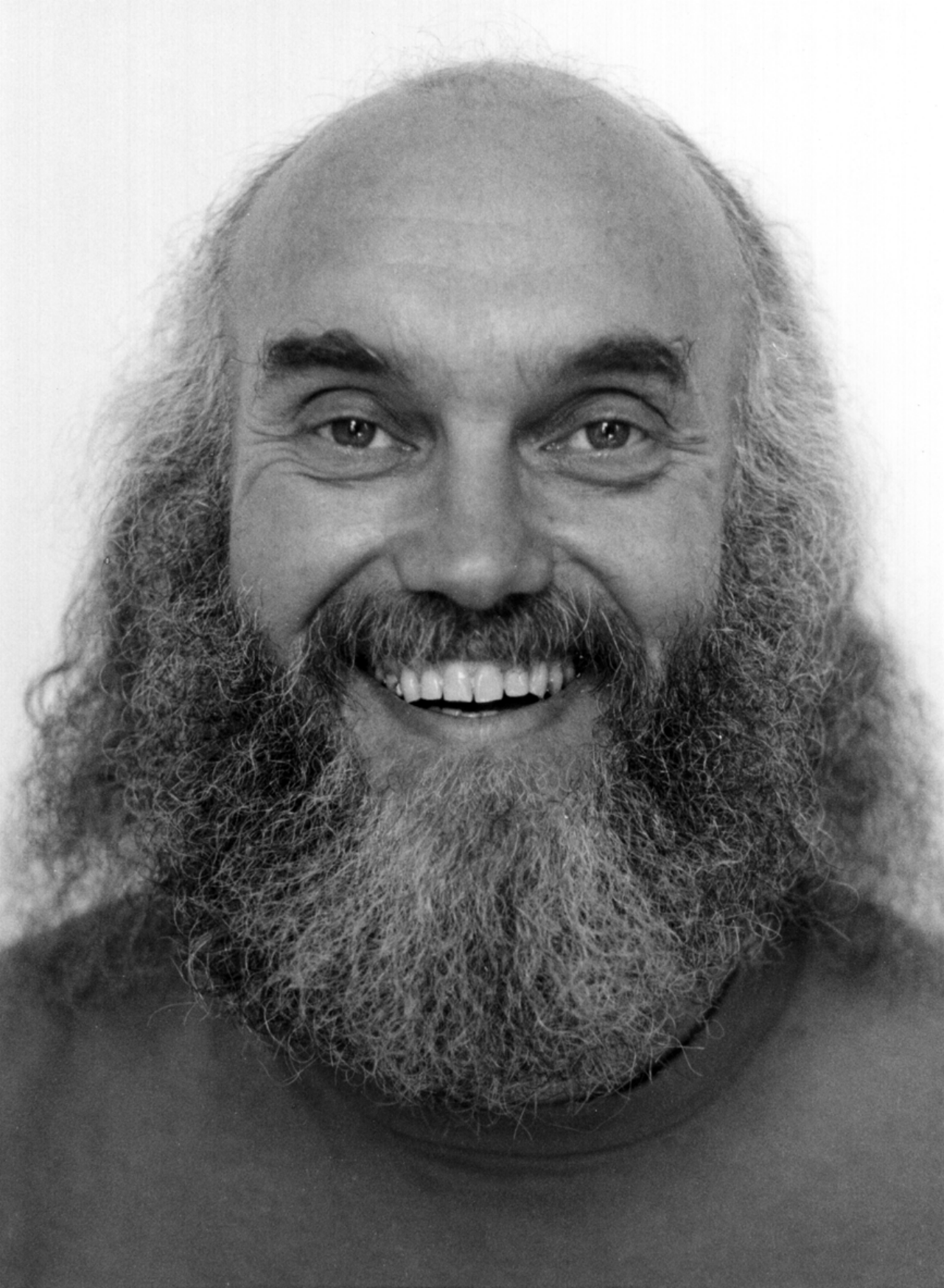




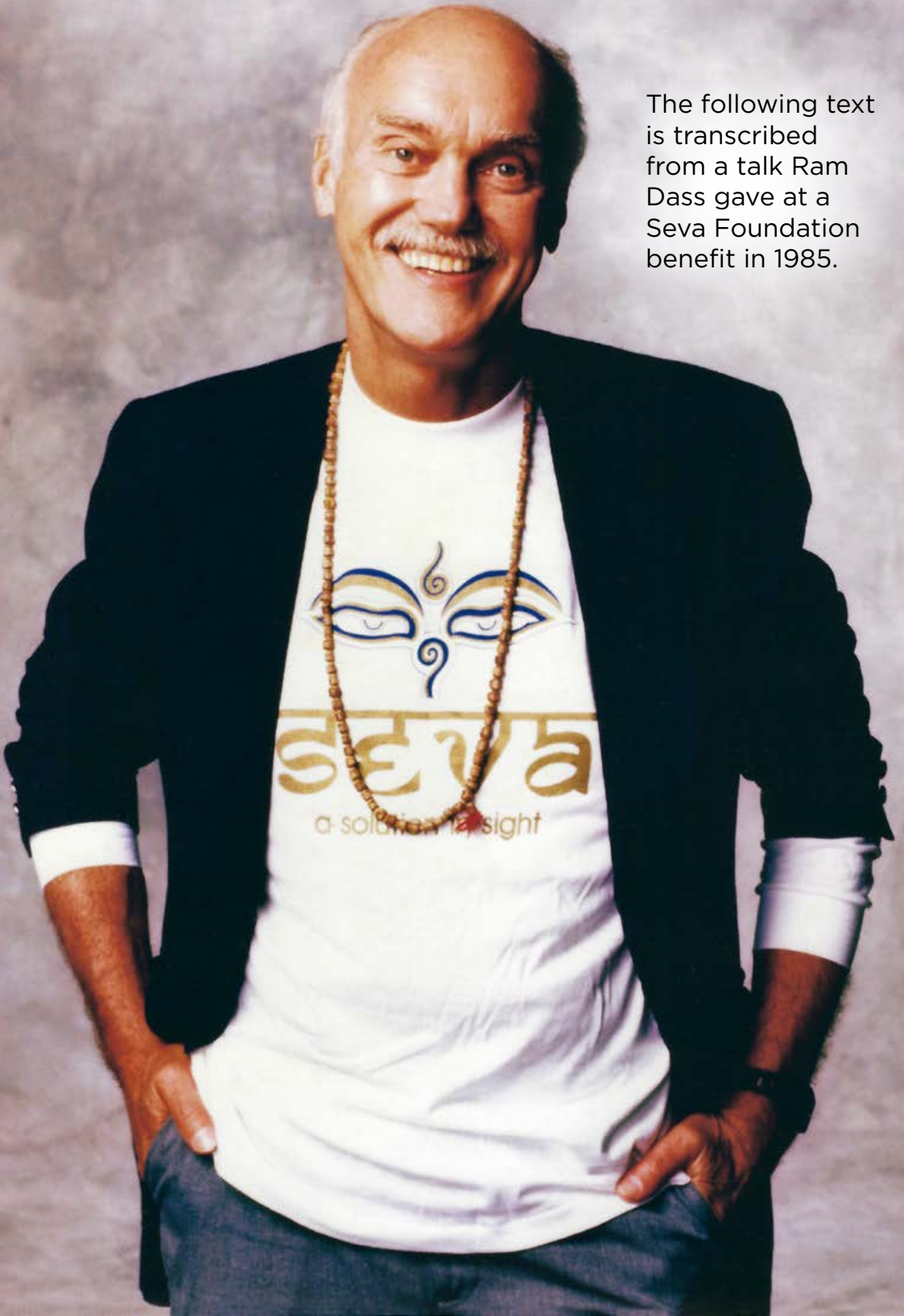
The Spirit of
seva

Ram Dass

**on Neem Karoli Baba,
Larry Brilliant, service, and
the birth of Seva.**



The following text
is transcribed
from a talk Ram
Dass gave at a
Seva Foundation
benefit in 1985.



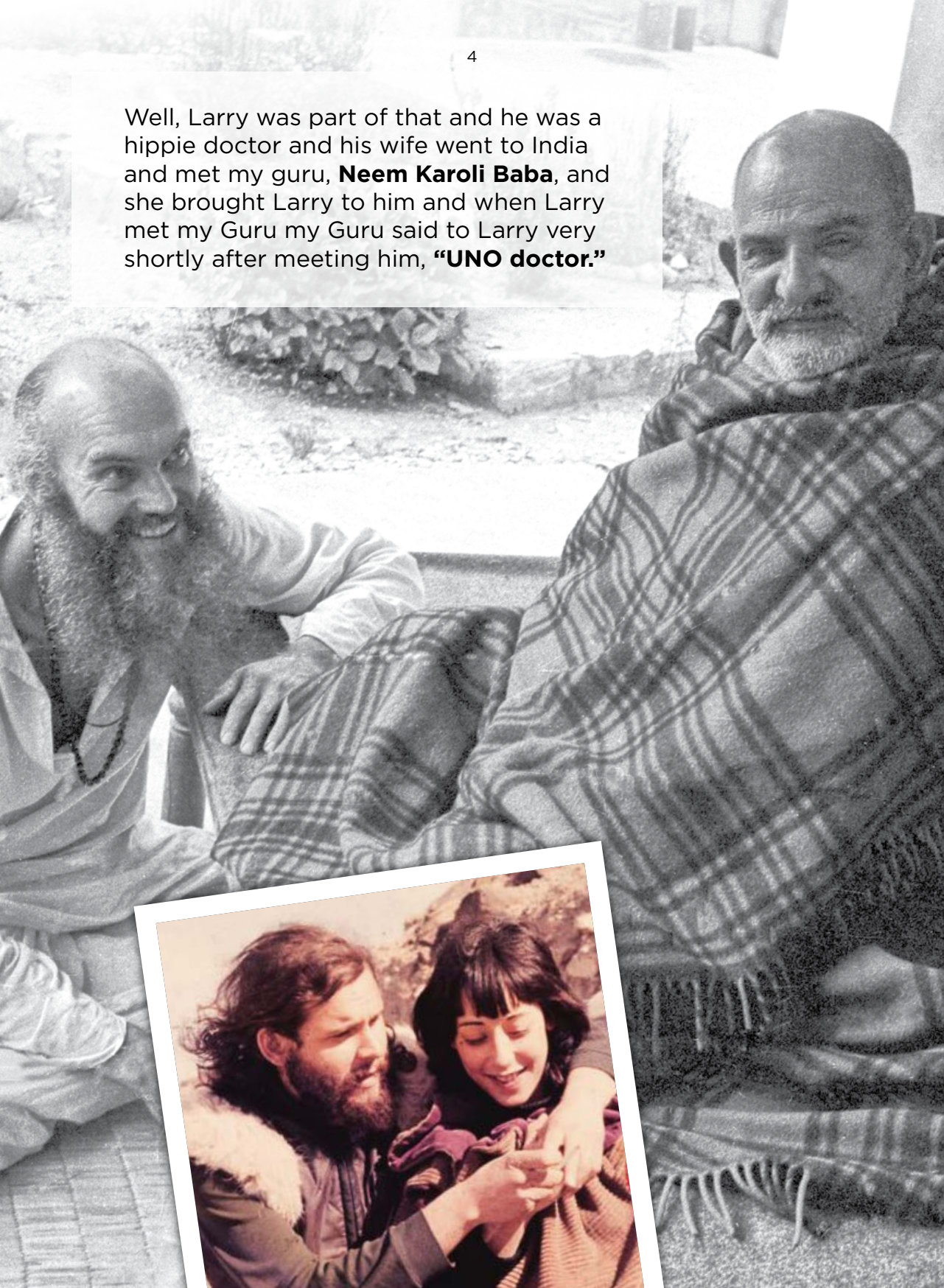
I have a friend – his name is **Larry Brilliant** – and Larry is a doctor. He used to be known as **Dr. America** as part of the **Hog Farm** which was a hippie commune in **Berkeley**.

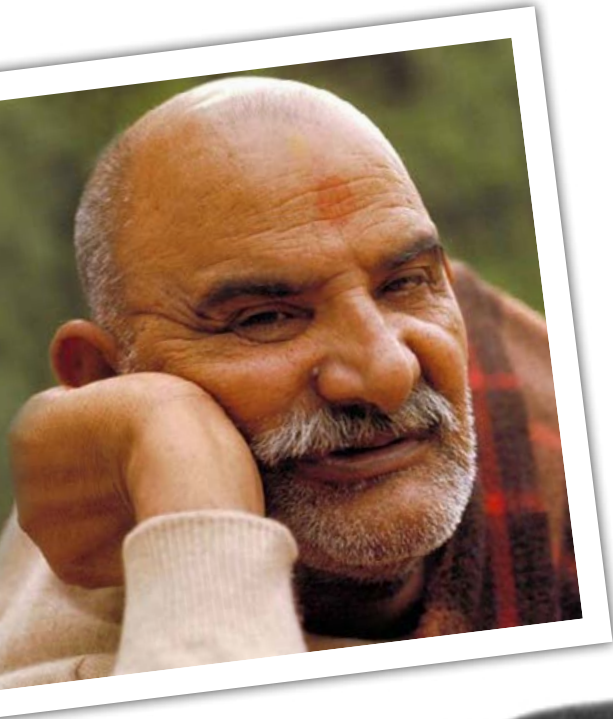


It was run by a fellow named **Wavy Gravy** who was a **clown** and Wavy works with children in leukemia wards as a clown and among other things - he also emcees and stuff - and those of you that saw the movie **Woodstock** remember Wavy offering everybody **breakfast in bed for 500,000 people** because he gives away food - they bring the Hog Farm bus and feed people. He's a very beautiful man.



Well, Larry was part of that and he was a hippie doctor and his wife went to India and met my guru, **Neem Karoli Baba**, and she brought Larry to him and when Larry met my Guru my Guru said to Larry very shortly after meeting him, **“UNO doctor.”**

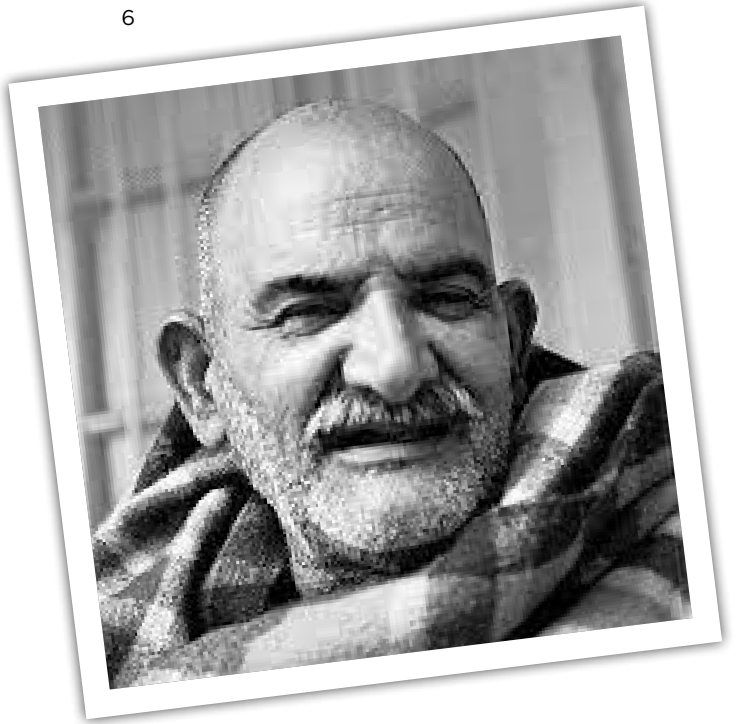




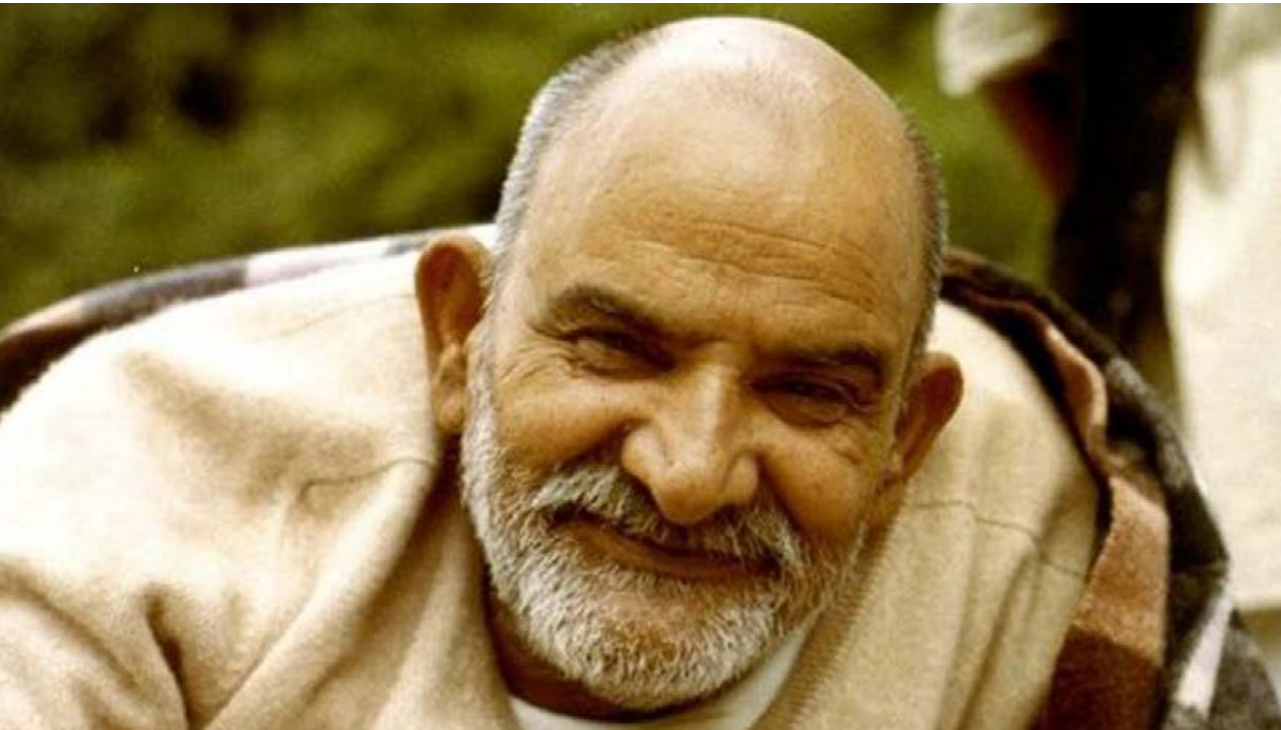
What Larry heard that as saying, **“you are no doctor,”** which is what his mother had been saying to him for years because he wasn’t earning a living.



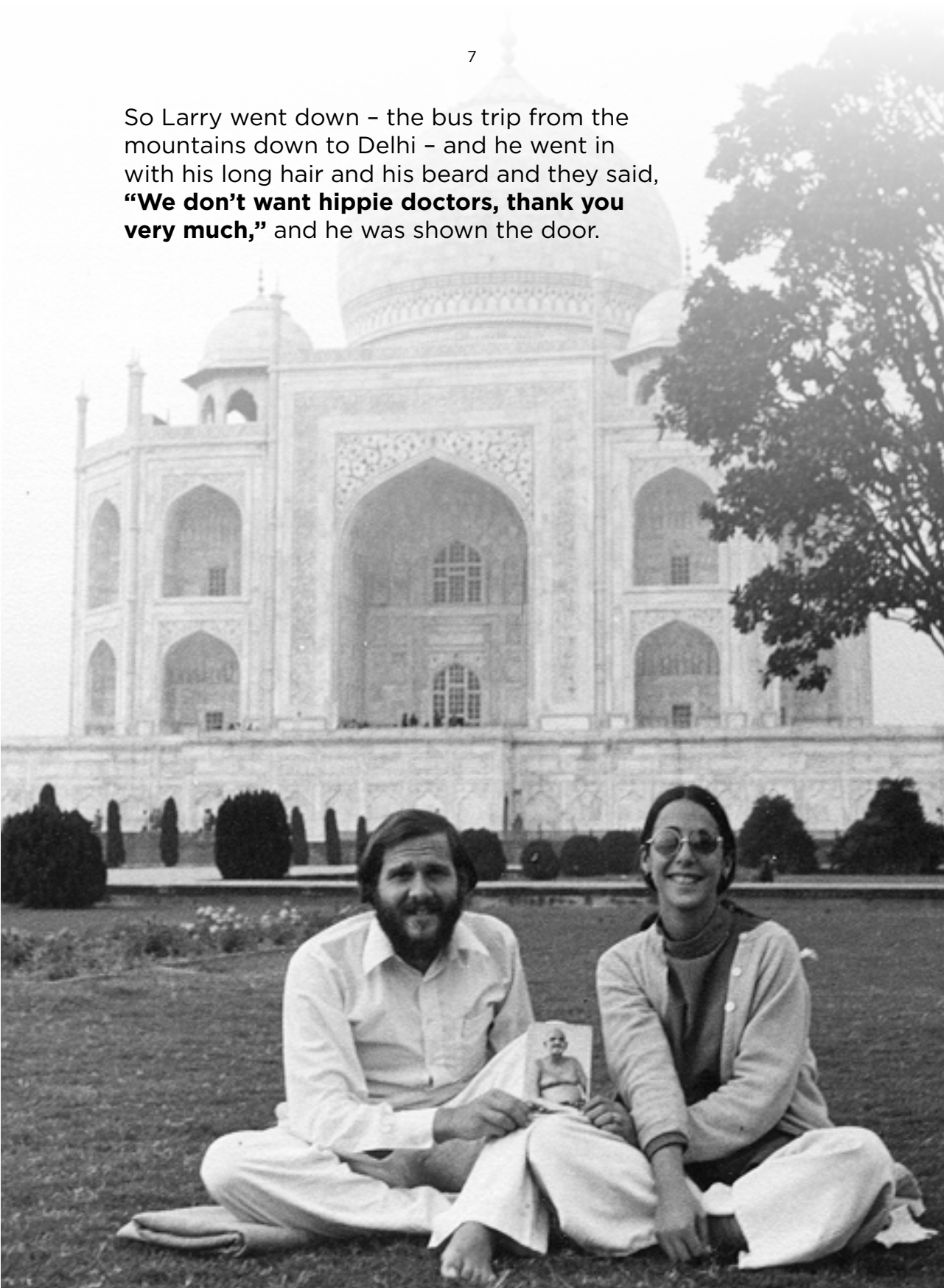
But the Guru kept repeating, “**UNO doctor, UNO doctor,**” until finally it sunk into Larry’s mind that what he was saying is, “**United Nations Organization doctor - UNO doctor,**” and there was a UNO thing - UN **World Health Organization** project to eradicate **smallpox** - that was going on in India.



United Nations Organization



So Larry went down – the bus trip from the mountains down to Delhi – and he went in with his long hair and his beard and they said, **“We don’t want hippie doctors, thank you very much,”** and he was shown the door.



He came back to the Guru, the Guru said, **“UNO doctor, go.”** He went back, they said, **“We don’t want you,”** he came back – this is a long bus trip – and he just kept doing it – it was like seven, eight, nine times.

Finally he went into the United Nations – he said, **“Look, have you got any job at all? I mean, I got to get this guy off my back. I’ll take any job you got.”** They said, **“Well, we don’t have a job as a doctor but you could be an administrative assistant.”** He said, **“Fine.”**





So, he joined the club of a group of people who were getting rid of **smallpox** – and I'm sure you know by now that smallpox is the one disease, human disease, that has been **completely eradicated from the face of the earth** at this point. There is not another case in the world. You don't have to have vaccinations, you don't have to have vaccination certificates, because it's gone.





It's a very extraordinary phenomena that humanity could band together – from Russia, from the United States, from Czechoslovakia, from everywhere, and do it together and get rid of something completely.

Well, the group that did this in Southeast Asia particularly – where the last case was – I mean it's **very exciting stuff** – you've got maps with pins of each case and you go with vaccination needles in jeeps and boats and you raid villages and it's very exciting – it's like a war you know – they got so juiced up that when it was over they all went and **got depressed.**



You can imagine – I mean how much their identity was caught in that – and they **didn't know what to do next.**

Well, one of the gals who was Larry's boss was this extraordinary lady, her name was **Nicole Grasset**, she was a Swiss doctor. She was a dynamo and she takes on projects and so she was with **Sir John Wilson** who is a blind man who is head of a world blindness organization



[International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness] and he said to her, **“Nicole, you’ve taken on smallpox and beat it. Why don’t you take on blindness?”** Because it turns out that **80% of the blindness in the world is preventable or curable.*** It’s extraordinary.

* Today, 90% of vision impairment can be prevented or cured!





So, she said, **“Okay!”** Larry, wanting to band with her and get her energy together, decided he’d start a foundation and get all of his buddies together. So, he drew his buddies from all the different parts of his life.

He was now a professor at the **University of Michigan** in public health, he had been working with the **World Health Organization**, he was part of the **Hog Farm**, he was a devotee of **my Guru**.



So, out of all those places he drew these people together and we met in a snow-bound weekend in **Michigan** for the first meeting and I can't tell you how bizarre it was because the organization - he called it **Seva** which meant at that time **Society for Epidemiology and Voluntary Assistance**. Only he knew that it also was the Sanskrit word for "**service**".



So, there was **a doctor in a three-piece suit** with a dispatch case who had come there for a meeting of the Society for Epidemiology and Voluntary Assistance and he had come from Washington.

And he came into the morning meeting – the first session – he set his briefcase down and he sat there and, suddenly, in walked **Wavy Gravy, who sat down next to him with a beanie on his head with a propeller on the top of it.**

The look of that doctor I will never forget – I mean it was like, **“There’s some error here, you know, I’m not supposed to be in this place where this guy is.”**



And it took us about three days to figure out that behind all of our facades we all really got off on **service** and that's why Larry drew us together.

So we took on blindness and we decided to take on - and to me that was a light thing - I didn't know what it meant - I'm not an ophthalmologist - I don't know, it was just a nice kind of game to play.



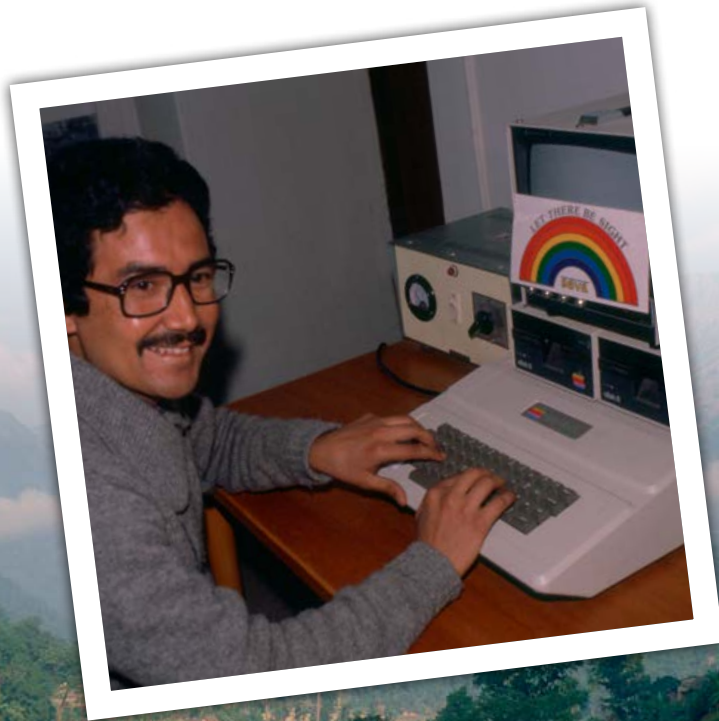
We took on **Nepal** because Nepal is a very poor country and Nepal has a very high incidence of blindness. It's hard to understand what the situation is. The population in Nepal – the population in the United States is 16 times the population of Nepal* and there are, in Nepal, 15 ophthalmologists and there are, in the United States, 16,000.**

And a survey showed us that most of the blindness because of ultraviolet light is due to cataract. **Cataract** is an opaqueness of the lens and it can be taken care of, in most cases, by an operation that, in a mobile eye hospital, takes **10 minutes and costs \$15.*****

* Today, the population of the USA is 11.4 times the population of Nepal.

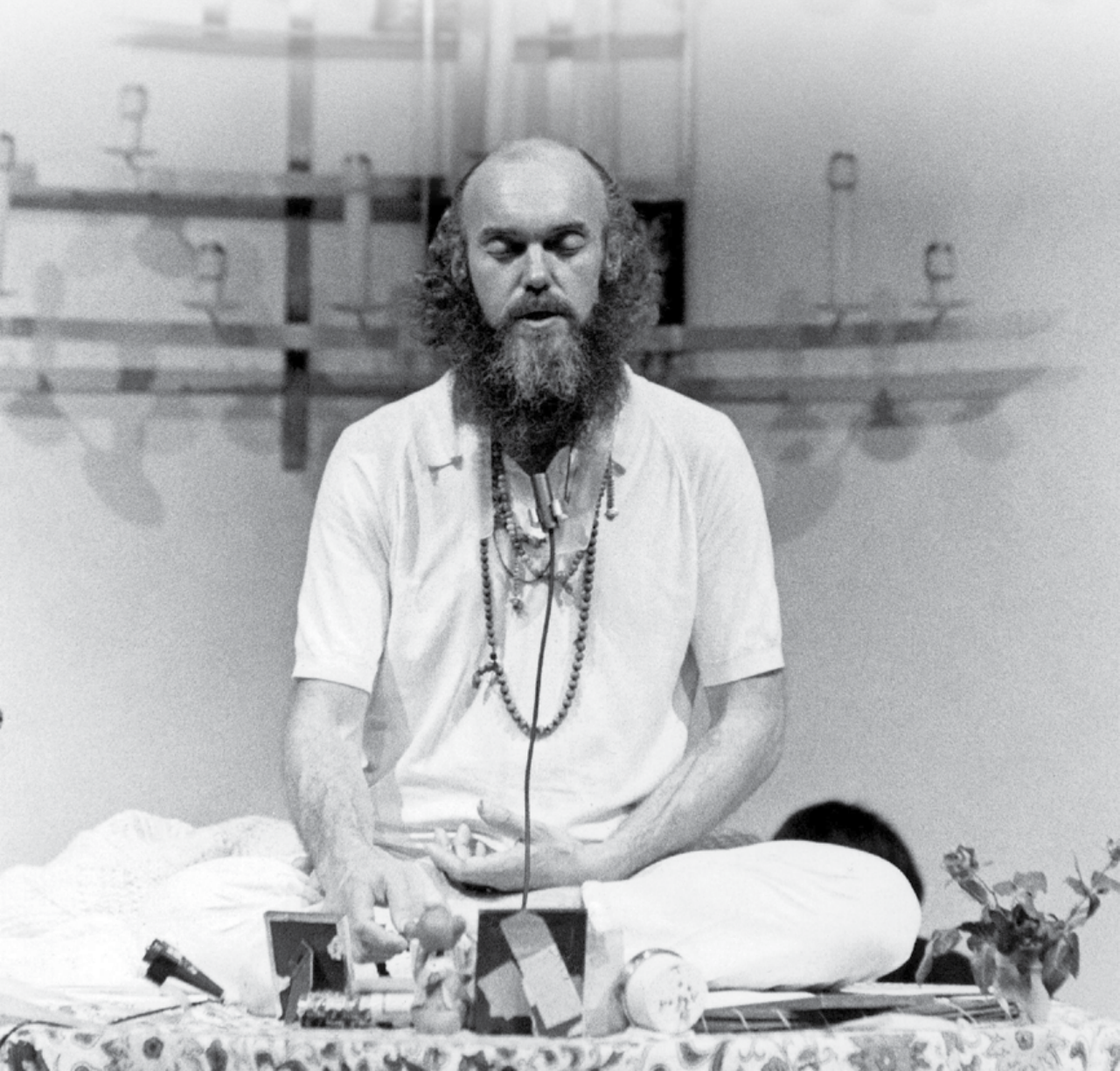
** Today, there are 240 ophthalmologists in Nepal.

*** Today, Seva-sponsored cataract surgeries average 15 minutes and cost \$50.



Okay. Now, if you want to **close your eyes** for one minute - now **imagine that you're not going to see again** and you're going to have to get up and go home - and think of all the obstacles you're going to have. Think of all the help you're going to have - and

as you get retrained - keep your eyes closed - as you get retrained you'll have a dog or you'll have braille and you'll have all these help systems to help you and special financial aid - all kinds of things that **society will provide for you to help** you out at this point.



Now imagine you're living in a third world country where there aren't any of those support systems and the labor force is so close to survival that once you are blind you are out of the labor force and the **expected life duration for you is three and a half years.**

But if you live onward because your family takes care of you in this hilly region you may live until you die and **you will never have your sight back because there is no ten minutes and there is no fifty dollars.**

That's the emotional part of the thing. Now you can open your eyes.



So, we figured, well, we go into Nepal – Nepal has 300,000 people just like that – and we'll just get ophthalmologists from India, Pakistan, all these places, build eye hospitals, eye camps, do all this and just get it moving.

Well, what I started to learn was this was a big game. This wasn't little. In fact, thus far, we're six years into it, there are more people going blind every year in Nepal that we're yet getting ahead of. **We're still behind, we're losing ground.***

* Recent data from 2022 indicates that the backlog of cataract cases has been successfully cleared!





And I saw that my 60s mentality was the mentality of kind of **hit and run** – you come in with a nice idea for a project, if everybody buys it – fine – if not, well you go do something else.

I hadn't ever learned to stay with something – to persist, to make a long-range plan, to make a commitment. This was a whole new experiment for me.



What we found – like our board meetings where there’s 16 of us on the board – our board meetings are really fierce. **They are like encounter groups. They are knock-down drag-out** groups because what we’re demanding is that the means and the ends be of the same stuff.

Some of us came in, like Nicole, they were focused on the end: **“Let’s get rid of blindness!”**; and I come in saying, **“How we get rid of blindness is important – is as important as that we get rid of blindness”**.

And she says, **“I’m not interested in how we get rid of it. Just get rid of it,”** and we meet like this because we’re coming from different kinds of service backgrounds, and we struggle and work with this, and fight it out, and argue it, and the growth in all of us is incredible, and it’s hard – **it’s not easy.**

And what we began to see was **the dynamics of a group trying to do service together at a conscious level.**



Now there are many crises that come up where a group gets together to do an action and they'll do it for all different motives and you say, **“Let’s just get it done. I mean if there are homeless people on the street let’s get them so they don’t freeze to death – let’s do something now.”**

And you don’t say, **“Well if you’re feeling too angry don’t do it.”** You say, **“Do it. Let’s get it done.”** But, when you’re in a long-term project you’ve got to understand that **how you serve has a lot to do with**

what level of suffering you will relieve.

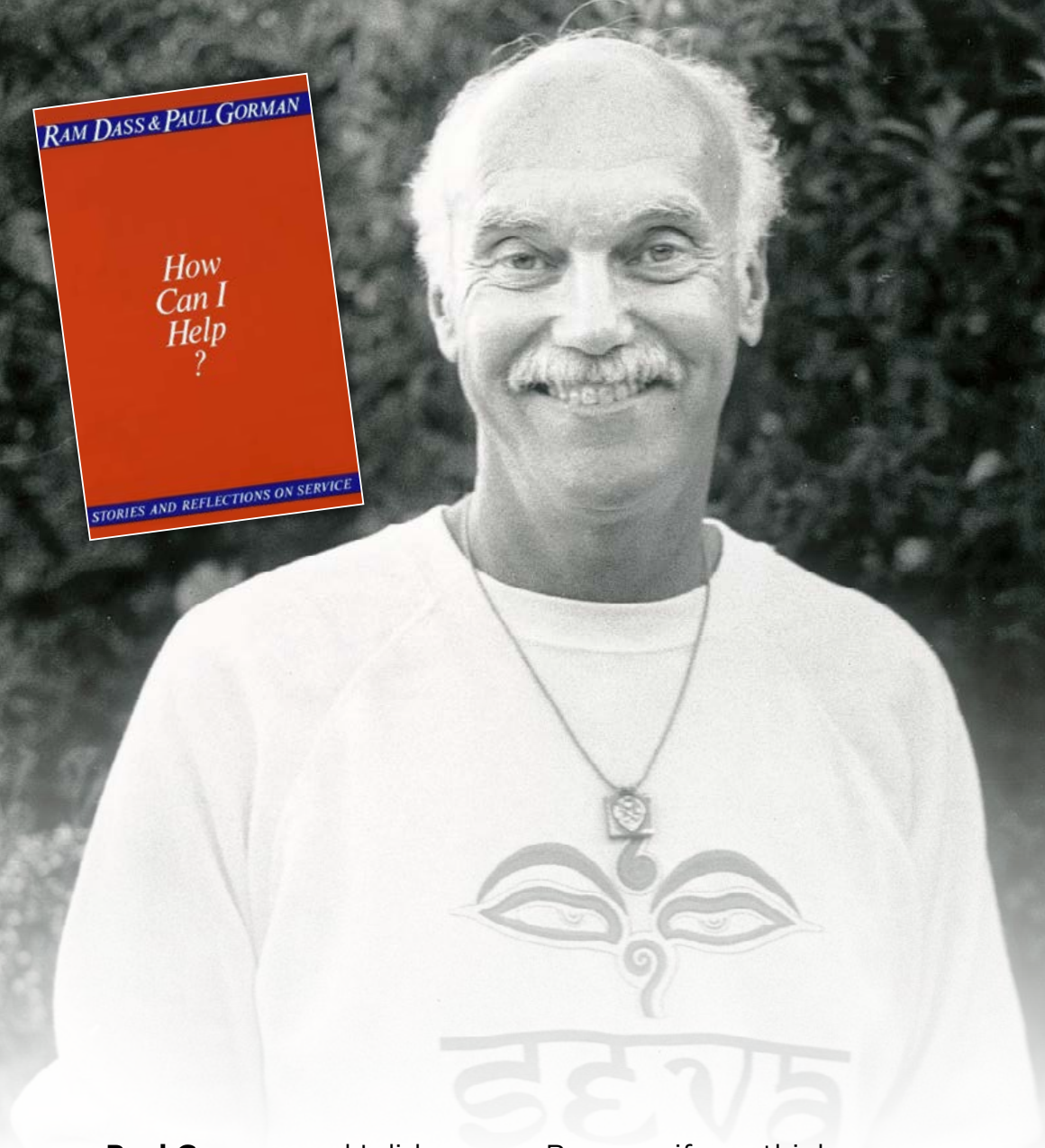
Because you find out it’s not just that you give somebody food, **it’s how you give them food.** Whether you make them feel less by the way you gave them food or more.

Do you see them as a fellow soul so that the giving and the receiving is nothing?

Did you end up graced by their accepting the food, or do you think you did something for somebody?

These are all levels of consciousness of service.





Paul Gorman and I did a book called ***How Can I Help*** which is really approaching these topics. That's what we're trying to do in this book - deal with the way in which you can help that you grow to its freedom, that **you look directly at suffering.**

Because if you think your happiness in this society comes from **turning your eyes away from people that are suffering**, believe me, **your happiness is riddled with fear.**

There was a moment - I've told this story - of standing in Marin County at the beach **naked with a frisbee**. I told it last time I was in this hall.

Now you may not want to visualize that. That's alright if you don't want to.

I was there with a frisbee and the question was as I stood there about ready to throw the frisbee - into my mind came the image of **Gandhi's tomb** and over Gandhi's tomb is written, **"Think of the poorest person you've ever seen and ask whether your next act will be of any use to that person."**

Do you throw the frisbee or don't you? That's our question for ourselves really.

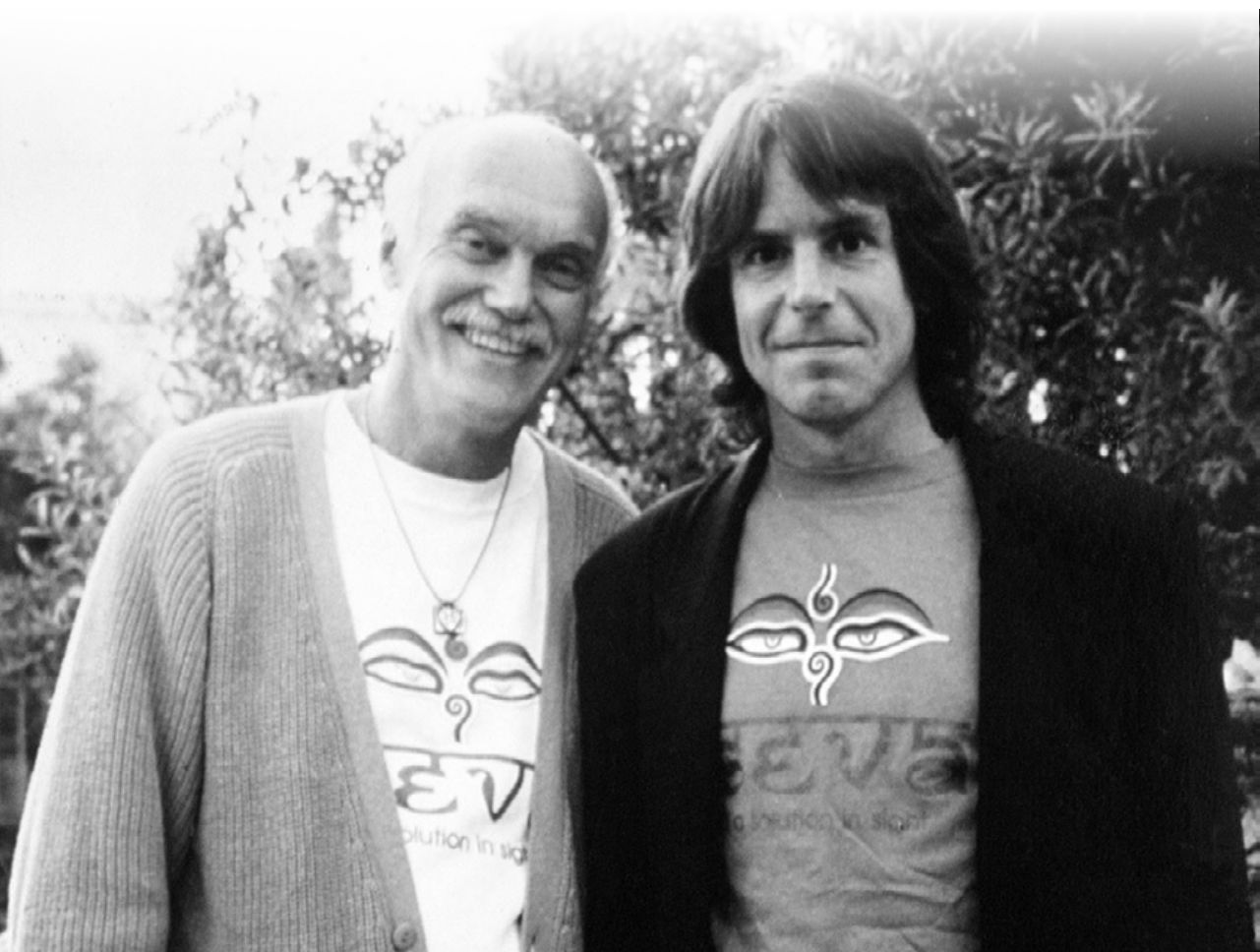


See, we have – each of us has – a unique **Dharma**, or a unique path, or a unique way through.

The game isn't that all of us become alike. Each of us is hearing a different message of what our unique path is – in our inner hearts and it feels right on – and for you to deny the beauty in order to deal with the humiliated or deny the humiliated in order to deal with the beauty – **you're all of those things.**

You've got to listen to all those messages. You've got to enjoy the joy of the good fortune you have in life – to be affluent, to be in this society, to have these kinds of freedom that you have.

And at the same moment you've got to keep the heart – **the compassionate heart** – open. It's that balancing that we're playing with.

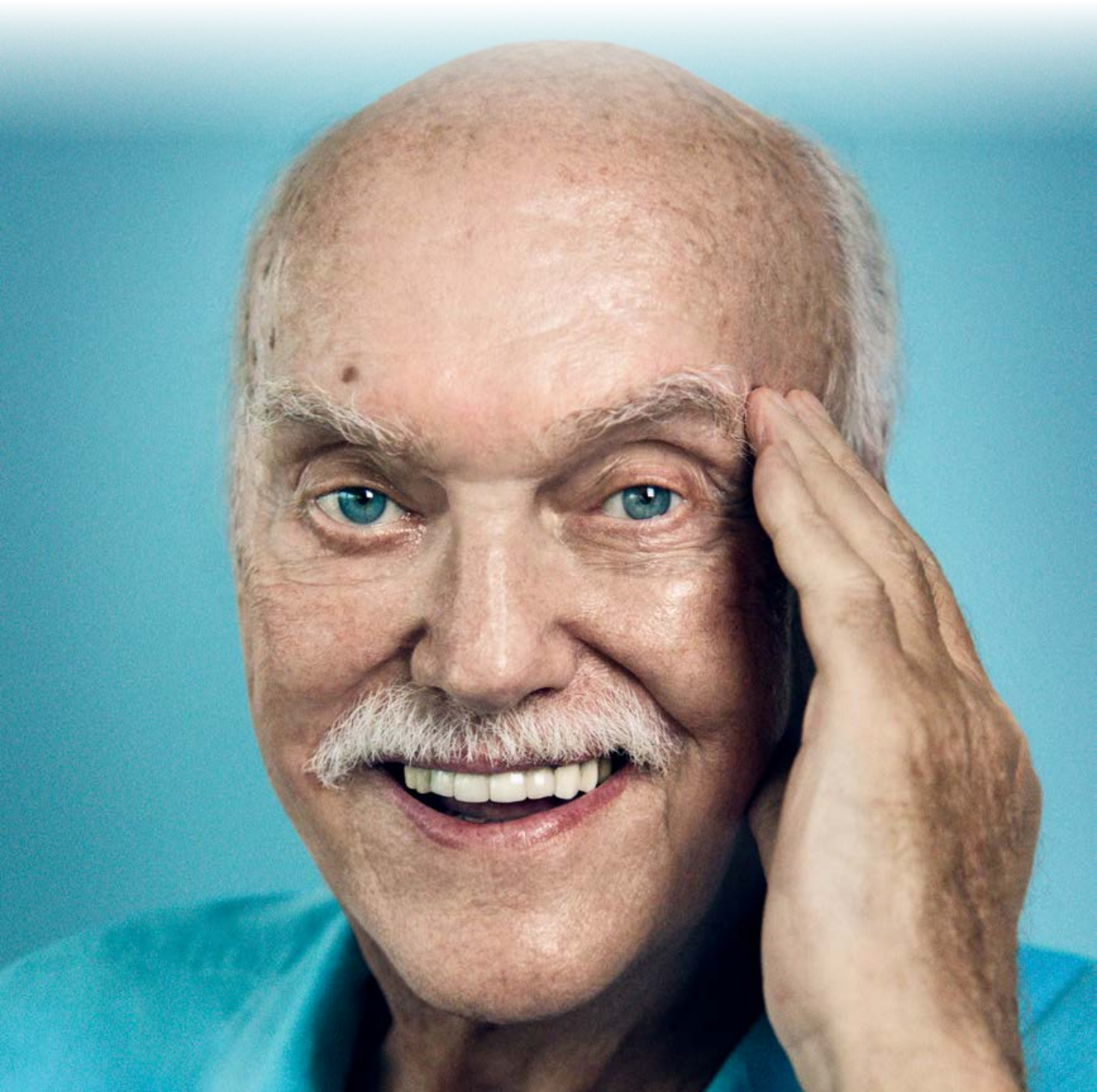


Yes, I threw the frisbee and I continue to throw the frisbee.

To me, life is joy and the joy can include the service.

Instead of the joy **or** the service – the joy **through** the service.

It's all of it. **It's all of it.**



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The Spirit of **seva**

Seva Foundation's vision is a world free of avoidable blindness that is accessible by all. Since 1978, we have brought vital eye care, medicine, and treatment to 57 million people in some of the world's most vulnerable and underserved communities.

Today, Seva Foundation partners with organizations worldwide to co-create self-sustaining programs that transform lives by preserving and restoring sight.

Seva began as a small group of people who believed we must translate our compassion and concern for others into useful service. Our work is guided by the philosophy of our beloved co-founder, Ram Dass, who led his life with generosity, beauty, and love — he set a high standard for Seva.

Why sight? Today, 1.1 billion people live with vision impairment — and the need for vision care continues to grow. By 2050, 1.7 billion people are expected to live with vision impairment without significant investments. The vast majority, 90% of these cases, could be treated or prevented. The only barrier to regaining their sight is a lack of access to affordable, high-quality eye care. Help “be the change” with a \$50 donation, immediately and profoundly restoring someone's sight with a 15-minute cataract surgery.

We hope you enjoyed perusing this book and celebrating our vision of a world free of avoidable blindness.