

**HITCHHIKING
FROM VIETNAM:
SEEKING THE OX**

**A MEMOIR
BY
RICHARD CHAMBERLIN**

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Author's Note: Some of the names and identifying characteristics of the persons included in this book have been changed.

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*Desolate through forests and fearful jungles,
He is seeking an Ox which he does not find
Up and down dark, nameless, wide-flowing rivers,
In deep mountain thickets he treads many bypaths.
Bone-tired, heart weary, he carries on his search
For this is something which he cannot find.
At evening he hears cicadas chirping in the trees.*

Kikuan Shien – A Chinese Zen Master of the twelfth century
— from *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts

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**I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO MY MOTHER,
MARJORY.**

CONTENTS

Preface	1
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PART ONE - MADISON

1	The Laundry	7
2	Zumbach's Suit	11
3	The People's Republic of Madison	17
4	Strippers and Snakes	22
5	A Visit from My Mother	28

PART TWO - THE TRIP WEST

6	The Primal Scream	37
7	Gunga Din	54
8	A Father's Plea	56
9	Popsicle Sticks	61
10	Dobermans in Outer Space	67
11	A Parting of the Ways	75
12	Freeway Ecosystems	79
13	San Filepe	83

PART THREE - VIETNAM

14	Dexter's Drones	89
15	The Seabees	97
16	Mary's Bar	100
17	Da Nang	108
18	Singapore Fling	116
19	Back to the World	125
20	Chu Lai	136
21	Taiwan	142
22	A Close Call	146
23	The Doors in Concert	154
24	Tripping in Norfolk	159

PART FOUR - THE TRIP BACK

25	Back on the Road	171
26	Tripping in Little Sur	177
27	Tango in Tahoe	184
28	The Honest Thief	193
29	Ernie Pyle's Typewriter	197
30	Hitchhiker Voodoo	205
31	Oak Creek, Colorado	208
32	Horse Heaven	218
	Epilogue	229

PREFACE

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE the more they stay the same.

In early August of 1964 President Johnson, with the help of a compliant press, convinced Americans that North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked a US destroyer innocently operating in international waters. In response, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave Johnson broad powers to expand the war. Ten years later, over 58,000 American soldiers had been killed and a generation of young adults had become disenchanted with their leaders.

Flash forward to October 11, 2002. On that day, President George W. Bush convinced Congress to give him the authorization to wage a preemptive war against Iraq, fearing it would use “weapons of mass destruction” to attack the United States. In March of 2003 we invaded Iraq and deposed its dictator, Saddam Hussein. When no weapons of mass destruction were found, Bush switched his rationale for the invasion to establishing a beachhead of freedom and democracy in the Middle East. As I write this, Iraq is locked into a civil war resulting in a slaughter of immense proportions. We are decimating our army and there is no end in sight.

Both of these wars were sold to the American people using manipulated intelligence reports. In both wars soldiers have

come home disillusioned and suffering in large numbers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, unable to reintegrate into society. Whether it was in My Lai or Haditha, the frustrations of fighting an insurgency have led to the massacre of civilians.

Every war veteran will wrestle with the demons of their own personal war and its meaning. They will ask themselves if it was worth the sacrifice. Their quest for meaning will affect their attitude toward their country, their family, their culture and themselves for as long as they live.

In this book I have tried to give the reader a window into my mind as I struggled to make sense of a society that was being consumed by its own contradictions just as America is today.

The book begins in 1975 in Madison, Wisconsin, liberal home of the University of Wisconsin and mid-west epicenter of violent anti-war protests during the late 1960's. President Richard Nixon had resigned in disgrace a year earlier and the former Vice President Gerald Ford was now president. The North Vietnamese had taken Saigon. A TV show called *All in the Family*, featuring a bigot and his hippie son-in-law, premiered on CBS. Muhammad Ali defeated Joe Frazier in the "Thrilla' in Manila," and William Henry Gates III dropped out of Harvard. Two years later he started a small computer company called Microsoft. The U.S. economy was in a recession, gasoline had jumped to fifty-seven cents a gallon nationwide, and the Dow Jones hit a high of 880.

The American psyche was in a state of meltdown. People had lost faith in government due to a general feeling of malaise after ten bloody years of the war in Vietnam and many turned to religion. Evangelists like Pat Robertson, Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Jim Baker and Hal Lindsay were shaking the foundations of established churches with what was called a Third Great

Awakening of religious fervor in America. A generation that had grown up during the turbulent 60's began to look inward for personal growth. For those who rejected Judeo-Christian traditions, Eastern faiths such as Buddhism and Hinduism became popular, and gurus attracted large numbers of followers. Still others used mind-altering drugs as a shortcut to gaining higher levels of spiritual understanding. It was a confusing time filled with hope and despair, faith and skepticism, confidence and doubt, but most of all it was a period of great change. Those changes continue to effect how we live our lives in the twenty-first century.

This is the story of a hitchhiking trip I took back then and what I learned.

Richard Chamberlin
September 2006

PART ONE

MADISON

1

THE LAUNDRY

Madison – Spring 1975

I REALLY WASN'T LOOKING for spiritual enlightenment. I just wanted to get inside to do my laundry. A cold damp wind lashed across my face, typical early spring weather for Madison, Wisconsin. As I walked quickly down Williamson Street lugging two pillowcases full of dirty clothes, the chipped, faded paint and torn asphalt shingles of the small wood frame houses along the sidewalk bore testimony to the severity of the seasons. Swollen buds on twigs stood stiff and naked like reluctant young recruits anxiously awaiting the first warm breezes of spring. The receding snows had left behind months of windblown garbage and piles of dog excrement in shallow puddles on the sidewalk. I longed for warmth and greenery after a long, brutal Midwestern winter.

When I got to the run-down laundromat it was deserted. I threw my clothes into the washer, dumped in some soap, slid two quarters into the tarnished silver slots and slammed them home. The machine began to hum and fill with water. I sat down on a tipsy three-legged plastic chair and tried to keep my balance while reading a stray newspaper, a reminder that a human world existed beyond the dank stillness of a room

populated with aging machines. Suddenly the washer began to thud dangerously like a drunken Sumo wrestler.

I got up and rearranged the load. As I walked back to my chair, the door creaked open and a long-haired fellow entered carrying two large black garbage bags full of laundry. He wore a plain white tunic, white pants and sandals, and glanced toward me with large, dark, almond-shaped eyes.

While only a glance, it stunned me. I turned away. What was it about his eyes? They seemed to look right through me. The stranger had a large scar on the left side of his face and part of an ear was missing. He placed his bags on a folding table, brushed back his dark hair, and took some coins from a woven satchel that hung from his neck. He walked over to the soap dispenser and bought three boxes of detergent, limping with a slightly exaggerated side-to-side motion like Charlie Chaplin. I pretended to read the newspaper.

He went back to the folding table, picked up each of the black bags and wrestled their contents into the washers. He added the soap, put the coins in the slots, then hobbled back to a chair on the other side of the room where he sat down and began reading from a small black book. When my washer clicked off, I transferred my clothes to a dryer and snuck another glance at him. He looked out of place, like a mystic from another dimension who had re-materialized on the steps of the laundromat. I wanted to find out more about him but couldn't think of anything to say. After my dryer stopped I took my clothes out and began folding them. When the stranger's washer shut off he gathered his clothes in his arms, threw them into a couple nearby dryers, dug around in his satchel and came up with a dollar bill.

He walked over to where I was folding my clothes and said, "Excuse me. Do you have change for a dollar?"

"I don't know; I'll see," I said, digging into my pockets. I had two quarters and some change. I gave him what I had.

"Thanks a lot," he said smiling. "My name is Ken-Adi."

I wasn't sure I should extend my hand because it was so conventional but did it anyway. "I'm Richard," I said. He reached out in a similar manner and we shook. His hands were thick, yet his grip was surprisingly warm and gentle.

The cosmic eyes softened a little. He went back to the dryer and I resumed folding my clothes. By the time I was done, his dryer had stopped. He emptied the contents on a table and began folding.

"Hey, Richard, could you help me fold something?" he called out as I loaded up my laundry bag.

I went over to his table, and he handed me the end of a long gauzy piece of cloth.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"That's for my turban. Fold it in half lengthwise and then just hold it."

I did as he said, and he began folding it slowly, reverently into wedges, the way someone folds a flag.

"Do you belong to an ashram around here?" I finally asked.

"I live in the one over there on Johnson Street," he replied, as if everyone knew where it was. When I hesitated, he added, "The Tri-Unity Center. Yogi Bajan is my spiritual master and I'm studying massage."

I didn't know Yogi Bajan from Yogi Bear so merely nodded my head, hoping that my silence would be mistaken for understanding.

When we were done, he thanked me and invited me to stop by the ashram sometime. I never did because I had no intention of joining a religious cult. I had never been a member of church and wasn't about to take up wearing a turban. Most of

the time I wasn't even sure if there was a God. If there was, I didn't think he exerted much control over people's lives. Yet I had an intuition that there was some sort of spiritual force in the universe, a force that I wanted to connect with. I had been looking for a philosophy to live by ever since I had returned from Vietnam in '69, yet was still reluctant to let anyone else tell me what to think. I wanted to figure things out myself.



During the mid-seventies, with the Vietnam War over, the generation that had brought about massive street demonstrations and changes in the social order began to turn inward. Pop psychologists and spiritual leaders emerged to take advantage of the new market for self-fulfillment. While I never intended to immerse myself in any of the spiritual movements, curiosity drove me to nibble around the edges, so I nibbled at the idea that Ken-Adi could be my guru.

A couple of years earlier a friend of mine named Dave Crum, who I'd met while working as a newspaper reporter in Indiana, got me interested in a former Harvard University professor-turned-guru named Baba Ram Dass. Dave loaned me his book, *Be Here Now*. The book seemed to say, don't try so hard. There are forces at work on you that you have no knowledge of. Accept life and let enlightenment come to you when the time is right. This advice was something I felt comfortable with during a period of my life when I wasn't sure where I was going. Although the concept was simple, I would soon find out that applying it was more difficult than I had imagined.

2

ZUMBACH'S SUIT

Madison – Spring 1975

WHEN SPRING FINALLY CAME to Madison, magnolias burst from their pods to reveal dazzling white and pink swatches of color amidst the brown and gray sticks of winter. Maple leaves unfurled, exposing their delicate green food factories to the sun. Outside restaurants the smells of pizza and freshly baked bread tempted strollers.

In early May most of Madison's alternative community turned out to see Ram Dass at the University of Wisconsin. He was giving a talk at the Student Union South. Dave and I were going to see him once in Indiana, but I couldn't get away from work. I was determined not to miss him again.

However, I wasn't sure what to wear because my lifestyle had been in a state of flux. My white gauzy, embroidered hippie tunic clashed with my short hair. "Damn it," I thought. "Why did I have to get my hair cut so soon?" After trying on a couple outfits, I decided that since a guru couldn't be fooled, I'd go as myself and wore corduroy pants, a western-style shirt with snaps and cowboy boots.

When I entered the meeting room an oppressively sweet odor of strawberry incense filled the air. The bald Krishnas were there in orange, flowing robes. Several had a long shock of hair growing from their otherwise bald heads. A band of Sikhs with white turbans and others sat on the floor. However, most of the people dressed more conventionally, so I began to relax. I didn't look as out-of-place as I had feared.

A muffled, almost imperceptible hum began to build like the murmuring of tires on a freeway in the early morning. When someone began to twang away on a sitar the humming gently took on vowels and became "Ommmm, Ommm, Ommmm . . ." The room vibrated with a heightened anticipation. Everyone was waiting. Waiting for Ram Dass. Older people took the few chairs next to the wall, so I sat on the floor and crossed my legs. Soon the heels of my boots bit into my thighs. Sandals would have been a better choice. I removed the boots, but now my tailbone chafed against the hard terrazzo floor.

Next to me was a long-haired young man sitting in a full-lotus position, his toes showing through the bends in his knees. Who was I trying to kid? I didn't belong here. My position wasn't even a half-lotus and I was still uncomfortable.

The sitar whined lackadaisically and the incense got thicker. Through the smoky mist, I saw a man with long, wiry, grayish hair and a mid-length beard leaning against a wall. He wore a short sleeved shirt and slacks. It was Ram Dass, a spectator at his own lecture.

Soon he began to make his way toward the microphone, casually stepping between the bodies and doing a little swoop and sway dance as he walked, smiling radiantly at each person he passed.

When he reached the microphone, he rolled his eyes toward heaven and continued to sway until the sounds of the sitar and tamburas faded into silence.

He slowly lowered his gaze and looked around the room.

"Has anyone ever heard the story of Zumbach's suit?" he asked.

Silence.

"Well, I'm determined to tell it until everybody has," he said smiling.

"Once upon a time there was a tailor named Zumbach known far and wide for his skill," Ram Dass began. "One day a man came to him and asked to have a suit made. The tailor worked swiftly and in a short time had assembled a fine looking suit. But when the man tried it on, one sleeve was too long.

'No problem,' said Zumbach. 'Just drop your shoulder a bit.'" Ram Dass dropped his shoulder.

"But there was another problem. The other sleeve was too short. Again Zumbach saw no reason for alarm and showed the man how to draw up his arm when he walked." Ram Dass raised his other shoulder.

"At long last, after adjusting a few more defects, the man reluctantly paid for the suit. He was walking down the street when a stranger stopped him and asked if his suit was made by Zumbach, the tailor.

'Why yes,' replied the man. 'How could you tell?'

'Because,' replied the stranger, 'only a tailor as skilled as Zumbach could fit a misshapen person like you.'"

Everyone laughed.

"Many people find a spiritual movement and try to fit themselves into it," he went on. "The Hare Krishnas are always

happy, happy, happy." Ram Dass jumped up and down, smiled and twinkled his fingers in the air. Even the Hare Krishnas laughed.

Ram Dass stopped smiling and his face went blank. "The Zen Buddhists are always stern and serious," he said in a monotone, holding the pose for a few seconds before smiling.

"Don't get caught in the spiritual trap," he said. "Find the practice that's most comfortable to you. Don't worry. If you are listening to your heart you will know when to hold back and when to move forward."

This is what I had been waiting to hear. At last there was someone who understood my spiritual longing. At last I had connected with someone who wasn't out to rip me off and try to make me accept a belief system I wasn't comfortable with. I immediately felt a spiritual closeness with Ram Dass, a closeness I wish I'd had with my own father, a salesman who had never quite closed the deal with his son.

Toward the end of his talk, Ram Dass led a meditation, and asked us to sit quietly and breathe in and out.

"Imagine that you are breathing out all the stale, black air you have been accumulating in your lungs and you are breathing in fresh, clean air," he said.

Slowly I sucked air into my lungs, then expelled it.

Next he said, "Imagine there is a little being of pure light that looks exactly like you, sitting in the middle of your body where the pit of your stomach is."

As my eyes closed, I gave Ram Dass total control of my thoughts.

"Now imagine that this being grows to the size of your body. Your head contains his head. His arms are in your arms. You and he are one." Ram Dass intoned each phrase slowly

and evenly so that everybody would have time to get in touch with their spirit and be ready for the next phase.

"Now he grows again and encompasses all the people in this room. He is pure light. Breathe in and out slowly and deeply."

My mind became still, aware only of my breath.

"He becomes even larger and covers the entire city of Madison. The Capitol is inside his belly. Breathe slow and deep. You and he are the same."

I began to feel my body become lighter.

"He expands . . . again . . . and his hands . . . touch together . . . as he embraces . . ." (long pause) ". . . the earth."

My eyes closed and I became aware of little points of light twinkling in the blackness of my consciousness.

"Slowly . . . he grows again . . . and his hands touch the outermost planets of the solar system. The sun . . . is in . . . your heart. Breathe slow and quiet."

I felt my spirit reaching out into the vast nothingness of space and filling it with a warm, loving glow.

"And now . . . your molecules are racing outward at the speed of light . . . into the limitless universe . . . you have no body. You . . . and the universe . . . are one."

For an indeterminate amount of time, Ram Dass left us out there, floating around in space. Then, gently, he began to bring everyone back to this solar system, this earth, this city, this building, and finally, to this body.

Sitaras began to twang and lazy, thick, trails of incense spiraled slowly into the air. A radiantly smiling Ram Dass, his eyes half closed and his pupils rolled up, began a slow shuffle toward the door. People came forward to hug him, tears of gratitude running down their faces. A young man with a

scruffy beard came up to him and Ram Dass rapped him in the forehead. The young man fell back with a stunned expression on his face. I was next. I stood waiting for a spark of recognition to bridge the distance between us. He came closer. I just wanted our eyes to meet if only for a second, just a moment of connection.

But Ram Dass kept walking past me as if I weren't even there, the totally blissful expression still on his face. He wandered out the door, surrounded by adoring followers, and vanished.

Disappointment washed over me. We were soul mates with so much in common. The academic establishment rejected us both. We had both taken LSD. We were both searching for another way to live in this world. Why didn't he notice me?



A couple days later I planted myself in front of the painted golden Buddha in my living room and tried Ram Dass' meditation on a foam rubber pad. I imagined exhaling all the stale, bad air and inhaling all the fresh, good air. I expanded my body to encompass the whole universe then brought it back to earth. Soon I began to feel more relaxed and less critical of myself. When I read from *Be Here Now*, it was easier to identify with my spirit, but my ego told me that I should get back into journalism. My spirit answered back that I was already enough. I liked the message I got from my spirit, yet that pesky ego kept whispering in my ear, "You have failed." I knew that the tug-of-war between these two paradigms would have to be resolved before I could get my life back on track.