I work with AIDS patients and I am holding someone, my heart is breaking, because I love this person and they are suffering so much. Yet within me at the same time is equanimity and joy. The paradox is almost too much for me to be able to handle. But this is what real helping is all about. If all you do is get caught in the suffering, then all you are doing is digging everyone's hole deeper.

You work on yourself, spiritually, as an offering to your fellow beings. Because, until you have cultivated that quality of joy, presence, honesty and truth, all of your acts are colored by your attachments. You cannot wait to be enlightened to act so you utilize your acts as ways of working on yourself. My entire life is my path, and this is true for every experience I have. As Emmanuel, my ghostly friend, said to me, "Ram Dass, why don't you take the curriculum? Try being human." All of our experience, high and low, is the curriculum, and it is exquisite, I invite you to join me in matriculating.