

Never stop

SOULIN.

AN INTERVIEW WITH BHAGAVAN DAS

By Kailas

BHAGAVAN DAS BECAME KNOWN to the counterculture for his role in introducing Ram Dass to his Guru, Neem Karoli Baba, in the late 60s, as recounted in *Be Here Now*. He was born in Laguna Beach, California in 1945, and left home at the age of 18, seeking enlightenment and his life's purpose. His travels led him to India in 1963, where he became a Yogi, renounced the world, and became the example for the many westerners who followed on a similar journey to the East in subsequent years.



He spent six years in India and Nepal, studying Hinduism and Buddhism, living the life of a Sadhu (an ascetic renunciate).

Bhagavan Das is an ecstatic, devotional singer and master of Nada Yoga, the mystical practice that explores the nature of reality through sound. He reaches out to his audiences through *kirtan*, an improvisational call-and-response form of chanting commonly practiced in India. He is the author of *It's Here Now, Are You?* and his first CD, *AH*, recorded over 30 years ago, was recently re-released and is one of the earliest

recordings of what would be known today as “world music.” His new CD, *Now*, is the fruit of his collaboration with Mike D. of the Beastie Boys, and is a groundbreaking offering of Eastern devotional chanting brilliantly recast in a swirling amalgam of streetbeats, loops and sampling. Bhagavan Das has been called “...the Jimi Hendrix of kirtan masters.” For more information, see www.bhagavandas.com.

KAILAS: *Many people are inspired by you.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: It's because I'm inspired!

KAILAS: *How does it go in those moments when it's difficult?*

BHAGAVAN DAS: Look, everything is a mood. How do you get out of a bad mood into a good mood? You get out of it by the breath and the Word--by the name of God in your breath. That's what you do. You got it? You take the breath and you put the name with it, and that's all you do. It's very simple.

KAILAS: *I never used to do mantras that much, until I saw how much you work with them.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: Do it forever, just do it, do it, do it. And never stop doing it. Never stop loving, never stop forgiving, never stop falling in love over and over again, with life, with beauty, with everything, never stop it. That's what I think it is. I think chanting the name of God keeps me balanced. I really do. I really think it's the name of God.

It's my food. We live not by bread alone. We live by God, by God's grace. That's all. We're living on grace; we're living on the grace of the Mother. That's what I live on. I live on Your beauty, Your grace, Your love. And You're everywhere. You're here, You're there. You're in the street; You're the little girl; You're the eight-month-old baby. I'm staring at her eyes, and she's staring in my eyes. I know that's God!

KAILAS: *With your music, in a sense you're performing, but for you this is all sadhana (spiritual practice.)*

BHAGAVAN DAS: Yeah, it's sadhana for me.

KAILAS: *It's your lifestyle, you're "doing what you are," so to speak.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: Exactly. I come out, and I see you all sitting there, and I just see that I'm in this temple, and there are all these gods and goddesses that I get to worship. So

I'm worshipping you, and singing is my form of worship. I hold a vision because I set up the altar in front of me, and I have that attitude of devotion, and that is what takes me into that space, which opens everyone into that space.

KAILAS: *In a sense, all the arts could learn from what you're saying...*

BHAGAVAN DAS: I think so. I think that we need God in art. The thing to do now is art, because religion sucks. All religion is bad religion. Because as you know, it's organized, and it's all political and it's a big power trip, and the kids don't buy it. They want it real. And what's real is art. You know, spontaneous, like pageantry, like Grateful Dead shows.

Like coming together, dancing, being in the party, being in that energy, and I want to do more of that. More festivals, where I can chant all night long. I can go for four or five hours without stopping. I just get warmed up after two hours and then most people can't sit, but if everyone was dancing, and they were moving, we could keep going.

We all need gatherings like that. We need people in our lives. It's who we meet and who influences our lives. This is the biggest thing we've got, all of us. When I was young, I had lots of people around me who really inspired me. I chose people around me who knew



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something. I thought, if I hang out with kids my own age, what am I going to learn? Nothing. So I would hang out with grandpas, grandmas, and spiritual people, people who really knew something, and had some life in them. They had that bright light coming out of their eyes, and then I learned things, because they'd been all over the world, they hitchhiked everywhere and they lived in all these different countries, and I was just living in California, and wow!

KAILAS: *So they lit your fire a little bit.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: They lit my fire. "Wow, I want to do those things. I want to go to Spain and dance with the gypsies. I want to climb the Himalayan peaks, I want to go to Tibet." And so I did all those things. I did it. Because of association. It's who we associate with. So just associate with high-minded spiritual people. And if you can't find any of those people, hang out with little children. And if you can't find little children, hang out with animals. And if you can't find animals, hang out with a tree. Go up to the tree and bow down to the tree, and bring it a flower—okay? And then go up to the tree and hug it, and then kiss it, and then lean up against the tree with your back and sit there and talk to the tree.

And if you really get into that vibe, the tree will talk to you. And you'll start to have this whole conversation with the tree, and it will tell you all kinds of things. It's wonderful. You can do it. Go do it, when you go home. Go out and find a tree. And really make that mystical connection. You've got to get mystical; you've got to get out of the mind, and into the mystical heart of creation. Have willingness to believe, and have that faith. It's faith, you know. This boy

came up to me just recently—he looked like he was about 18—and he said, "Bhagavan Das, how can I pray like you pray?" And I looked at him and I said, "You gotta suffer, baby. You ain't suffered enough." You have to have enough light to get to that place of intensity in your life where you can really feel things.

KAILAS: *Do you ever get to the point where you have to hold yourself back?*

BHAGAVAN DAS: I always have to hold myself back.

KAILAS: *Do you have mystical type experiences going on?*

BHAGAVAN DAS: Do you mean when I'm singing?

KAILAS: *Yes.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: I have visions, and sometimes I get in such a high state of consciousness I can't drive afterwards. I have to have people drive me home. I am in such an altered state, it's like tripping, I'm so blissed out. Everything is like fluid, like lights, and that's all from chanting. The best drug you can take is devotion to God. It's the greatest drug in the world. Nothing else makes you so high. And then do art: let your longing and your spiritual aspiration come out in art. Dance, sing, paint, sculpt, get some clay and sculpt it, really create!

KAILAS: So we feed the art, and the art feeds the practice.

BHAGAVAN DAS: The spiritual practice is art. It's really where we need to go to with it, get more freedom into it. Otherwise, it's too uptight, you know, the ashrams, temples, religion. Generally speaking everyone has to march to the beat of the organization. It gets too political.

KAILAS: *Do you find that more people are coming to you than a couple of years ago? Is there something growing?*

BHAGAVAN DAS: Well it's totally growing in *me*. It's just getting more and more released, I'm flowing more and more into the Mother, and my prayers are being answered. The kids are coming, because I'm here to give, I'm here for them. "Use me! Will you kids use me? And work me, ask me questions." It's happening. We all need to come together and inspire each other, and bring the spiritual family together.

KAILAS: *Entertainment seems like a good way to bring people together these days.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: I'm a spiritual entertainer. I entertain people, and people really love it. I make them laugh, and they listen. It's like, "Ah, it's really good, he's funny." Because it *is* funny.

KAILAS: *You're talking about what people can relate to.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: Exactly. It's real stuff, it's real life. Look, I also love sitting on the couch and watching TV for three or four hours. I love it, but I do my beads. You know, I do the remote, and I have my cold drink on the couch, and it's really cool. I veg out, I do the American veg out, and it's nice.

KAILAS: *Do you find that adds a balance?*

BHAGAVAN DAS: You have to be balanced. You can't take yourself too seriously. You've got to laugh at yourself. And this is the problem with kids, young people. They take themselves too seriously. You should see pictures of me, my passport picture. You'll see it in my book, when I was 18. That's my passport picture. I was very serious. I was really seriously searching. But you know, you can only be where you're at, when you're there. I can only be where I'm at now because of all the stuff that I did in my life. And you can only be where you're at, from what you've been through, and we have so much to give each other. Because you spark my enthusiasm, because you have that energy, and that life force. The kids have it.

And I'm the Hippie Guru, and the times are ready for the Hippie Guru. I have no trip. I'm positive about life. This guy came to me once and said, "I failed, Bhagavan Das. I'm smoking pot again." And I said, "that's great, you're smoking pot! Now here's what you do: when you come home from work, roll up a big fatty, put it in your pocket with the matches, walk out of the house, smoke it, and go out in the woods and repeat 'Om Namah Shivaya' for a couple of hours. And you do your mala beads, and you get really high, and you pray to Shiva." You see what I mean? Change the set. It'll fall away when it falls away. But if you need it, accept that you need it. It's from God; it's sacred. Use the herb and pray with it. Right? And the same thing with tobacco, if you're going to smoke, pray with every puff. Pray on that tobacco. Make it sacred. Offer the wine up; offer the alcohol. Make it sacred, and everything will come forth from that attitude.

You sit down, with your crayons and your colors and your paints; you have the empty canvas before you, and you close your eyes, and you go "Ma, use me! Saraswati, White Goddess, shower your grace upon me. Let your Shakti flow through my hands." And maybe you need to take all your clothes off, and get naked, and just really get into the painting and feel it; put on the right music—maybe listen to Bhagavan Das or something!—and then you start getting inspired by it. You start painting, you get really wild, you get into it! You see? And that way you're letting the flow of the Mother flow through you, and you're not on a head trip with life.

KAILAS: *So that spiritual energy, you could call it wild, in its essence.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: It *is* wild! But wildness is where the energy is. It's not about being in control, like academia. It's not sitting around tables drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, intellectualizing and philosophizing about it. That's just a bunch of head trips. It doesn't mean anything. Kids love sex, they love drugs, they love rock 'n roll. And

I'm totally positive about it. Look, they're doing it anyway. So encourage them in a good way.

CD REVIEW

*chanting of
the deep
feminine...*



PRESENCE: Chants of Sacred Power Sita

Every time I hear Sita sing or chant, without exception, I get goose bumps and the energy at the base of my spine starts to tingle. She has a way of reaching deep, deep down into herself and communicating, via her rich and resonant voice, into that same place of depth in other souls. I would say the effect is almost chilling, were it not tempered by the profoundly devotional aspect of her music that renders the impact not only haunting but powerfully spiritual and inspirational as well. A native of Ireland, Sita says that her voice comes out of her Celtic roots, though as a disciple of Neem Karoli Baba, her chanting originated in the Hindu *kirtan* tradition, and has since expanded to embrace the peoples and prayers of all faiths. She has performed with Krishna Das and Bhagavan Das and while perhaps not as well known as they, she has been known to steal the show! *Presence* is her first CD, and will fuel the fire of anyone's devotional practice. Obtain it by contacting Sita at Sitasita108@hotmail.com.

—E.S.



Direct the energy, man. Focus the energy!

KAILAS: *In other words, teach the kids to direct the energy.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: Direct the energy, man. Focus the energy! I had this girl who was very devoted to me at one point, and she was anorexic, skinny as a rail. And I knew that she was the Divine Mother and she was calling out to me, and I befriended her. We e-mailed, we wrote letters, we had this amazing correspondence going on, and she was amazing to me. She'd say "Bhagavan Das, I hate everyone in my school. I want to kill everyone. I don't know what to do with these feelings." And I'd write her back and say, "That's good. You've got a lot of Shakti going. You take that energy you want to kill them with, and do art. Get creative with that energy. Use its life force; you can't bottle it up. What are you going to do with it, right? You can run a five mile race, or you can go out and get into trouble."

We all want experience, and we're going to get the experience, any which way. Get into your feelings. To feel is for real. That's my motto. *To feel is for real. Stop the stinking thinking.* The mind is completely deluding you. You think you're going to figure it out, and you know what? Nobody figured it out. Albert Einstein said, "I never saw myself as a scientist. I see myself as a musician." And he played violin. And his whole trip was God. He said, "I know that God just flowed through me and I got the answer. I didn't figure it out." You know, I don't know what I'm saying. I don't know the answers to anything. But I trust that God will touch my tongue, and flow through my mouth, and I will be able to be an instrument of that divine grace that flows through me. Because it is grace, it really is grace, it's the grace of God. And that's the miracle of our life.

Let yourself have the moment. I tell teenagers, "The most important person you want in your life is you. You really want *you*. So stop giving it away to stupid boyfriends or girlfriends who don't care, and are just selfish. You follow me? They don't care. And you get all wrapped up." People get so wrapped up, and so hurt and wounded. I'm still wounded by my girlfriend leaving me in my freshman year. I'm still wounded by her. And that's how strong the power of the emotions is, at that age, at that time.



KAILAS: *Especially in these times, people are looking for what you're offering.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: This is it! This is the greatest time we're in right now. This is a fabulous time. Materialism has reached its zenith; the whole world's at war; there are tens of thousands of people dying every single day; we've made murder a cool thing. They offer goats at the Kali temple and eat them, and right next door is McDonalds. And people there say "How could they offer goats at the Kali Temple? How could they kill those little goats, and offer them to God? That's so horrible!" Hello! (laughter) I don't think so.

KAILAS: *You talked earlier about making sex sacred.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: It isn't about *making* sex sacred; sex *is* sacred. It's about taking the filter off your head and getting out of the porno thing, and letting yourself feel the sacredness of sex: "Wow! This is amazing." There is so much energy in sex. That's why everyone is sex crazy. Because it's the life force, and one reason people are so sex crazy, is, they don't do any art. And they don't do anything creative. So all they can do is have sex, because that's the most creative thing they can do. You see?

KAILAS: *It's as though the creativity will not be denied.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: It will not be denied. The life force will not be denied.

KAILAS: *So you're talking about the life energy, the sexual energy, the creative energy...it's all the same energy, and to put it to good use...*

BHAGAVAN DAS: Dance, dance! Get the music on and dance. You're horny, you're frustrated? Take your clothes off, dance for an hour. You'll feel great!

KAILAS: *It's a way to release the energy...*

BHAGAVAN DAS: Yeah, get the energy out. Move the energy in your body, you just want to be touched. And it feels so good, you know, but just don't go all the way. Just keep it on that fringe of tension, which is so powerful. And then you can move from that space into chanting, or do some dancing, or cook a meal.

KAILAS: *It's a teaching about life, not just sex.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: You carry all of this energy over into your life. And if you don't, if you repress it, it's all going to pop out. Sex energy, shutting it down, is like trying to push a beach ball under the water in a pool. That's what it's like, it goes whoop...it flips up somewhere else.

KAILAS: *So you could say your performance is sexual, in a sense.*

BHAGAVAN DAS: It's totally sexual! Oh man, I'm having sex every time I sing; that's why it's so powerful, because I'm having sex with God. It's an erotic make-out, energetic experience. It's taking the energy, and bringing it up to the heart, out the throat, and vocalizing it.

If you run after the world, the world will always run ahead of you, and you'll never find what you want. But if you let go of the world, and you go inside of yourself, guess what? The world will hunt you down. That's what happened to me. I thought, I'm just going to do what I want, and what other people think of me is none of my business. You know, I'm just going to mind my own business, and I'm going to live my truth. I went into retreat; I lived naked for five years in my house; I worshipped; I did just what I wanted to do; I ran around the woods, had a great time worshipping the Mother, and all of a sudden, the world started hunting me down. "Wow! You're a really interesting person! We want to interview you. We want you on the cover of our magazine. We want you to do this, we want you to do that."

We need to get real with what we really feel, and stop kidding ourselves. Kids are killing themselves with drugs, they're having sex at ten years old. What are we going to do? Let's do something. Sounds like an emergency to me. As a grandpa, I would say, "Hey, what's happening with my children?" I love them. Let's connect with them. I would ask them, "Hey, what's going on? Talk to me. Let's hang out. What do you need? What do you want?" You see what I'm getting at? Relationship. Relationship is the key to this. Spiritual relationship.

Ask your version of God how It wants to be worshipped. When you meet someone, and fall in love with them, you want to know all about them: "What do you want? What

kind of food do you like? What do you like to do? What interests you? What books do you read? Show me your palms. Talk to me." And this is what we need, and this is, I feel, what the kids need. I think the average exchange between parents and children is seven minutes a day. That's really sad. And both of them are losing; the children lose, and the parents lose. Just think of the sacrifice of being a parent, investing all that energy, and then just dropping the deal, because it gets too much, because you can't handle it, or because you want to go off with your friends and you don't want to do it. You see, that's a biggy. I mean how much more spiritual can it be, than the children? It's all for the children.

When I was 25 years old, I was adopted by a Native American grandpa. He was 84 years old. We were in the teepee one day, and he was doing some rituals, and he said, "You watch, you pay really close attention to what I do, because I'm not going to be here much longer. You're going to take this, what I show you, to the children, and show them what I show you." And I cried. That's really heavy. He said it's all for the children! Everything you do is for the children.

I'm 57, it has taken me awhile. We're late bloomers in America. It takes a long time to go through it, to really grow up. And that's another thing that I think is really hard for us in this culture, is that we never grow up. We have perpetual adolescence forever, because we don't like old people, we don't acknowledge old people, we don't respect them, we put them away, in old peoples homes, where they never get touched, they don't get their legs rubbed or their feet rubbed. We should go to old people's homes, and hang out with them, and make them laugh. The old people and the kids, that's our whole legacy. Those are the jewels of our life that we have to reconnect with.

We live in a miraculous world and we just don't notice it. I mean, look at this body that we live in. Can you imagine how this is made? How we're living here, and the consciousness that we all have? It's a miracle! It's a miracle. I've lived a very wild, crazy life, and I'm still alive and that's a miracle to me that I'm still here, that God still has more for me to do. And so, I think we have to really let ourselves happen, let yourself happen.

KAILAS: *Wouldn't you love to see this country take a turn?*

BHAGAVAN DAS: It will, it will. Jai Ma. Jai Ma.

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