

## Interview with Stanislav Grof

**Stanislav Grof, M.D, Ph.D.**, born on July 1, 1931 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, is a psychiatrist with more than fifty years of research of non-ordinary states of consciousness. In 1956 he received an M.D. degree from Charles University School of Medicine in Prague and in 1964 a Ph.D. degree (Doctor of Philosophy in Medicine) from the Czechoslovakian Academy of Sciences. In the past, he was Principal Investigator in a psychedelic research program at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at The Johns Hopkins University and Chief of Psychiatric Research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in Baltimore, MD, and Scholar-in-Residence at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. Currently, he is Professor of Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco, writes books, and conducts lectures, workshops, and professional training worldwide. He lives in Mill Valley, CA, with his wife Christina. They have a son and a daughter from Christina's previous marriage.

### SPIRITUALITY:

**In your book, *When the Impossible Happens*, you revealed that you used to have a skeptical and materialistic view of life. What have made your concepts change?**

I was not exposed in my childhood and young years to any form of religions influences and indoctrination. My parents had a serious conflict with the local church in connection with their wedding. The church refused to marry a Catholic (my mother) and a person without church affiliation (my father) and

finally agreed to do it only after being offered a major financial donation. My parents were very disenchanted by this affair and decided not to commit me or my brother to any religion. They wanted us to make our own choices when we would come of age. And with this history, I enrolled in the medical school which certainly does not instill mystical feelings in the students. And I studied medicine at a time when we were controlled by the Soviet Union and had a Marxist regime, I received with my education the purest materialistic doctrine there is.

So I am a somewhat rare example of a person who was brought to spirituality and mysticism by scientific research - laboratory and clinical study. I experienced a powerful spiritual opening in 1956 when I volunteered for an LSD session combined with exposure to intense stroboscopic light. My consciousness left my body and I lost the clinic, Prague, and our planet and became identified with the entire universe. It was an amazing experience that not only opened me to spirituality, but also generated in me a life-long passion for the study of non-ordinary states of consciousness. It has been now over fifty years since that session and I have done in my professional life very little of what was not related in one way or another to these states.

I spent approximately half of this time conducting therapy with psychedelic substances, first in Czechoslovakia in the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague and then in the United States, at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in Baltimore, where I participated in the last surviving American psychedelic research program. Since 1975, my wife Christina and I have worked with holotropic breathwork, a powerful method of therapy and self-exploration that we jointly developed at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. Over the years, we have also supported many people undergoing spontaneous episodes of

non-ordinary states of consciousness - psychospiritual crises or “spiritual emergencies,” as Christina and I call them. The common denominator of these three situations is that they involve non-ordinary states of consciousness.

**Has this renewal been a decisive factor for you to start your researches about spirituality? Why?**

It definitely was. When I was returning from my cosmic journey, it took me some time to align my consciousness with my body and get these two together. At that point, it became absolutely clear to me that consciousness cannot possibly be a product of the brain as I had been taught by academic authorities, It appeared to be at least an equal partner of matter, or possibly supraordinated to it, as it is discussed in the great Eastern spiritual philosophies. And I also saw that spirituality is an important and legitimate dimension of the human psyche and of the universal scheme of things. I saw the enormous revolutionary, paradigm-breaking potential of the work with non-ordinary states. The following fifty years of research of other people’s experiences only validated and reinforced this original feeling.

**How do you understand spirituality? In your opinion, what is the importance of spirituality in people’s lives? Why?**

According to traditional science, the history of the universe is history of developing matter. The universe essentially created itself and its evolution from the Big Bang to homo sapiens occurred without a guiding principle, without a master plan, simply as a result of complex interplay of material particles

reflecting natural laws. Life, consciousness, and intelligence are seen as epiphenomena of material processes. Modern consciousness research has made this perspective untenable. The study of non-ordinary states revealed dimensions of existence that are beyond the reach of senses in our everyday state of conscious.

The historical and mythological domains of the collective unconscious with its governing principles – the Jungian archetypes - are clearly supraordinated to material reality; like Plato's Ideas or Forms, they form and inform what is happening in the world and in our life. Genuine spirituality is based on personal experience of these normally hidden dimensions of reality. When our experiential self-exploration reaches deeper levels of the unconscious - in my terminology perinatal and transpersonal – the experiences have a quality that C.G. Jung called (after Rudolph Otto) numinosity. The term *numinous* is relatively neutral and thus preferable to other similar names, such as religious, mystical, magical, holy, or sacred, which have often been used in problematic contexts and are easily misleading. The sense of numinosity is based on direct apprehension of the fact that we are encountering a domain that belongs to a superior order of reality, one which is sacred and radically different from the material world.

To prevent misunderstanding and confusion that in the past compromised many similar discussions, it is critical to make a clear distinction between spirituality and religion. Spirituality is based on direct experiences of nonordinary aspects and dimensions of reality. It does not require a special place or an officially appointed person mediating contact with the divine. The mystics do not need churches or temples. The context in which they experience the sacred

dimensions of reality, including their own divinity, are their bodies and nature. And instead of officiating priests, they need a supportive group of fellow seekers or the guidance of a teacher who is more advanced on the inner journey than they are themselves.

Spirituality involves a special kind of relationship between the individual and the cosmos and is, in its essence, a personal and private affair. By comparison, organized religion is institutionalized group activity that takes place in a designated location, a temple or a church, and involves a system of appointed officials who might or might not have had personal experiences of spiritual realities. Once a religion becomes organized, it often completely loses the connection with its spiritual source and becomes a secular institution that exploits human spiritual needs without satisfying them. Organized religions tend to create hierarchical systems focusing on the pursuit of power, control, politics, money, possessions, and other secular concerns. Under these circumstances, religious hierarchy as a rule dislikes and discourages direct spiritual experiences in its members, because they foster independence and cannot be effectively controlled. When this is the case, genuine spiritual life continues only in the mystical branches, monastic orders, and ecstatic sects of the religions involved.

## **NON-ORDINARY STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

**What is consciousness? Is it possible to physiologically explain it? Does this concept diverge from that employed by academic medicine?**

According to academic science, consciousness emerges somewhere during the evolution of species out of the complexity of material (neurophysiological) processes in the brain. However, the gap between matter and consciousness is so radical and profound that it is hard to imagine that something like that could really happen. And this assumption involves a major logical error. We have ample clinical and experimental evidence showing deep correlations between the anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry of the brain, on the one hand, and conscious processes, on the other. However, none of these findings proves that consciousness is actually generated by the brain. The origin of consciousness from matter is simply assumed as an obvious and self-evident fact based on the metaphysical belief in the primacy of matter in the universe. In the entire history of science, nobody has ever offered a plausible explanation how consciousness could be generated by material processes, or even suggested a viable approach to the problem.

What materialistic science wants us to believe is that it is possible that the brain itself has the capacity to somehow translate chemical and electric changes in the neurons into a conscious subjective perception of the observed material object. The nature of the process and mechanism capable to carry out this operation eludes any scientific analysis. The assertion that something like this is possible is a wild and unsubstantiated conjecture based on a metaphysical bias rather than a scientific statement supported by solid evidence.

The idea that consciousness is a product of the brain naturally is not completely arbitrary. Its proponents usually refer to the results of many neurological and psychiatric experiments and to a vast body of very specific clinical observations from neurology, neurosurgery, and psychiatry, to support

their position. When we challenge this deeply ingrained belief, does it mean that we doubt the correctness of these observations? The evidence for a close connection between the anatomy of the brain, neurophysiology, and consciousness is unquestionable and overwhelming. What is problematic is not the nature of the presented evidence but the interpretation of the results, the logic of the argument, and the conclusions that are drawn from these observations.

While these experiments clearly show that consciousness is closely connected with the neurophysiological and biochemical processes in the brain, they have very little bearing on the nature and origin of consciousness. There actually exists ample evidence suggesting exactly the opposite, namely that consciousness can under certain circumstances operate independently of its material substrate and can perform functions that reach far beyond the capacities of the brain. This is most clearly illustrated by the existence of out-of-body experiences (OOBEs). These can occur spontaneously, or in a variety of facilitating situations which include shamanic trance, psychedelic sessions, hypnosis, experiential psychotherapy, and particularly near-death situations (NDE).

In all these situations consciousness can separate from the body and maintain its sensory capacity, while moving freely to various close and remote locations. Of particular interest are 'veridical OOBEs,' where independent verification proves the accuracy of perception of the environment under these circumstances. There are many other types of transpersonal phenomena which can mediate accurate information about various aspects of the universe that had not been previously received and recorded in the brain.

Strictly speaking, all that clinical and experimental data unequivocally demonstrate is that changes in the brain function are closely and quite specifically connected with changes in consciousness. They say very little about the nature of consciousness and about its origin; they leave these problems wide open. It is certainly possible to think about an alternative interpretation that would use the same data, but come to very different conclusions. This can be illustrated by looking at the relationship between the TV set and the TV program. The situation here is much clearer, since it involves a system that is human-made and incomparably simpler. The final reception of the TV program, the quality of the picture and of the sound, depends in a very critical way on proper functioning of the TV set and on the integrity of its components. Malfunctions of its various parts result in very distinct and specific changes of the quality of the program. Some of them lead to distortions of form, color, or sound, others to interference between the channels. Like the neurologist who uses changes in consciousness as a diagnostic tool, a television mechanic can infer from the nature of these anomalies which parts of the set and which specific components are malfunctioning. When the problem is identified, repairing or replacing these elements will correct the distortions.

Since we know the basic principles of the television technology, it is clear to us that the set simply mediates the program and that it does not generate it or contribute anything to it. We would laugh at somebody who would try to examine and scrutinize all the transistors, relays, and circuits of the TV set and analyze all its wires in an attempt to figure out how it creates the programs. Even if we carry this misguided effort to the molecular, atomic, or subatomic level, we will have absolutely no clue why, at a particular time, a Mickey Mouse cartoon, a Star Trek sequence, or a Hollywood classic appear on the screen. The fact that



there is such a close correlation between the functioning of the TV set and the quality of the program does not necessarily mean that the entire secret of the program is in the set itself. Yet this is exactly the kind of conclusion that traditional materialistic science drew from comparable data about the brain and its relation to consciousness.

**What are non-ordinary states of consciousness? How do they happen in the physical body? How can someone achieve them? What is the practical usage of such consciousness states?**

Non-ordinary states of consciousness (or their important subcategory which I call holotropic) involve experiences of normally invisible dimensions of reality or a radically different perspective on our everyday reality. In sharp contrast with modern humanity, all the indigenous cultures held holotropic states in great esteem and spent much time and effort developing safe and effective ways of inducing them. They used them as a principal vehicle in their ritual and spiritual life and for several other important purposes. In the context of sacred ceremonies, non-ordinary states mediated for the natives direct experiential contact with the archetypal dimensions of reality - deities, mythological realms, power animals, and numinous forces of nature.

Another area where these states played a crucial role was diagnosing and healing of various emotional and psychosomatic disorders, or even some physical diseases. Although aboriginal cultures often possessed impressive knowledge of naturalistic remedies, they put primary emphasis on metaphysical healing. This typically involved induction of holotropic states of consciousness -- in the client, in the healer, or in both of them at the same time. In many instances, a large

group or even an entire tribe entered a healing trance together, as it is, for example, until this day among the !Kung Bushmen in the African Kalahari Desert.

Holotropic states have also been used to cultivate intuition and extrasensory perception for a variety of practical purposes, such as finding lost persons and objects, obtaining information about people in remote locations, and for following the movement of the game. In addition, they served as a source of artistic inspiration, providing ideas for rituals, paintings, sculptures, and songs. The impact that the experiences encountered in these states had on the cultural life of preindustrial societies and the spiritual history of humanity has been enormous.

The importance of holotropic states for ancient and aboriginal cultures is reflected in the amount of time and energy dedicated to the development of “technologies of the sacred,” various mind-altering procedures capable of inducing holotropic states for ritual and spiritual purposes. These methods combine in various ways drumming and other forms of percussion, music, chanting, rhythmic dancing, changes of breathing, and cultivation of special forms of awareness. Extended social and sensory isolation, such as a stay in a cave, desert, arctic ice, or in high mountains, also play an important role as means of inducing holotropic states. Extreme physiological interventions used for this purpose include fasting, sleep deprivation, dehydration, and even massive bloodletting, use of powerful laxatives and purgatives, and infliction of severe pain. A particularly effective technology for inducing holotropic states has been ritual use of psychedelic plants and substances.

**We know that you have also experienced altered states of consciousness. What have made you interested in such experiences? Tell us how it has been like. Has it happened more than once? If yes, which one has been the most impacting for your? Why?**

For me, it was the first experience with LSD that generated a life-long interest in these states and passion for consciousness research. Over the years I have had a number of psychedelic experiences and experiences with holotropic breathwork. I have essentially personally experienced all the substances that I administered to other people – LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, Ecstasy, DMT, DPT, and others. I have also participated in native ceremonies in different parts of the world using psychedelic plants – peyote, Psilocybe mushrooms, ayahuasca, and kava kava. It has been a tremendous adventure in consciousness and it would be very difficult for me to identify a session that had the greatest impact on me. I have described many of them in my most self-revealing and personal book, *When the Impossible Happens*.

**When did you identify a therapeutic opportunity in it?**

The great therapeutic potential of LSD became obvious in very early stages of research, It was actually suggested in the very first scientific paper on it, written in Switzerland by dr. W.A. Stoll; it was called LSD-25: Fantasticum from the Ergot Group. Later research then confirmed Dr. Stoll's impression. It showed that LSD used in the proper set and setting was able to substantially deepen and accelerate the psychotherapeutic process and could be beneficial even for groups of patients who were not very responsive to traditional treatments – alcoholic, narcotic drug addicts, terminal cancer patients, criminal recidivists, and others.

### **How does the therapeutic method using non-ordinary states work?**

Clinical work using non-ordinary states has discovered that emotional and psychosomatic disorders have their roots not only on the biographical level of the unconscious as assumed by traditional psychiatry, but they reach deep to the perinatal level (to the memories of the birth trauma), and to the transpersonal level (to karmic and archetypal matrices). While verbal therapies cannot reach these deeper levels of the unconscious, non-ordinary states of consciousness can bring this material to the surface for processing and integration.

### **What sort of things happen in such non-ordinary states?**

In the early stage of my consciousness research, I created a vastly expanded map of the human psyche that includes the main categories of experiences that one can encounter in non-ordinary states. We can relive various emotionally relevant memories from our childhood, infancy, birth, and prenatal life. Additional possibilities are experiential identification with other people and various animals, ancestral, collective, and past life memories, encounters with archetypal beings and visits to mythological realms of various cultures. Among the most profound experiences are identification with the cosmic creative principle and the supracosmic and metacosmic Void.

**Are these experiences real or products of our brain? How can we separate in a non-ordinary state of consciousness a fantasy from a genuine experience?**

Transpersonal experience often contain new accurate information about other people, animals, plants, life of our ancestors, historical periods and events, and even mythological beings and realms from various cultures of the world. In many instances, this information is very specific, transcends the subject's educational and cultural background. and its veracity can be confirmed by independent research. I have described many examples of this kind in my book *When the Impossible Happens*.

Careful study of transpersonal experiences shows that they cannot be explained as products of pathological processes in the brain, but are ontologically real. To distinguish transpersonal experiences from imaginary products of individual fantasy, Jungian psychologists refer to this domain as *imaginal*. French scholar, philosopher, and mystic, Henri Corbin, who first used the term *mundus imaginalis*, was inspired in this regard by his study of Islamic mystical literature (Corbin 2000). Islamic theosophers call the imaginal world, where everything existing in the sensory world has its analogue, '*alam a mithal*,' or the "eighth climate," to distinguish it from the "seven climates," regions of traditional Islamic geography. The imaginal world possesses extension and dimensions, forms and colors, but these are not perceptible to our senses as they would be when they are properties of physical objects. However, this realm is in every respect as fully ontologically real and susceptible to consensual validation by other people as the material world perceived.

**Is there any standard (occurrence) in the images and descriptions revealed by the individuals after experiencing an expanded states of consciousness? In case of positive answer, what is it and why? Doesn't that imply that we are all supposedly "equal"?**

What is actually truly striking about non-ordinary states is the opposite - their amazing inter-individual and also intra-individual variability. When we give a psychedelic substance in the same dosage and under the same circumstances to hundred people, each person's experience will be very different. The same can be said about repeated sessions of the same person. It also applies to holotropic breathwork.

### **Is everyone able to experience this amplified state of consciousness?**

In principle yes, although there are great individual differences. For some people, it is difficult to get into a non-ordinary state, including with the use of psychedelics, as much as they are trying. For others, such states erupt in the middle of their everyday life and interfere with their daily activities this is what my wife and I call ("spiritual emergency").

### **Are there any contraindications for experimenting with non-ordinary states?**

There are physical, as well as emotional contraindications. From a physical point of view, we are primarily concerned about people with cardiovascular disorders – high blood pressure, aneurysms, advanced arteriosclerosis, and a history of strokes or heart attacks, for whom physical stress and intense emotional experiences could be dangerous. Emotional contraindications include borderline personality, bipolar disorders, and history of psychosis and psychiatric hospitalizations. In many instances, these contraindications are relative, but the

work with these categories of clients requires a residential facility. In Prague, where I had my own ward, I worked with all these categories of patients.

**Does meditation take us to) an amplified state of consciousness?**

**Explain.**

Meditation certainly has that potential, particularly is it is associated with breathing exercises. Occasionally, it can actually trigger an extended episode of a non-ordinary state (“spiritual emergency”).

**SURVIVAL OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND NEAR--DEATH EXPERIENCES**

**In your opinion, what happens after the death of the physical body?**

**Have you ever been able to verify it through your researches? If yes, how?**

I have dedicated my entire last book, *The Ultimate Journey: Consciousness and the Mystery of Death*, to psychological, philosophical, and spiritual aspects of dying and death. I have summarized there my own experiences and observations from over fifty years of consciousness research related to this topic. I have also reviewed the existing literature and summarized the findings of other researchers.

At the time of my medical studies (over fifty years ago), the answer seemed clear and – unfortunately it still seems clear to many uninformed materialistic scientists: Consciousness is the product of the brain; when the body dies, the brain stops functioning and that is the end of any form of consciousness. Today, thanks to meticulous thanatological research - study of near-death

experiences and experiences of dying people, as well as investigation of past life experiences, the survival of consciousness after death seems possible or even plausible. I illustrate this problem by various clinical examples in my books *The Ultimate Journey* and *When the Impossible Happens*.

**Can the amplified state of consciousness make a person remind facts from past lives? How?**

Past life experiences are among the most common phenomena in non-ordinary states of consciousness. They have occurred with extraordinary frequency in psychedelic sessions of my clients, in sessions of holotropic breathwork, and in the course of spontaneous psychospiritual crises (“spiritual emergencies”) of the people we have worked with. This happened 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.

These karmic 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 was a deep connection between the protagonists and events in these experiences and the individuals’ present lives.

I soon became aware of the fact that past life experiences had many characteristics that made it difficult to dismiss them as childish fantasies. They occurred on the same continuum with accurate memories from adolescence, childhood, infancy, birth, and intrauterine existence, phenomena that could often be reliably verified. They were also often intimately connected with the individuals’ emotional and psychosomatic symptoms and with important issues and circumstances in their present life. When karmic sequences emerged fully into consciousness, they frequently brought illuminating insights into various previously incomprehensible and puzzling aspects of everyday existence of the persons involved.

This included a wide variety of psychological problems and interpersonal issues for which traditional schools of psychotherapy failed to provide adequate explanation. I also witnessed repeatedly that past life experiences led not only to intellectual understanding, but also alleviation or complete disappearance of various difficult emotional and psychosomatic symptoms, as well as resolution of conflicts in relationships with other people. In addition, like the earlier mentioned ancestral, racial, and collective memories, past life experiences often provided accurate insights into the time and culture involved. In many instances the nature and quality of this

information made it unlikely that these people could have acquired it through the conventional channels.

**Have you had access to your past lives? Tell us about one of your most touching experiences.**

Over the years, I have had many past life experiences. Two of them are described in considerable detail in my book *When the Impossible Happens*. One of them took me to Czarist Russia, the other one to pharaonic Egypt. They are quite complex and to do them justice would take much time. I have to refer the interested readers to the original source.

**In your opinion, is there a soul? What is the relationship between soul and consciousness?**

Religions of the world differ in their definition of soul and this term is somewhat fuzzy and unclear. My research has shown that we do not have a fixed identity. In our everyday life we identify with the body/ego (Alan Watts' "skin-encapsulated ego"). In non-ordinary states, we can experience very convincing identification with anybody and anything that is part creation, including the creative principle itself. For me the "soul" would be extension of our identity into the transpersonal realm, somewhere between our everyday identity and Spirit. The soul would thus be much larger than our everyday self and have transpersonal dimensions, but still maintain a sense of separateness. In the highest states of consciousness, the soul dissolves in the Absolute – Brahman, the Tao, Buddha, the Cosmic Christ, Ketar, the Great Spirit – whatever name we choose for this principle.

**In your book, *When the Impossible Happens*, you claim that during many non-ordinary states , the individual goes back to his/her moment of birth. Why is this moment so decisive for the individual's behavior during his/her life?**

Reliving of one's birth is a common occurrence in non-ordinary states of consciousness. I am astounded that academic psychiatry does not see this challenging situation of extreme physical and emotional stress lasting many hours or even several days as a psychotrauma and instead puts lot of emphasis on nuances of nursing, which is an incomparably more subtle situation. The memories of prenatal disturbances and of the discomfort experienced during birth constitute a major repository of difficult emotions and sensations of all kinds and constitute a potential source of a wide variety of emotional and psychosomatic symptoms and syndromes. It is therefore not surprising that reliving and integration of the memory of birth can significantly alleviate many different disorders – from claustrophobia, suicidal depression, and destructive and self-destructive tendencies to psychogenic asthma, psychosomatic pains, and migraine headaches. It can also improve the rapport with one's mother and have positive influence on other interpersonal relationships

The usual reason for denying the possibility of birth memory is that the cerebral cortex of the newborn is not mature enough to experience and record this event. More specifically, the cortical neurons are not yet completely covered with protective sheaths of a fatty substance balled *myelin*. Surprisingly, the same argument is not used to deny the existence and importance of memories from the time of nursing, a period that begins

immediately after birth. The psychological significance of the experiences in the oral period and even “bonding,” the exchange of looks between the mother and child immediately after birth, is generally acknowledged by psychiatrists and obstetricians.

The myelination argument makes no sense and is in conflict with scientific evidence of various kind. It is well-known that memory exists in organisms that do not have a cerebral cortex at all let alone a myelinated one. In 2001, American neuroscientist of Austrian origin, Erik Kandel, received a Nobel prize in physiology for his research of memory mechanisms of the sea-slug *Aplysia*, an organism incomparably more primitive than the newborn child. The assertion that the newborn is not aware of being born and is not capable to form a memory of this event is also in sharp conflict with extensive fetal research showing extreme sensitivity of the fetus already in the prenatal stage.

## **HOLOTROPIC BREATHWORK**

**In which ancient cultures you know was hyperventilation a current practice and a mean of access to the so-called transcending?**

Various breathing techniques have been used since time immemorial for religious and healing purposes. In ancient and preindustrial societies, breath and breathing have played a very important role in cosmology, mythology, and philosophy, as well as an important tool in ritual and spiritual practice. Since earliest history, virtually every major

psychospiritual system seeking to comprehend human nature has viewed breath as a crucial link between the world, the human body, the psyche, and the spirit. This is also reflected in many languages: the same word is used for air, breath and spirit – the Indian prana, Greek pneuma, Chinese chi, Japanese ki, Hebrew ruach, Latin spiritus, Hawaiian ha, and many others.

It has also been known for centuries that it is possible to influence consciousness by techniques that involve breathing. The procedures that have been used for this purpose by various ancient and non-Western cultures cover a very wide range from drastic interference with breathing to subtle and sophisticated exercises of various spiritual traditions. Thus the original form of baptism practiced by the Essenes involved forced submersion of the initiate under water for an extended period of time. This resulted in a powerful experience of death and rebirth. In some other groups, the neophytes were half-choked by smoke, by strangulation, or by compression of the carotid arteries.

Profound changes in consciousness can be induced by both extremes in the breathing rate, hyperventilation and prolonged withholding of breath, as well as by using them in an alternating fashion. Very sophisticated and advanced methods of this kind can be found in the ancient Indian science of breath, or *pranayama*. Specific techniques involving intense breathing or withholding of breath are also part of various exercises in Kundalini Yoga, Siddha Yoga, the Tibetan Vajrayana, Sufi practice, Burmese Buddhist and Taoist meditation, and many others. More subtle techniques, which emphasize special awareness in relation to breathing rather than changes of the respiratory dynamics, have a prominent place in Buddhism. Anapanasati

is a basic form of meditation taught by the Buddha; it means literally “mindfulness of breathing.” Buddha’s teaching of anapana was based on his experience of using it as a means of achieving his own enlightenment.

In the last several decades, Western therapists rediscovered the healing potential of breath and developed techniques that utilize it, such as Leonard Orr’s rebirthing or Gay Hendricks Radiance Breathwork. My wife Christina and myself have experimented in the context of our monthlong seminars at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, with various approaches involving breathing. These included both breathing exercises from ancient spiritual traditions under the guidance of Indian and Tibetan teachers and techniques developed by Western therapists. Each of these approaches has a specific emphasis and uses breath in a different way. In our own search for an effective method of using the healing potential of breath, we tried to simplify this process as much as possible. The result was what we call holotropic breathwork.

### **What is holotropic breathwork?**

Holotropic breathwork is a method that uses the healing and transformative potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness. It induces these states by a combination of very simple means - accelerated breathing, evocative music, and a technique of bodywork that helps to release residual bioenergetic and emotional blocks. It provides access to very deep levels of the unconscious psyche, such as repressed memories from childhood and infancy, birth and pre-natal period, and even an entire spectrum of experiences we call transpersonal – mystical states, past life experiences,

encounters with archetypal figures, visits to mythological realms of the psyche, and so on. In its theory and practice, holotropic breathwork brings together and integrates various elements from ancient and aboriginal traditions, Eastern spiritual philosophies, and Western depth psychology.

Maybe I should say a few words about the name “holotropic,” which some people find puzzling. This composite word means literally "moving in the direction of wholeness" (from the Greek *holos* = whole and *trepein* = moving in the direction of something). The word holotropic is a neologism, but it is related to a commonly known term *heliotropism* – the property of plants to always move in the direction of the sun.

This name suggests something that might come as a surprise to an average Westerner - that in our everyday state of consciousness we are not whole and identify with only a small fraction of who we really are. Experiences in non-ordinary states of consciousness have the potential to help us recognize that we are not “skin-encapsulated egos” – as British philosopher and writer Alan Watts called it – and that, in the last analysis, we are commensurate with the cosmic creative principle itself. Or that – using the statement by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, French paleontologist and philosopher – “we are not human beings having spiritual experiences, we are spiritual beings having human experiences.”

This astonishing idea is not new. In the ancient Indian Upanishads, the answer to the question: “Who am I?” is “Tat tvam asi.” This succinct Sanskrit sentence means literally: “Thou art That,” or “You are Godhead.” It suggests that we are not “namarupa” – name and form (body/ego), but that

our deepest identity is with a divine spark in our innermost being (Atman) which is ultimately identical with the supreme universal principle (Brahman). Experiences in holotropic breathwork can take us to the recognition of our cosmic identity, sometimes in small steps, other times in quantum leaps.

### **How have you developed the holotropic breathwork technique?**

In 1973 I was offered advance royalties by Viking Press to write a book on psychedelics. I left the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center and my friend Michael Murphy invited me to the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California as Scholar-in-Residence. I was conducting workshops at Esalen in exchange for room and board. In the workshops I talked about the research of non-ordinary states of consciousness (or holotropic states as I call them) and its profound implications for psychology and psychiatry. Participants in these workshops kept telling me: “We hear about all these interesting experiences; can’t we do something to actually have them?” When I was doing psychedelic research, I observed that spontaneous faster breathing intensified the experience. So my wife Christina started experimenting with breathing; we combined it with music, and bodywork (we had used both already in psychedelic research) and with some elements from yoga. In the process, we also discovered that it has many advantages if people work in pairs, alternating in roles of breathers and sitters.

### **Which purposes is holotropic breathwork recommended for?**



Like the work with non-ordinary states of consciousness of any kind, holotropic breathwork can be used for many purposes – for personal growth, spiritual practice, healing of emotional and psychosomatic disorders, for artistic inspiration and cultivation of creativity. We have seen over the years numerous instances when participants in the workshops and the training were able to break out of depression that had lasted several years, overcome various phobias, free themselves from consuming irrational feelings, and radically improve their self-confidence and self-esteem. We have also witnessed on many occasions disappearance of severe psychosomatic pains, including migraine headaches, and radical and lasting improvements or even complete clearing of psychogenic asthma. Participants in our training or workshops often favorably compared their progress in several holotropic sessions to years of verbal therapy.

**You are also considered one of the founders of transpersonal psychology. What is it about and what makes it different from the other psychology tracks?**

The famous American psychologist Abraham Maslow called transpersonal psychology the Fourth Force in psychology, following behaviorism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and humanistic psychology. In the first half of the century, American and European psychology and psychiatry were dominated exclusively by behaviorism and psychoanalysis. Humanistic psychology, founded by Abraham Maslow and Anthony Sutich, arose as a reaction to the inadequacies and limitations of the first two forces.

Humanistic psychology corrected the tendency of behaviorism to ignore consciousness and introspection and formulate theories about the human psyche exclusively from the observation of behavior, particularly behavior of animals, such as rats and pigeons. Humanistic psychology also emphasized the need to move beyond the tendency of Freudian analysis to draw all the data from the study of psychopathology and it included normal and supernormal individuals as research subjects.

The focus of humanistic studies were higher human values and the tendency to pursue them, Maslow's "metavalues" and "metamotivations," leading to what Maslow called "self-actualization" and "self-realization." Humanistic psychology also provided a broad umbrella for the development of a new revolutionary form of psychotherapies, called "experiential therapies," such as Gestalt practice, primal therapy, orbioenergetics.

Transpersonal psychology then added yet another important dimension, that is, recognition of spirituality as a legitimate and important aspect of the human psyche. This is a radical difference from academic psychology that dismisses spirituality of any form and any level of sophistication as superstition, primitive magical thinking, emotional immaturity, or pathology. Another important aspect of transpersonal psychology is that it studies the entire spectrum of human experience, including non-ordinary states of consciousness, particularly various forms of mystical experiences.

Transpersonal psychology was deeply influenced by the experiences and observations from the study of non-ordinary states of consciousness,

such as those that occur during shamanic practices, aboriginal rites of passages, the ancient mysteries of death and rebirth, psychedelic sessions, and various forms of spiritual practice (including different schools of yoga, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Christian mysticism, etc.). And this is where my own work comes in. My own contribution to transpersonal psychology (besides giving it the name “transpersonal”) came from four decades of systematic exploration of the therapeutic, transformative, and evolutionary potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness.

### **What are the therapeutic methods of the transpersonal psychology?**

Therapeutic methods of transpersonal psychology cover a very wide spectrum and range from ancient and aboriginal practices, such as shamanic work and various forms of meditation to verbal psychotherapy, hypnosis, experiential therapies, and work with psychedelic substances. Frances Vaughan, pioneer in transpersonal psychotherapy pointed out that what defines a transpersonal therapist is not the method he or she is using or the content of therapeutic sessions, but the large context. The content of the session is determined by what the client is bringing into therapy at any particular time. A transpersonal therapist has a large enough model of the psyche that he or she can work with the client on biographical, perinatal, as well as transpersonal issues.

### **CLINICAL PRACTICE AND NEW PROJECTS**

**After years dedicated to this work, which was your most amazing finding? Why?**

I could not single out one particularly amazing finding, but can name a few of them. First it was the vastness of the human psyche, of which Western psychology just barely scratches the surface. This was connected with the realization that some of the systems that Western science dismisses as primitive or even delusional, such as shamanism, mysticism, and the Eastern spiritual philosophies have in many ways much more accurate understanding of consciousness, human psyche, and the nature of reality than materialistic science. Another great surprise was the discovery that spirituality is a legitimate and important dimension of the human psyche and existence; my scientific training dismissed spirituality as reflecting lack of education, superstition, primitive magical thinking, or even serious psychopathology. And the last straw was the surprising discovery that astrology is not a ridiculous pseudoscience, but when correctly understood and used, it is an extremely useful tool.

**How many patients have you attended to? What have been their major issues? How has been their recovery? Is there any standard for such recoveries which makes them worth highlighting?**

I have conducted during my professional life over 3,000 psychedelic sessions, about 35,000 sessions of holotropic breathwork (all of them in groups, some of which had more than 300 participants), and have worked with many persons undergoing spontaneous psychospiritual crises, or “spiritual emergencies,” as my wife and I call them. All the work with

psychedelic therapy at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Centers in alcoholics, narcotic drug addicts, and terminal cancer patients were controlled study with a follow-up. They all have been published in professional journals and had quite remarkable results. Our own observations from breathwork were not done in the context of controlled studies, but there exist many clinical papers and dissertations written by people whom we trained.

**Among the cases you have followed up, is there any one which called your attention the most? In case of positive answer, which one and why?**

I cannot think of any one case that I would highlight. I have described many such cases in my book *When the Impossible Happens: Adventures in Non-Ordinary realities* that will soon appear in a Brazilian edition.

**How has the academic field received your researches?**

My work has been received very enthusiastically in certain scientific circles. Surprisingly, the first positive responses came primarily from quantum-relativistic physicists, from people like Fritjof Capra, Fred Wolf, Saul Paul Sirag, Nick Herbert, David Bohm, and more recently Amit Goswami. These scientists are aware of the fact that the old monistic materialistic philosophy and the Cartesian-Newtonian image of the universe dominating academic science are hopelessly outdated.

My ideas have also been very positively accepted by avant-garde scientists representing various other disciplines of the new paradigm – biology, holographic approach to the brain, systems theory, thanatology, parapsychology, etc. Most of the resistance comes from the academic circles that are generally closed to all these new currents in science. Many traditional scientists hang on to the outdated paradigms in a way that can be called “scientism” rather than science. Their attitude resembles fundamentalist approach to religions; they have already made up their mind about what the world is like and are completely impervious to evidence of any kind and scope.

There is something that people in the transpersonal movement find very exciting. In the last several decades, whenever there has been some scientific breakthrough, it always proved to be a shocking surprise for the representatives of the old thinking, but has been welcomed and embraced by transpersonal psychologists as compatible with their own findings. This happened with philosophical implications of quantum-relativistic physics, Karl Pribram’s holographic model of the brain, David Bohm’s theory of holomovement, Ilya Prigogine’s theory of dissipative structures, Rupert Sheldrake’s concept of morphogenetic fields, Ervin Laszlo’s psi-field, and many others. If this trend continues, it should not last a very long time till the new thinking gains sufficient ground.

So far the most meaningful appreciation for my work did not come from the academic circles, but from a very remarkable writer and inspired statesman, former Czech president Vaclav Havel. Later this year, on October 5, on his birthday, I will receive in Prague the prestigious Vision 92 Award

from the Dagmar and Vaclav Havel Foundation. Like many people all over the world, I hold Vaclav Havel in great esteem and consider it a tremendous honor to be acknowledged by him in this way.

**What sort of research are you currently carrying out? What is it intended for?**

It seems to be my destiny, or karma if you will, to get involved in controversial areas. At present, I have been focusing on what I consider currently to be the cutting edge of research – a combination of the work with non-ordinary states of consciousness, archetypal astrology, and astrology. My close friend of thirty years, Rick Tarnas, and I have been doing research in this area almost as long as we have known each other and have been teaching courses on this subject (entitled Psyche and Cosmos) at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco. It is impossible to do justice to this complex topic in the context of this interview, I would like to refer the interested readers to Rick's brilliant books, *Passion of the Western Mind and Cosmos* and *Psyche; Intimations of a New World View*, to make their own judgment about this explosive and controversial subject.

**In your opinion, how can spirituality contribute for helping science to understand its enigmas?**

I see spirituality and science as two complementary approaches to the understanding of existence that are not or should not be in conflict. As Ken Wilber pointed out: "If there seems to be a conflict between science and

religion, we are probably dealing with “bogus science” and “bogus religion” (pseudoscience and false religion). The most important contribution that spirituality can contribute to science is to provide deep insights that can be subjected to scientific testing. The late Willis Harman gave in his remarkable book *Higher Creativity* a large number of examples, where scientists solved in non-ordinary states problems, which they could not solve in their everyday state of mind. or conceived ideas for remarkable scientific projects, including some that were later awarded a Nobel Prize. Among others, Francis Crick solved the problem of the DNA molecule when he was under the influence of LSD.

**How do you see the future of psychiatry? What kind of science’s changes do you think you will help to contribute with your researches?**

This is as much a wish as a prediction; after all these years of consciousness research I cannot obviously help being somewhat biased. I see the future of psychiatry in transpersonal psychology, more specifically a combination of the work with non-ordinary states, archetypal psychology, and astrology. And I believe that we are rapidly approaching a point when transpersonal psychology and the new paradigm in science will be integrated into a comprehensive scientific world view.

**How many books have you had published?**

This is a very easy question: twenty books and over 140 articles in professional journals. Here is a list of the books for your information:



1. **Realms of the Human Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research.** Viking Press, New York, 1975. Paperback: E. P. Dutton, New York, 1976.
2. **The Human Encounter with Death.** E. P. Dutton, New York, 1977 (with Joan Halifax).
3. **LSD Psychotherapy.** Hunter House, Pomona, California, 1980.
4. **Beyond Death: Gates of Consciousness.** Thames & Hudson, London, 1980 (with Christina Grof).
5. **Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science.** State University New York (SUNY) Press, 1984 (ed.).
6. **Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death, and Transcendence in Psychotherapy.** State University of New York (SUNY) Press, New York, 1985.
7. **The Adventure of Self-Discovery.** State University New York (SUNY) Press, 1987.
8. **Human Survival and Consciousness Evolution.** State University New York (SUNY) Press, 1988 (ed.).
9. **Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis.** J. P. Tarcher, Los Angeles, 1989, (ed. with Christina Grof).

10. **The Stormy Search for the Self: A Guide to Personal Growth Through Transformational Crises.** J. P. Tarcher, Los Angeles, 1991 (with Christina Grof).
11. **The Holotropic Mind: The Three Levels of Conscious-ness and How They Shape Our Lives.** Harper Collins (1992), (with Hal Zina Bennett).
12. **Books of the Dead: Manuals for Living and Dying.** Thames and Hudson, 1994.
13. **The Cosmic Game: Explorations of the Frontiers of Human Consciousness.** State University New York Press, Albany, N.Y., 1998.
14. **The Transpersonal Vision: The Healing Potential of Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness.** Sounds True, Boulder, CO, 1998.
15. **The Consciousness Revolution: A Transatlantic Dialogue** (two days with Stanislav Grof, Ervin Laszlo, and Peter Russell). Elf Rock Productions, London and Las Vegas. 2003.
16. **Psychology of the Future: Lessons from Modern Consciousness Research.** State University of New York Press, Albany, N.Y., 2000

17. **Call of the Jaguar.** A science fiction novel available currently only in Russian translation (Institute of Transpersonal Psychology Press and K. Kravchuk Publishing House, Moscow, 2001) and Danish translation.
  
18. **When the Impossible Happens: Adventures in Non-Ordinary Realities.** Sounds True, Louisville, CO, 2006.
  
19. **The Ultimate Journey: Consciousness and the Mystery of Death,** MAPS, Sarasota, FL, 2006.
  
20. **New Perspectives in Psychiatry, Psychology, and Psychotherapy: Observations from Modern Consciousness Research.** Moravia Press, Prague, 2007.

The above books have been translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Russian, Czech, Hungarian, Romanian, Polish, Bulgarian, Latvian, Estonian; Greek, Turkish, Japanese, Chinese. and Korean.

### **What are your next projects?**

I am fascinated by the amazing progress of special effects technology in cinematography. I would love to see it used to portray mystical experiences rather than dinosaurs or aliens destroying cities. I have some initial experience in this area. In 1982, my wife Christina and I were invited by the special effects wizard Doug Trumbull (2001, Blade Runner, Close

Encounters, and others) as consultants for special effects in the Hollywood sci-fi movie *Brainstorm*. The original intention – to use the best special effects available at the time and the scientific knowledge about non-ordinary states of consciousness to convincingly portray the death experience – was severely compromised by the untimely tragic death of Natalie Wood and the ensuing withdrawal of financial support by MGM. As a result of this tragic circumstance, there was not enough money to create a high quality facsimile of holotropic states, the part of the movie we were most interested and involved in. The film was finished and released, but was severely compromised.

Since the time of this exciting but failed experiment, I have followed with great interest the rapid progress of special effects technology. I have been very impressed by its astonishing accomplishments and excited about its enormous potential. However, I have been equally profoundly disappointed by the fact that this extraordinary artistry has been used almost exclusively for portraying scenes of violence and destruction. I became convinced that the nature and quality of special effects that have become available in recent years by the advances of digital imaging could open up radically new and exciting avenues in movie-making. There is no doubt in my mind that a marriage of consciousness research, transpersonal psychology, and modern special effects technology would make it possible not only to convincingly portray mystical experiences on the screen, but probably actually induce them in many of the spectators.

I felt strongly that movies using this strategy could become what is technically called “entheogenic” - inducing spiritual experiences (literally

“awakening the divine within”). They would thus transcend the framework of entertainment and become important instruments in transformation and evolution of human consciousness, individually as well as collectively on a large scale.