

Interview with Dr. Stanislav Grof for "The Empire of the Spirit" – April 2010

Dear Doctor Grof,

The journal, "The Empire of the Spirit", is one of the biggest journals in Russia about religion and the mystical experience. For many years, we have been reading and rereading your books so we have many questions concerning spiritual practices in the light of transpersonal psychology.

In our journal, we constantly speak about the mystical experience of the most famous people in the world. You are among these people. Could you please tell us what kind of mystical events and experiences made you help people and heal their mental illness? Have you experienced yourself extraordinary mystical events? Which of them have especially influenced your life?

I have explored non-ordinary states of consciousness (or an important subcategory of these states that I call holotropic) more than half a century. During this time I have had many mystical experiences and transpersonal experiences in general – experiences of identification with other people and other species, psychospiritual death and rebirth, encounters with archetypal beings and visits to various archetypal realms (heavens, hells, and paradises of different cultures), past life experiences, experiences of cosmic unity, powerful visions of the source of creation that I perceived as God, experience of the Supracosmic and Metacosmic Void, and so on. I have experienced most of the types of experiences that I have been writing about in my books, many of them in my psychedelic sessions, others during spiritual practice, Holotropic Breathwork, or in the sensory isolation tank designed by my friend John Lilly. They had very profound influence on me and radically changed my worldview – from a monistic materialistic Newtonian-Cartesian one, imparted on me by my academic training, to an essentially mystical or transpersonal one.

But if you asked me which of these experiences was the most important one, I would have to say my first LSD session for which I volunteered in 1956 in the Psychiatric Department of the School of Medicine in Prague. It opened for me the door to important and normally inaccessible

dimensions of reality about the existence of which I had not had the slightest ideas. They had never even been mentioned during my psychiatric study, except as morbid products of hallucinations and delusions of mentally ill patients. I described this experience in my book *When the Impossible Happens*, where I have also described many observations indicating that these realms are ontologically real and cannot be relegated to the world of fairy tales or handbooks of psychopathology. I have also discovered that properly understood and supported, transpersonal experiences have extraordinary heuristic, therapeutic, and even evolutionary potential.

Many people have in their early childhood a feeling that their blood parents are not their parents, and their real parents are somewhere else. Probably such feelings can be connected with the idea of reincarnation. Did you have such feelings when you were a child? What other mystical thoughts came to your mind in your youth?

I have encountered such feelings in my patients, but they seemed to have more to do with the fact that they did not experience genuine affection in their parents' behavior toward them, that there was not enough love in their family, rather than this having something to do with reincarnation. However, it is common for people reliving memories from their past lives to discover that the protagonists in these experiences are people from their present life, including their parents. They can then understand various problems in these current relationships as carry-overs from previous lifetimes and can also significantly improve these relationships by resolving these karmic problems. I described a situation of this kind from my own life in the story entitled *The Karmic Triangle: Time Travel to Ancient Egypt* in my book *When the Impossible Happens*.

Another experience that people can have in holotropic states of consciousness in relation to their parents is a strong feeling that from another level of reality they actually chose the parents to whom they were born, rather than being the result of their parents' decision. It is also common to transcend one's biological identity that makes us see ourselves as products of our parents. We can think here of the words of the great Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran: "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself." And Ram Dass, famous Harvard psychology professor turned into a spiritual teacher, expressed the same idea succinctly and facetiously: "I am Jewish, but only from my parents' side."

I was very lucky in regard to my parents; we were facing many external threats – most prominently the horrors of the German Nazi occupation, but were a very closely knit family. Most of my spiritual feelings were in connection with nature in relation to the animal and botanical kingdom. I was also very early puzzled and haunted by such questions as infinity or finite nature of the universe and eternity versus limited clock-time. It challenged me that I could not imagine the universe being either finite or infinite in space and eternal or beginning and ending in clock-time.

Who of the greatest spiritual teachers have you been friends with? Who have you met personally? It is of great interest to us what teachers and traditions did you receive initiations from?

My wife Christina and I have had the privilege to meet many great spiritual teachers, spend some intimate time with them, and count them among our friends. We have spent most time with Swami Muktananda, head of the Siddha Yoga lineage, from whom we had received shaktipat and with whose help we organized a large international transpersonal conference. The conference was held in the Oberoi Hotel in Bombay in February 1982, several months before Muktananda's death; it was his last public appearance. The conference was called *Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science* and provided a forum for exchange between new paradigm scientists and spiritual teachers. It featured Mother Teresa, Parsee high priest Dastoor Minocheer Homji, Turkish Sufi Sheik Muzafer Ozak Al-Jerrahi, Taoist Master Chungliang Al Huang, and Benedictine monk Father Bede Griffith.

Another memorable gathering of our spiritual teachers and friends was an Esalen sixweek workshop entitled *Buddhism and Western Psychology*, which had a stellar cast and remarkable program. Co-leader of the workshop was Jack Kornfield, dear friend, psychologist, Vipassana teacher, and Buddhist monk, with whom we have since co-led thirty retreats combining Vipassana Buddhist meditation and Holotropic Breathwork. The guest faculty included Tibetan Buddhist spiritual teachers Chögyam Trungpa, Tarthang Tulku, and Sogyal Rinpoche. Lama Govinda was in residence with his wife Li for two of the six weeks and, during this time, he lived in our house and gave a one-hour lecture on Tibetan Buddhism every day. Religious scholar and philosopher Huston Smith gave lectures on Buddhism and Joseph

Campbell introduced the group to Buddhist mythology in a series of illustrated presentations; both of them can be seen as spiritual teachers in their own right. Zen Buddhism was represented by the abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center Reb Anderson, Korean Zen master Seung Sahn Nim, and Kobun Chino; Kobun was the priest who married Christina and me. Taoist teacher Chungliang Al Huang, along-time dear friend of ours, introduced participants to Tai Chi Chuan and to Chinese calligraphy. Benedictine monk and Christian mystic Brother Steindl-Rast also made some important contributions to the program.

That is a long list of people who have been important teachers for us; however, it was his Holiness the Dalai Lama who has made the deepest impression on us. The times we have spent with him, beginning with a 1981 New Year's private audience in Dharamsala, has left us with unforgettable memories. He is a great spiritual teacher who actually lives in full consonance with his teaching, or – as we say in English – walks his talk.

Is any transpersonal experience useful for an individual? Can we for example say that consistent passing through The Third Basic Matrix with its aspects of sadomasochism necessarily brings a man to the next matrix? It happens that such experiences end up with a great tragedy. We can take as an example the skoptsy (a sect practicing castration). The terrifying images of the Supernatural injured many people, both mentally and physically. Does there exist a way to escape this phase going directly to Albedo and escaping Nigredo? Is there a risk to be stuck in the Hell not being able to reach the Paradise?

Your question has two parts; both of them are important, but they are independent from each other. The first part is "Are any transpersonal experiences useful for an individual?" They are extremely useful because they correct our superficial and naïve materialistic worldview by revealing dimensions of our psyche that we cannot reach in our everyday state of consciousness and dimensions of reality that are not accessible to our physical senses. Yet, without this information, we cannot really understand who we are and what is the nature of reality.

Transpersonal experiences have a quality that C. G. Jung called "numinosity;" They are accompanied with a convincing feeling that they belong to a higher order, higher dimension of reality that forms and informs the processes in the material world. They thus show that

spirituality is an important aspect of existence and spiritual quest a legitimate and vital pursuit. Transpersonal experiences also have an extraordinary therapeutic or healing potential. I have observed repeatedly significant alleviation or even disappearance of emotional and psychosomatic disorders, such as depression, various phobias, psychogenic asthma, migraine headaches and other physical pains after experiences of psychospiritual death and rebirth, reliving of past life experiences, encounter with archetypal figures, or states of cosmic unity. Now to the second part of your question: the importance of terrifying and painful experiences during spiritual journey. Confrontation with the personal Shadow and the dark side of existence is a critical aspect of the spiritual journey. These experiences are not created by the effects of psychedelic drugs, Holotropic Breathwork, or other methods that are used for induction of holotropic states of consciousness. They indicate that we are coming to terms with the dark aspects of our psyche and existence in general. This can be extremely healing and transformative, if it happens in the context of responsible and intelligent inner self-exploration, but very dangerous if it is projected outside and acted-out.

For example, when we are experiencing elements of the Third Perinatal Matrix (BPM III) that you brought up – the struggle in the birth canal after the cervix opens – we can have visions of unimaginable violence, satanic scenes, sadomasochistic sequences, and deviant sexuality. When the process is internalized and associated with introspection, this is an important stage of the transformation process and an important step toward spiritual opening. Acted out it can result in behavior that is useless at best and extremely dangerous at worst. It can lead to violence, destructive and self-destructive activity, including self-mutilation, murder and suicide, aberrant or even criminal sexuality, and other extreme manifestations. Negative results of psychedelic and other sessions do not indicate that the individual experienced too much; they indicate that the experience remained unfinished. It brought some challenging material from the unconscious close to the surface, so that it has disturbing effect on consciousness, but not far enough for it to be resolved and integrated.

Different luminous beings, which come to a man at the moment of death, during spiritual practice or even in a dream, treat people with love and very often open much knowledge to them. In your opinion, what is the nature of these beings? Does always their information bring use? Has it ever happened to you to interact with this spiritual world?

The visions of various discarnate beings are very common in dreams, psychedelic sessions, Holotropic Breathwork sessions, near-death experiences, and spontaneous episodes of non-ordinary states of consciousness (“spiritual emergencies” as my wife Christina and I call them). They belong to different categories. A common vision in near-death situations is what Raymond Moody called “Being of Light” (God) experienced as judge of the way the individual has lived his or her life. Another type of experience involves apparitions of people who have died. It is possible to communicate with them, receive advice or instructions, and so on. Dying individuals, as they are approaching death, often have visions of their dead relatives, who seem to welcome them to the next world. These deathbed visions of the “welcoming committee” seem very authentic and convincing and often induce a state of euphoria in the dying persons that seems to ease their transition from life to death. These visions cannot be easily explained in psychopathological terms and dismissed as hallucinations; they have been observed in individuals with clear consciousness, who were not delirious, disoriented, and confused. However, these phenomena in and of themselves were not particularly interesting for the researchers, since the dying could have easily constructed such images from memories. Early researchers therefore focused on an important subgroup of subjects usually referred to as “Peak in Darien” cases. This idea was conceived by Frances Power Cobbe in 1877. It is based on the belief that spirits of dead relatives come to aid the dying, ease their transition, and take them to another world. This means that dying persons would see only persons who are already dead. Thus, if a patient saw an apparition of a dead person about whose death he or she was not informed, this was seen as strong supportive evidence for survival after death.

Yet another category of beings includes archetypal figures, who function as spiritual guides or teachers. They can convey information that the individual does not possess in the everyday state of consciousness. They can then receive this information themselves or channel it to others. Salient example would be C. G. Jung who credited his spirit guide Philemon for important parts of his psychology. Roberto Assagioli, told me when I stayed with him in Florence shortly before his death, that he received the basic ideas of his system called *psychosynthesis* from an entity, who called himself the Tibetan. Roberto believed that it was the same entity whose ideas were channeled by Alice Bailey and became the basis of her

metaphysical system. I would also mention in this context Helen Schucman, who channeled The Course in Miracles, a remarkable text used by many professional psychiatrists and psychologists in their courses.

Some people tend to pooh-pooh the idea of spirit guides and channeling, other are very gullible and accept uncritically the information that comes this way. I believe in the existence of this phenomenon having it experienced myself and observed in many others. However, I feel strongly that one has to exert the same critical judgment in relation to entities that might appear in one's inner world as one would or should in relation to people that one encounters. As my friend and colleague Charlie Tart put it with his incisive sense of humor: *"There is no indication that death increases IQ or heightens moral standards."*

Most people when getting information about their past lives are sure that this is exactly their life. Can images seen by them be related to somebody else's life or past life? Do you remember your past lives? If yes – how do you know that this is your own experience?

Reliving of what seem to be memories from previous lives belong to the most frequent experiences in holotropic states of consciousness. They occurred in the sessions my patients spontaneously, in spite of the fact that I initially did not take the idea of reincarnation and karma seriously and saw it as a product of wishful fantasy of people who could not accept the grim reality of impermanence and death. In addition, these experiences were contrary to the beliefs of the culture I grew up in, since the concept of reincarnation is rejected both by mainstream science and by the theologians of our dominant religion. It is one of the rare issues about which materialistic science and Christianity are in agreement (Christian Church since the Council of Constantinople in 553 AD when the belief in return of souls as rejected in connection with the teachings of Father Origen).

For many people, the first encounter with past life experiences happened at the time when they were reliving their birth, for others these episodes emerged independently. These

sequences typically took the individuals involved to some emotionally highly charged situations that were taking place in various countries of the world and different historical periods, both recent and remote. The content of these experiences usually came as a complete surprise and, yet, they were accompanied with a strange feeling of déjà vu or déjà vecu: "This is not the first time this is happening to me; I have been here before, I experienced this in one of my previous lives." There also typically is a deep connection between the protagonists and events in these experiences and the individuals' present lives. It is this feeling of remembering something that happened before and the relation to our personal life that distinguishes past life memories from episodes from the collective unconscious with which we do not have any personal connection. Over the years, I have had a large number of past life experiences; and described them in my books. Two of the more interesting ones are included in my book *When the Impossible Happens*. One of them involves an Egyptian incarnation and the other one takes place in Czarist Russia. It was the personal encounter with these fascinating phenomena that helped me understand that they cannot be dismissed as product of psychopathological processes in the brain, but represent a serious conceptual challenge for psychiatrists, psychologists, philosophers, and theologians. In addition, Ian Stevenson's meticulous research of over three thousand cases of little children who remember previous incarnation suggests strongly that the problem of reincarnation deserves serious attention of scientists.

Adherents of a Russian sect of the 1920s called themselves "immortals." They thought that death would not come if you don't think about it; then people would be immortal. These people died anyway. But the question is: does this vision help to live? Maybe thoughts about death harm people, being horrifying and preventing them from spiritual development?

In holotropic states of consciousness, we can have very convincing experiences indicating that we are not our physical bodies and egos, that "we are not human beings having spiritual experiences, but spiritual beings having human experiences." This idea of the French philosopher, paleontologist, and Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin is even more strongly expressed in the Upanishads. There the answer given to the question "Who am I?" is "Tat tvam asi," meaning "Thou Art That" (You are Godhead). We are not *namarupa* (name and shape); our true identity is *Atman*, a divine spark in our innermost being that is identical with *Brahman*, the creative principle of the universe, Absolute Consciousness that is immortal. In the Hindu

tradition we are given meditative practices – various yogas - that can provide experiential confirmation of this assertion.

I have worked with many people – in psychedelic sessions, Holotropic Breathwork, and spontaneous psychospiritual crises (“*spiritual emergencies*”) - whose experiences brought them to the same conclusion. However, this realization of our immortality should not be confused with immortality of the physical body. This conviction could be extremely useful for people facing imminent death, as we have seen in our study of psychedelic therapy with terminal cancer patients. I have described this study in my comprehensive book on death and dying entitled *The Ultimate Journey; Consciousness and the Mystery of Death*.

Deep-seated fear of death that we carry in our unconscious can seriously distort and spoil our experience of everyday life and lead to various forms of emotional problems and irrational behavior. However, the solution is not to keep our thoughts away from death, but to confront death in spiritual practice or other forms of focused self-exploration. The source of this fear are memories of life-threatening experiences from postnatal life (near-drowning, injuries, and diseases, biological birth, prenatal life, and past lives), and archetypal figures and motifs from eschatological mythology. When we are able to bring them to consciousness for processing, we can achieve significant reduction of the fear of death. This is how I understand the importance of “dying before dying” in the ancient mysteries of death and rebirth, native rites of passage, and various forms of spiritual practice. I love the quote of the German Augustinian monk Abraham a Sancta Clara: “*The man who dies before he dies does not die when he dies.*”

The question of spirituality, mysticism and magic is not taken seriously by materialistic scientists. But spiritual practices certainly can bring positive results. Around us there are too many proofs to deny that. Which argument (fact, thought or image) do you regard as most convincing in the polemics with materialists?

You are asking a question concerning a problem that has been of critical importance throughout my entire professional life. I realized very early in my research of psychedelic experiences and other types of holotropic states of consciousness that many observations from this research represent “*anomalous phenomena.*” This means

they cannot be accounted for and explained by current conceptual frameworks in psychiatry and psychology and represent a serious theoretical challenge for the basic metaphysical assumptions of materialistic science.

In the late 1960s, I had the pleasure to be part of a small working group, including Abraham Maslow, Anthony Sutich, Jim Fadiman, Miles Vich, and Sonya Margulies. This group met repeatedly in Menlo Park, California, with the purpose of creating a new psychology that would honor spirituality and the entire spectrum of human experience, including various non-ordinary states of consciousness. During these discussions, Maslow and Sutich accepted my suggestion and named the new discipline "transpersonal psychology." This term replaced their own original name "transhumanistic," or "reaching beyond humanistic concerns." Transpersonal psychology, as we formulated it was culturally sensitive and treated the ritual and spiritual traditions of ancient and native cultures with the respect that they deserve in view of the findings of modern consciousness research. It also embraced and integrated a wide range of "*anomalous phenomena*," paradigm-breaking observations that academic science was unable to account for and explain.

However, although comprehensive and well substantiated in and of itself, the new field represented such a radical departure from academic thinking in professional circles that it could not be reconciled with either traditional psychology and psychiatry or with the Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm of Western science. As a result of this, transpersonal psychology was extremely vulnerable to accusations of being "irrational", "unscientific", and even "flakey," particularly by scientists who were not aware of the vast body of observations and data on which the new movement was based. These critics also ignored the fact that many of the pioneers of this revolutionary movement had impressive academic credentials. They generated and embraced the transpersonal vision of the human psyche not because they were ignorant of the fundamental assumptions of traditional science, but because they found the old conceptual frameworks seriously inadequate and incapable to account for their experiences and observations.

The problematic status of transpersonal psychology among “hard sciences” changed very radically during the first two decades of the existence of this fledgling discipline. As a result of revolutionary new concepts and discoveries in various scientific fields, the philosophy of traditional Western science, its basic metaphysical assumptions, and its Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm were increasingly seriously challenged and undermined. Like many other theoreticians in the transpersonal field, I have followed this development with great interest and described it in the first part of my book *Beyond the Brain* in an effort to bridge the gap between the findings of my own research and the established scientific worldview. To answer your question, after a long introduction: this is what I use today in discussions with my materialistic colleagues.

The influx of this exciting new information began by the realization of the profound philosophical implications of quantum-relativistic physics, forever changing our understanding of physical reality. The astonishing convergence between the worldview of modern physics and that of the Eastern spiritual philosophies, foreshadowed already in the work of Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schroedinger, and others, found full expression in the ground-breaking book by Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*. Capra’s pioneering vision was in the following years complemented and refined by the work of Fred Alan Wolf, Nick Herbert, Amit Goswami, and many others.

Of particular interest in this regard were the contributions of David Bohm, former co-worker of Albert Einstein and author of prestigious monographs on theory of relativity and quantum physics. His concept of the explicate and implicate order and his theory of holomovement expounding the importance of holographic thinking in science gained great popularity in the transpersonal field, as did Karl Pribram's holographic model of the brain. The same is true for biologist Rupert Sheldrake’s theory of morphic resonance and morphogenetic fields, demonstrating the importance of non-physical fields for the understanding of forms, genetics and heredity, order, meaning, and the process of learning.

Additional exciting contributions were the anthropic principle in astrophysics of Barrow and Tipler, the encyclopedic work of Ken Wilber and, above all, Ervin Laszlo's connectivity hypothesis and his concept of the PSI or Akashic field (a subquantum field in which everything that happens in the material world remains holographically recorded). The observations from consciousness research, which are quite impressive and convincing in and of themselves are thus finding powerful support from various avenues of the new emerging paradigm in science.

It has been very exciting to see how the new revolutionary developments in various fields, undermining the traditional edifice of materialistic science, are welcomed by the transpersonal scientists as supportive evidence for the basic tenets of their worldview. Each of the new pieces in the rapidly forming mosaic of the new paradigm increases the hope that transpersonal psychology will become in the near future an integral part of a comprehensive new worldview bringing together the best of spirituality and science, as well as modern pragmatism and ancient wisdom.