

## Acknowledge Suffering

By Ram Dass

One of the things that makes relationships so difficult is the way in which we protect ourselves from suffering — from our own and from each other's. Because when you love someone you don't want to lay your suffering on them and your fears. Also you are afraid if you open your heart too far their suffering will overwhelm you. Because when you look at the world, you just see suffering everywhere.

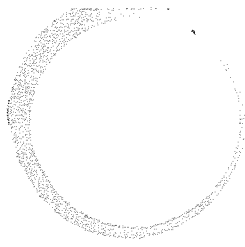
If you scratched the surface of every person in this room, you will find that there is some suffering. Some people who are walking around here smiling at each other and sitting down and having wonderful, gentle conversations, inside have very deep pain and deep fear. But they have learned so well how to mask it from each other. The culture reinforces that saying, *don't bring your pain to me. I only want your happiness. I'll put up with a little of it but not much of it because you will scare me.*

Now just as I said before, if you are going to be able to deal with seeing someone else's beauty, you have to be able to acknowledge your own beauty. In a similar way if you are going to be able to be available for someone else's suffering you have to be able to acknowledge your own suffering and be able to understand the nature of suffering in such a way that you have converted the quality of suffering in yourself.

Gurdjieff, the Russian philosopher, said there is nothing that can be attained spiritually without suffering in life. But at the same time, if you are going to proceed on the journey you must sacrifice suffering. You hear the dual nature of it. You have to have suffered because the suffering is what burns through you and deepens the compassion and opens the door. Suffering brings you closer to the mystery. At the same moment if you hold on to the suffering and grab at it and sort of wallow in it or cling to it, it stops the journey.

There is an understanding of suffering such that you don't invite suffering into your life but when it comes you work with it and transform it. The extreme of it is the Christian monk who is saying, "God, God give me more pain. Give me more suffering because I want to get closer to you." And Maharaj ji saying, "Do you like suffering or joy," and saying, "I love suffering — it brings me so close to God."

[www.ramdass.org](http://www.ramdass.org)



# Living/Dying Project

winter 2011

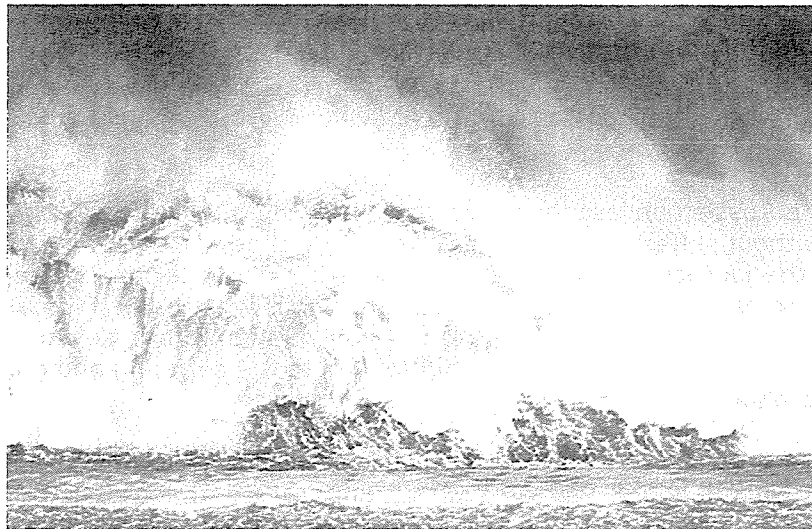
## Almost Unbearable

We are all going to die but don't know when. Life is precious. These truths are traditionally contemplated to motivate a spiritual seeker to persist, with patience and trust, during the work of uncovering and then embracing the resistance that seemingly separates us from each other and our true selves. Our woundedness then is no longer overwhelming.

I've been a meditation teacher for almost forty years and am able to calm my mind, open my heart, rest in Presence, merge with the Beloved. The extraordinary events of my life - love, death, survival, tend to deepen my practice. Yet again and again in the ordinary activities of daily life, the scores of emails and telephone calls and little tasks that appear each day, I lose myself and forget to live what I know to be true. How can you and I each find the motivation to put into

practice that which we know, that which in other moments our hearts have embraced?

Recently I needed to have a



new publicity photograph taken. The shot I've been using is over 5 years old, my last passport photo, not much feeling or personality showing. So two friends took about 40 pictures of me. My job was to select the one or two shots that would be used in promotions for upcoming events.

Examining these pictures with a critical eye was an unsettling experience, not because of the wrinkles in my face, the obvious wear and tear that life had so honestly imparted, but rather

because in most of the pictures I look like somebody who was busy having his photo taken. Only in a few was somebody really there,

looking out, knowing that he would die but not knowing when.

I've been around a lot of death in my life. I've often seen death arrive unexpectedly. Despite knowing this possibility I still treasured some unexamined assumption that at least I will be alive for the next few

hours, that I will be able to finish writing this sentence, that when someone is taking my photograph there will be time to take another shot if the image isn't sufficiently enchanting. I realize I was lost in the illusion of immortality once again, missing the preciousness of the moment in which the shutter snapped.

A few days ago a friend told me she regretted all the time she had wasted in her life, time in which she had not been fully alive. But perhaps in those moments anxiety

and fear were unbearable. Distracting herself had been her only possible response; she had not been ready to look nakedly and directly at the truth of the moment. Yet the suffering of all those distracted moments brought her to the awakening of her regret. In truth, not a moment had been wasted. Can we have compassion for that part of ourselves that so often has turned away from the preciousness of life, from our humanity?

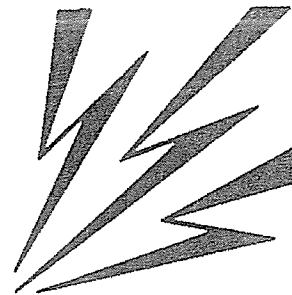
Many of the people I know who found the deepest spiritual realization have been motivated by a profound crisis earlier in their lives, often even resulting in a breakdown. For those of us on a more gradual path, finding ongoing motivation in the preciousness of life and the certainty of death seems to me essential. Do I really know that I *am* going to die, that I *am* dying? Can I be humble enough to go back before the beginning of practice and be touched by the preciousness of life? I work with those facing death not just because I want to help people, but because I want to know in the core of my being that I am going to die, possibly even in this next moment, and hence be fully alive right now.

When I accept my mortality I feel particularly vulnerable, raw, exposed. If I directly feel this moment might be my last moment, then my relationship with the notion of self is radically transformed. Receiving spiritual truths at only an intellectual level is far too easy and comforting. If we see nakedly the fragility of life, see that everything is dying each moment, how can we not love and care for other beings and for ourselves? Then, as zen master Dogen puts it, we live with passion and intensity as if our hair were on fire. Walt Whitman said, "Sometimes touching another human being is almost more than I can bear." If I know that you and I might die in the next moment, how can our touching be less than almost unbearable?

—Dale Borglum  
Executive Director

*Before you begin to pray,  
decide you are ready to die  
in that very prayer.*

*There are some people so intense in their worship,  
who give up so much of their strength to prayer,  
that if not for a miracle they would die  
after uttering only two or three words.  
It is only through God's great kindness  
that such people live,  
that their soul does not leave them  
if they are joined to Him in prayer.*



**Your Word is Fire**

*The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer*  
ed. and translated by Arthur Green & Barry Holtz