

Thursday, July 12, 2007

### **When Bhagavan Das was elusive.**

My four key gurus -- the pantheon, my law partner, Jay Marks, calls them -- are Steve Rench (trial battles), Jun Yasuda (peace, compassion, and eliminating my fear of death), Cheng Man Ch'ing (t'ai chi), and Victoria Boutenko (healthy and harmonious living and eating). I have spent time with all of them --- except Professor Cheng, who died before I took up t'ai chi -- particularly many times with Jun-san and Steve. When things get heated in court, sometimes I imagine that Steve Rench is on my left for confidence, Jun-san on my right for compassion to all (even my enemies), and Cheng Man Ch'ing behind me for full fighting power. I have many other key teachers, including a sampling described here. One of my key teachers has taught me one of my most important lessons without my ever getting a chance to meet him. He is Bhagavan Das. Bhagavan Das was born Kermit Mike Riggs in California in 1945. Then John Kennedy was assassinated, and he left the country for what became a multi-year journey, first in Europe, and ultimately spending several years in India as an ascetic holy man. He tells his fascinating story in *It's Here Now -- Are You?*, which describes his whirlwind ride soaking in spiritual life in India, coming under the tutelage of Neem Karoli Baba, seeking out Richard Alpert/Ram Dass for the acid he was sharing (and introducing Alpert to Neem Karoli Baba, and the rest is history, recorded in *Be Here Now*), and ultimately returning to fame in the United States through the story about him in *Be Here Now*. The ride continued. Bhagavan eventually cut his hair and became a whiz at selling used cars, followed by encyclopedias and insurance. The Eastern holy man made an even more abrupt self-revolution when he became a born again Christian and dumped his Eastern religious objects in the water, including his begging bowl made from a human skull. Ultimately, Bhagavan left an exclusively Christian path to focus on spirituality itself, no matter the source. Why am I drawn to Bhagavan Das? The most important reason is his view that he never needed to spend all those years in India to learn what he learned there, while at the same time, his journey in India was fascinating. He did not need anybody else to make his life complete, even though many people helped enrich it all the more. He did not need to convert to a used car salesman from an ascetic holy man, but he did, and he made huge profits from it. Whether intentionally or not, Bhagavan Das underlined to me how I do not need to meet and spend time with my teachers to learn from them. In April 2006, I drove to a Philadelphia yoga center, which was one of the stops on his tour. I arrived late, and the rest of the night involved seemingly endless responsive chanting called kirtan. My eyes glazed over with limited interest after the initial excitement of being in the room with Bhagavan. Once the program ended, I tried to meet Bhagavan, with his autobiography in my hand. Many wanted a piece of him. One man told him he had driven all the way from farther than I, and Bhagavan said: "That's devotion" and ended up inviting him to stay overnight where he had been provided lodging. Yet with me, he seemed to remain elusive. The drive back would bring me home for limited sleep, so I left without meeting him. On reflection, I don't know if Bhagavan was just tired late in the evening and could not give a piece of himself to all, whether he was responding to my not looking plussed over all the kirtan chanting, or whether he was trying to teach me that I can learn from him and other teachers without needing them to autograph their book and without needing to talk to them. Sometimes, one's learning truly begins after leaving one's teacher. In Hollywood, this was exemplified in the *Kung Fu* series -- which I religiously watched -- when Kwai Chang Caine had to leave the Shaolin temple and his cherished teachers once he was able to snatch the pebble. Closer to home, many of Cheng Man Ching's t'ai chi students apparently moved from being more unified when he lived to running various autonomous schools after he passed away. One of his senior students, Benjamin Pang Jeng Lo speaks reverently about Professor Cheng, while demonstrating his own powerhouse abilities, including successfully defying anybody to be able to move his extended arm when it is relaxed. Further about Ben Lo, five years ago, at one of Ben's annual weekend seminars in the Washington, DC, area, I managed to get a seat at his table during lunchtime. He seemed amused to learn I was a lawyer, telling me that another lawyer t'ai chi practitioner was stiff; a new line of lawyer jokes, perhaps. I asked him how a person unable to bend much (because of replaced knees) can perform t'ai chi. He advised to focus on the lifting hands movement. A repeated message at the Trial Lawyers College and the National Criminal Defense College is to share our learning with other like-minded lawyers. The taught become the teachers, while simultaneously learning from those they teach. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 00:00