

## The Cosmic Womb

Stan and Christina Grof  
and the Counsels of Spiritual Emergence (1973-1987)

Finally, as the time of his death approaches he sees a bright light, and being unaccustomed to it at the time of his death he is perplexed and confused. He sees all sorts of things such as are seen in dreams, because his mind is confused. He sees his (future) father and mother making love, and seeing them a thought crosses his mind, a perversity (*viparyasa*) arises in him. If he is going to be reborn as a man he sees himself making love with his mother and being hindered by his father; or if he is going to be reborn as a woman, he sees himself making love with his father and being hindered by his mother. It is at that moment that the Intermediate Existence is destroyed and life and consciousness arise and causality begins once more to work. It is like the imprint made by a die; the die is then destroyed but the pattern has been imprinted.

*Saddharma-smrityupasthana Sutra* 34 (6<sup>th</sup> century CE)<sup>1</sup>

During a session in which he alternately experienced episodes of “good” and “bad” womb, he felt that he developed new insights into the understanding of demons from several cultures—in particular, India and Tibet. He suddenly saw a striking relationship between the state of mind of the Buddha sitting on the lotus in deep meditation and that of an embryo in a good womb. The demons surrounding the peaceful Buddha figure on many Indian and Tibetan religious paintings appeared to him to be representatives of various forms of disturbances

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Arthur Waley in Edward Conze et al., *Buddhist Texts through the Ages* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer Ltd., 1954)

of the intrauterine existence. . . . On another level, he was simultaneously experiencing episodes that appeared to be past-incarnation memories. It seemed as if elements of bad karma entered his present life in the form of disturbances of his embryonal existence and as negative experiences during the period when he was nursed. He saw the experiences of the “bad womb” and “bad breast” as transformation points between the realm of the karmic law and the phenomenal world governed by natural laws as we know them.

a modern LSD session report from *Realms of the Human Unconscious*

In a move clearly designed to protect other cultures from psychological analysis, cultural critics of psychoanalytic thought often claim that its insights are applicable only to western culture, where, or so they assume, all of its insights were first born and developed most fully: only westerners, we are asked to believe, have something like an unconscious, an oedipal complex, or omnipresent and constantly morphing libidinal drives. Ancient Asian texts such as the first passage above, however, make a virtual mockery of such a position. In this Buddhist near-death experience (which is really more of a near-birth experience), translated into the Chinese from the Sanskrit around 542 CE, the author advances a theory of what we today call gender identity that is remarkably congruent with the Freudian one. Freud, of course, would locate these processes in the psychosexual stage of late infancy and childhood, whereas the Buddhist text “out-Freuds Freud” and locates them much further back in the Intermediate Existence, that is, in that marginal realm after the soul has died in its previous life but before it has taken on another body in its future life. But the classical oedipal structure of this process (with the child loving one parent and feeling aggression toward the other) is nevertheless as obvious to the reader as it is confounding to the cultural relativist. Note also that, according to this Buddhist text, the soul’s witnessing of the primal scene is not some minor accident or detail without consequence—on the contrary, its primordial “imprinting” is permanent for the course of a life, *even if* its source or “die” has been destroyed or, as we would say today, has become unconscious. Moreover, it is precisely this same voyeuristic event and these same sexual and aggressive drives that set the wheels of causality and existence into motion again. They, in effect, actually create the personal reality of this particular human life. This was not a text or a

culture that took sexual desire (even that of a pre-fetal soul!) and the inter-familial dynamics of what Freud would later call “the family romance” lightly.

As it turns out, these exact same cross-cultural patterns were noticed and perhaps even experienced by those who were taking psychedelics while they read Buddhist and Hindu scriptures in the early counter culture. Leary, Metzner, and Alpert, for example, in their psychedelic manual based on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* comment on the uncanny correspondences between Freud’s oedipal theory and ancient Buddhist descriptions of this same *bardo* or “intermediate state.” Indeed, they actually quote Jung to the effect that Freud’s psychoanalysis constitutes the first western theory to map out the psychic territory that was much earlier explored by Tantric Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> The hermeneutic would come full circle when later Buddhologists would note, for example, that the famous *yab-yum* statues of Tibetan Buddhism (see plate X) are imbued with similar oedipal dynamics, since the copulating Buddha-consort pair is actually referred to in the culture as *yab-yum*, that is, “father-mother”: “The terms are rich with suggestions (never made explicit in the tradition) of copulating with one’s parent,” Tibetologist Jeffrey Hopkins observes in his own meditation on the intimate ontological relations between orgasm, reason, and enlightenment within the tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Oedipal reincarnations, copulating parental statues, and orgasmic states of reason are just three of literally thousands of reasons why writers ranging from Romain Rolland, C.G. Jung, and Alan Watts to Robert Paul, Sudhir Kakar, Gananath Obeyesekere, Wendy Doniger, June Campbell, Bernard Faure, and myself have repeatedly noted over the years that there are real and theoretically important cross-cultural correspondences between Western psychological theory and Asian religious traditions, particularly when the former is defined as psychoanalytic and the latter as Tantric.<sup>4</sup> Similar, if very differently expressed, psychoanalytic-Tantric patterns

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Hopkins, *Sex, Orgasm, and the Mind of Clear Light: The Sixty-four Arts of Gay Male Love* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1998), 118, n. 59. See also Robert Paul, *The Tibetan Symbolic Order: Psychoanalytic Explorations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), and June Campbell, *Traveler in Space: In Search of Female Identity in Tibetan Buddhism* (New York, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> See the bibliography for references to each of these scholars’ writings on the subject. For a summary of this tradition with respect to psychoanalysis and Hinduism, see my “Why the Tantrika Is a Hero: Kali in the Psychoanalytic Tradition,” in Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal, eds., *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). For a collection of representative essays and a

correspondences have been central to Esalen as well, even if their profound intellectual indebtedness to Freud has often been downplayed for the sake of a more Jungian expression. We have already had some occasion to explore this psychoanalytic stream in the orgone of the renegade Reich and his immense influence on somatics practitioners at Esalen. But the matter hardly ends there. It was also central to the work and writing of Stanislav Grof, the Czech psychiatrist who has worked for almost fifty years now, fourteen of them on the grounds of Esalen, to integrate the nonordinary states catalyzed by psychedelics into our modern psychological maps of the mind. In Stan Grof, Tantric Asia, psychedelics, and psychoanalysis all meet within over 6,000 clinically regulated psychedelic sessions to form a corpus of writing and a body of scientific and therapeutic work that constitute some of the most intellectually developed, emotionally provocative, and aesthetically stunning displays of Esalen's nonordinary history.

*Albert's Historic Bike Ride, the CIA's Counter Culture, and Stan's Freudian Crisis*

This particular story actually begins, not in Big Sur in the early 60's, but in pre-war Europe in the 30's. There, a 37-year-old chemist named Albert Hoffman working at the Sandoz Pharmaceutical Laboratory on the Rhine in Basil, Switzerland, was in the business of synthesizing ergot analogs, that is, human-made compounds that bore strong chemical similarities to the alkaloids naturally occurring in the ergot spore, a tiny mushroom that grows on different types of grain. Many of these compounds turned out to have useful medicinal properties, and—in a small but fascinating detail that will become more significant below—there was some interest in exploring these compounds for their circulatory and contractual effects on the uterus, that spasming female organ of orgasm, pregnancy, and child-birth. The twenty-fifth compound in this laboratory series was synthesized in 1938 and was lab coded—not very imaginatively—LSD-25. It caused experimental animals to become restless and created “strong uterine-constricting effects.” But that was about it. Or so it seemed.

Accordingly, the compound was set aside until 1943, when Hofmann received what he later called “a peculiar presentiment.” In essence, he felt that LSD-25 was worth looking at again, so on the afternoon of April 16, 1943, he resynthesized the compound in his lab with the

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bibliography on the same, see T.G. Vaidyanathan and Jeffrey J. Kripal, eds., *Vishnu on Freud's Desk: A Reader in Psychoanalysis and Hinduism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

intention of submitting its chemical portfolio to Sandoz again. During this work, however, it seems he accidentally ingested a miniscule small amount of the substance. He became “strangely inebriated,” the shape of time became distorted, and fantastic colors and shapes began to appear before his eyes. His psychedelic bike-ride home is now the stuff of legend, lore, and poster art (see plate X), as is the essential humor of his choice a few days later to submit himself to what he considered to be a ridiculously safe amount of the substance: 250 micrograms (millionths of a gram). Later, researchers would learn that 100 micrograms is a full dose for humans. Hoffman, in other words, even in his excessive pharmacological care, was massively off the mark. He had discovered the most powerful psychedelic in human history, a full four thousand times stronger than mescaline 9 ((this is probably an exaggeration; where did you get this? Mescaline has been used in doses from 100 mg to 500mg, seldom more; a comparable range for LSD has been 100mcg to 500mcg, occasionally more).<sup>5</sup> Nothing this strong existed in nature. But it did now.<sup>6</sup>

Once it came on the research market, LSD-25 was used extensively in the 50’s and 60’s throughout Europe and America for therapy and research, often with the initial assumption that it could evoke a “model psychosis” and so provide psychiatrists with a unique opportunity to get at the chemical origins and mechanisms of mental disease. In a bizarre twist of events in the late 40’s and early 50’s, the CIA discovered the drug, partly through a false rumor that the Soviets had purchased a massive amount of the stuff and were planning to use it as a weapon of war. The rumor was completely false (no such stockpiles existed), but now the CIA itself became acutely interested in exploring the mind-control potentials of the substance and began to generously fund research projects at various American university hospitals. A series of quite remarkable cultural events, criminal activities, and human follies followed, from the use of hypnosis and drugs to elicit information from Agency operatives, students, mental patients, and prisoners, to the setting up of a house of prostitution to test LSD on its patrons and the tragic suicide of one of its top scientists whom had been given the drug (he ran through a tenth-story window). Many of these events were later documented by former CIA employee and later

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<sup>5</sup> I am relying here on Peter Stafford, *Psychedelics* (Oakland: Ronin, 2003), but the same story is available in numerous other publications.

<sup>6</sup> For Hoffman’s reflections on this story, see his *LSD: My Problem Child: Reflections on Sacred Drugs, Mysticism, and Science* (Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1983)

Esalen associate John Marks in his best-selling *The Search for the “Manchurian Candidate.”*<sup>7</sup> As Marks documents, the CIA, after considerable effort and money, eventually concluded that LSD was useless for such ends, but in the meantime the control-obsessed secret organization had, quite ironically, helped fuel what would quickly become a very public American counter culture. LSD-25 was slipping fast into the broader culture, primarily through CIA-funded psychiatrists like Dr. Harold Abramson, who seemed to revel in sharing the stuff with university intellectuals (the Gnostic Academy again). Intellectuals, artists, and religious explorers, it turned out, were both constitutionally suited and culturally poised to make the most of this still secret substance and the esoteric society that was quickly forming around it. Michael Hollingshead was more influential than most here; he distributed the stuff to, among others, Paul McCartney, Keith Richards, Frank Barron, Huston Smith, Timothy Leary (who “took a tablespoon and a half from Hollingshead’s mayonnaise jar of LSD cut with sugar-icing—and didn’t talk for five days”<sup>8</sup>), Richard Alpert, Ralph Metzner, and Alan Watts. Thus the chemistry of the counter culture began. Significantly, Barron, Smith, Leary, Alpert, and Watts would all play important roles at Esalen.

Stanislav Grof, however, did not enter the field through the mayonnaise jar of Michael Hollingshead. He entered it through the Czechoslovakian psychiatric establishment and Sigmund Freud. Turned on by Freud’s *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* in college, the young Grof entered medical school and became an orthodox Freudian analyst. In 1956, just a few months after graduating from medical school, he volunteered for an experiment with LSD in the Psychiatric Department of the School of Medicine in Prague under the direction of Dr. George Roubíček. The experience was quite literally mind-blowing, and it permanently shattered his Freudian materialism with one fell swoop. Later work with thousands of LSD sessions would consistently and dramatically confirm the psychological processes Freud had so famously mapped out, but they now took their own place, for Grof anyway, within an immeasurably richer and deeper cosmic consciousness. Grof would dedicate the rest of his life

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<sup>7</sup> John Marks, *The Search for the “Manchurian Candidate”*: *The CIA and Mind Control* (New York: Times Books, 1979). See also Martin A. Lee and Bruce Schlain, *Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD, and the Sixties Rebellion* (New York: Grove Press, 1985). John Marks would later come to Esalen, experience something of a life conversion there, and dedicate his life to peace-making. He is now based in Jerusalem as director of Common Ground, an NGO and think-tank dedicated to exploring political reconciliation and creative public policy initiatives across the globe.

<sup>8</sup> Stafford, *Psychedelics*, 50-51.

to understanding, personally and philosophically, the nonordinary realms of “mind manifest” Hoffman’s magic drug had initiated him into.

His first response was a purely professional and scientific one. He set out to study the psychiatric effects and possible uses of LSD in the research institutes in Prague. He traveled to London in 1964 for a conference on LSD, where he met an American psychologist and family therapist by the name of Virginia Satir. The next year, he traveled to the States for a conference in Amityville, Long Island. During this 1965 trip, Satir invited him to the West Coast and introduced him to the community at Esalen. There he gave an impromptu workshop and felt a strong and immediate connection to Michael Murphy. He returned to the States again in 1967, this time to take up a two-year fellowship at John Hopkins University School of Medicine under Dr. Joel Elkes. It was during these two years (1967-1969) that Grof began to draft his first book on his LSD researches, the psychoanalytically entitled *Realms of the Human Unconscious*.<sup>9</sup>

Joel Elkes originally invited Grof to start a psychedelic research program at Johns Hopkins. However, a week before Grof’s arrival in Baltimore, Maimon Cohen had published his article on the effect of LSD on the chromosome that started a national hysteria about the potential deleterious effects of this substance on heredity. Under these circumstances, Elkes decided not to go ahead with his plan. By fortunate coincidence, the last surviving psychedelic research program happened to be conducted in Baltimore’s Spring Grove Hospital. Instead of launching a new program, Grof joined the Spring Grove staff. Here in Baltimore he also underwent a shattering of the space-time continuum within a high-dose psychedelic session at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. As Grof considers this event to be one of the most extraordinary and important of his own inner life, his description of it is worth describing at some length. Early in the session he had the following thought: “It appeared to me rather obvious that there are no limits whatsoever in the realm of spirit and that time and space are arbitrary constructs of the psyche.”<sup>10</sup> Grof then decided to test his newfound conviction and travel to his parents’ Prague apartment. He imagined himself flying through space in the proper direction. He senses that he was moving at an incredible speed, but he was in fact going nowhere. He realized that such imagined flight was still bound by a spatial mindset and that it

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<sup>9</sup> Stanislav Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Grof, *The Cosmic Game*, 89. The full account of this trip appears on pp. 89-91 and 194-196.

might be better to simply imagine that Baltimore and Prague were the same place. At once he found himself inside his parents' television set! This he recognized as a symbolic spoof on his still unconquered assumptions about what was possible (a television signal, after all, can travel these sorts of distances easily). Once he could renounce this second dysfunctional frame of mind, the television set turned inside out and he found himself standing in his parents' apartment. He walked around, found his parents sleeping, and noticed a clock on the wall that correctly registered the six-hour time difference. But suddenly he became very anxious, as he felt no drug effect and he couldn't tell, at all, if he was really in Prague and his Baltimore existence was a dream, or whether he was actually in Baltimore and this was an hallucination produced by the LSD. He thought immediately of Chuang-Tzu, the Chinese philosopher who once famously asked whether he was a man imagining that he was a butterfly or a butterfly imagining that he was a man.

Grof decided to perform a simple experiment. He would take a picture off the wall and then ask his parents in a letter whether anything unusual happened that night. As he reached for the picture, however, he felt great anxiety. Images of black magicians, gambling casinos, and high-level government and military meetings flashed before his mind's eye. He realized the terror of what he was about to do: after all, if he could transcend space and time so easily, so could others, and then what? And where would this stop? He could make millions in the casinos and psychically spy on government officials around the world. As we shall soon see, he would not be the last to entertain the latter idea, and others, including the U.S. government, would spend millions exploring similar possibilities. But Grof in 1967 was not so sure: "If I could get confirmation that it was possible to manipulate the physical environment at a distance of several thousand miles, my whole universe would collapse as a result of this one experiment, and I would find myself in a state of utter metaphysical confusion. The world as I had known it would not exist any more."<sup>11</sup> In the end, with the world itself at stake, he decided against the experiment. To this day, he is not certain whether he had truly transcended the space-time continuum or whether he had simply had a very interesting drug trip.

In 1968, the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia. Grof was ordered by the authorities to return to Prague in the flesh. He decided to disobey them and stay in the States. It was a fateful decision. He would live in exile for almost twenty years until the liberation of Eastern Europe.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 195-196.

When he did finally return to his home country, it was to search for a proper venue for an international conference on transpersonal psychology to be held in 1993 under the aegis of his friend and then President of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, whose brother, Ivan Havel, had helped nurture an underground interest in things transpersonal and mystical throughout the Soviet era.<sup>12</sup>

In 1969 when his fellowship ended, Grof was offered the positions of Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins and Chief of Psychiatric Research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center that he held until 1973. That year, he went to New York City to sign a contract for his first book, *Realms of the Human Unconscious* to be published in the Esalen Book Series that Stuart Miller had arranged with Viking Press.<sup>13</sup> During the same visit, he was invited to a party in the house of Bob and Leni Schwartz, Michael Murphy, who happened to be among the guests, offered him to move to Esalen as resident scholar and write the book there. He accepted and left the East Coast for the West Coast. At Esalen, now a resident scholar, he finished the text of *Realms* and later wrote *The Human Encounter with Death* (co-authored with Joan Halifax) and a series of other books.

### *Freud on LSD (and Cocaine)*

“If I am the father of LSD then Stan is the godfather,” Hoffman once noted. “Nobody has contributed as much as Stan for the development of my problem child.”<sup>14</sup> Certainly the cartography of consciousness that Grof developed with the help of over 4,000 clinical sessions or “trips” on LSD, psilocybine, mescaline, dipropyl-tryptamine (DPT), and methylene-dioxy-amphetamine (MDA) and later with over 30,000 sessions of Holotropic Breathwork<sup>15</sup> is an

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<sup>12</sup> Stanislav Grof, *The Cosmic Game: Explorations of the Frontiers of Human Consciousness* (Albany: SUNY, 1998), 92-93.

<sup>13</sup> Mike: When was this series created and by whom? How many titles appeared in it? A Stuart Miller project?

<sup>14</sup> Quoted with a 1999 photo of the two researchers in Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy*, 80h.

<sup>15</sup> Holotropic Breathwork is a type of group breathing meditation spontaneously developed by Stan and Christina Grof in the mid 70's at Esalen when Stan through his back out gardening and couldn't run a scheduled seminar as usual. “Holotropic” is a word coined by Stan Grof from the Greek that means, literally, “seeking or following (*tropos*) the Whole (*holos*).” Grof uses it to refer to the psyche's natural tendency to strive toward an integral wholeness that involves both egoic and transpersonal dimensions.

impressive one.<sup>16</sup> Grof's publications are many and diverse, and he continues to publish into the present. His work, however, has remained astonishingly consistent over the years. The random reader of his very first book (written at Esalen and published in their own series), *Realms of the Unconscious*, for example, will recognize almost all of the patterns of his most recent text, *The Psychology of Being*. One can begin with the first or the last, in other words, and find the same basic vision. Metaphysically, this makes a great deal of sense. It is almost as if Grof's initial mystical collapse of space and time in his early LSD initiation constituted a kind of full and complete revelation that he has since spent his decades expressing in linear logic and temporal words, always somehow grounded in that initial nonordinary state of consciousness beyond the four dimensions of space and time. Couliano's hyperdimensional forks return.

For own purposes here, however, we will attempt to enter this state of consciousness thorough Grof's most developed, if also most profoundly ill-timed, statement, his *LSD Psychotherapy* (1980), which appeared, as Grof himself notes, just as widespread and irresponsible drug abuse combined with a sensationalizing media and an increasingly hostile political environment threatened to sink the entire subject into complete oblivion. The counter culture was over. The Reagan years were about to begin. One might as well have been writing high school workbooks on Darwinian evolution and biblical criticism for the Texas textbook board.

Grof begins *LSD Psychotherapy* as William James once began his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, that is, with a methodological principle of excess. James had argued that mystical forms of consciousness exaggerate normal psychological processes and so can act like a mental microscope for psychological study: in essence, they bring to consciousness processes and material that is otherwise unconscious. Similarly, Grof points out that LSD research began and developed with the conviction that LSD is to psychiatry what the telescope is to astronomy and the microscope to biology: psychic processes initiated under its influence make possible the observation of dynamisms and levels of psychic functioning that are not normally available for analysis. In Grof's own words, "LSD psychotherapy seems to intensify all the mechanisms operating in drug-free psychotherapies and involves, in addition, some new and powerful mechanisms of psychological change as yet unacknowledged and unexplained by mainstream

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<sup>16</sup>Grof, *The Cosmic Game*, 9.

psychiatry.”<sup>17</sup> The drug, for example, catalyzes and magnifies the recall of repressed memories, transference phenomena between therapist and client,<sup>18</sup> the emergence of unconscious material,<sup>19</sup> and—particularly in one controversial mode of LSD therapy known as *anaclitic* therapy characterized by a fusion technique of full body contact between client and therapist—dramatic age regression.<sup>20</sup> What we are dealing with here, then, is a kind of radicalized psychology, a psychoanalysis as western mystical technology, if you will.

In the mid 60’s, R.E.L. Masters and Jean Houston had already identified four levels of psychic functioning within psychedelic experience: the sensory, the recollective-analytic, the symbolic, and the integral or mystical.<sup>21</sup> Grof seems to have picked up on this and identified what he called the abstract or aesthetic, the psychodynamic, the perinatal, and the transpersonal. Both systems recognize an early and rather superficial level of abstract geometric patterns that are commonly seen in the early stages of psychedelic states (the sensory or aesthetic). Both also recognize the reality and general fit between their second levels and the processes described by depth psychology (the recollective-analytic or psychodynamic). The third and fourth levels (the symbolic/integral or perinatal/transpersonal) are where both models begin to diverge—they would say transcend—the standard psychoanalytic maps. It is crucial to repeat, however, that Grof’s work with LSD dramatically confirms the earlier discoveries of Freud, which some, interestingly enough, have argued were catalyzed by Freud’s own use of the LSD of the time that he himself actually helped “discover” (to both positive and personally tragic effect), that is, cocaine.<sup>22</sup> It appears that both drugs allowed these respective psychiatrists to access otherwise completely unconscious levels of the mind and then map them out for the public in their analytic writings. In other words, Grof’s work with LSD, although moving in transpersonal directions

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>21</sup> R.E.L. Masters and Jean Houston, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966). See Robert C. Fuller, *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs in American Religious History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 74-5, for a summary and insightful discussion of these two models and their place in American religious experimentation.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example: Robert Byck, ed., *Cocaine Papers: Sigmund Freud*, Notes by Anna Freud (New York: New American Library, 1974); and Robert C. Fuller, “Biographical Origins of Psychological Ideas: Freud’s Cocaine Studies,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 83/3 (summer 1992): 67-86.

that can only be described as post-Jungian and which would have horrified the secular anti-religious sensibilities of the historical Freud, also had deep historical and theoretical roots in Freud's psychoanalysis. Grof thus embodied for Esalen *both* of the great western masters.

And even Freud was not as opposed to the mystical as is often thought. Almost half a century ago now, David Bakan advanced the provocative thesis that psychoanalysis—with its oral initiatory ritual structure, its emphasis on esotericism, its understanding of sexual symbolism, its antinomian engagement with the "lower" or "infernal" powers of instinct, its strange fascination with numerology, and its rabbinic-like exegetical style—functions as a kind of secularized Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism, and that the former in fact may find its deepest intellectual roots in the latter.<sup>23</sup> Bakan, it turns out, was not the first to advance a thesis about Freud's possible, perhaps even unconscious, indebtedness to Jewish mysticism. Abraham Roback, as early as 1918 and again in 1929 in his *Jewish Influence in Modern Thought*, argued that Freud's method is "strongly reminiscent" of Kabbalah, and that "[p]sychoanalysis, on the whole, contains a mystical tendency."<sup>24</sup> Although Freud himself objected strongly to Roback's thesis, calling it "nonsense,"<sup>25</sup> one wonders if there is not indeed something to it. He was convinced, for example, that telepathy was a real phenomenon and in fact wrote four separate papers on it (all of which today are as conveniently ignored by the psychoanalytic establishment as they are enthusiastically embraced by Michael Murphy and his Esalen colleagues).

Moreover, in correspondence with the French playwright and self-confessed mystic Romain Rolland (who had sent Freud his classic biographies of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda for comment and interpretation), Freud expressed a real sense of humility and awe before the "oceanic feeling," as Rolland called it, of mystical literature. Edged on by Rolland, Freud speculated that mystical experiences of oneness stem back to fusion experiences between the newborn infant and the mother: "An infant at the breast does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him," Freud writes. "[O]riginally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> David Bakan, *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in David Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic & Contemporary* (New York: Wiley, 1997), 265.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 266.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed, an all-embracing—feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it. If we may assume that there are many people in whose mental life this primary ego-feeling has persisted to a greater or less degree, it would exist in them side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity, like a counterpart to it. In that that case, the ideational contents appropriate to it would be precisely those of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe—the same ideas with which my friend [Romain Rolland] elucidated the “oceanic feeling.”<sup>27</sup>

Later theorists after him radicalized this idea by extending it from Freud’s focus on the nursing breast back to the womb of natal existence, a kind of *regressus ad uterum* or “return to the womb” (this same historical move is represented nicely in our opening LSD session epigram). Otto Rank, moreover, had speculated that many psychological patterns and problems could be traced back to the trauma of childbirth and the infant’s dramatic passage through the vaginal channel.<sup>28</sup>

Grof synthesizes and develops these ideas even further, locating a whole series of what he calls “basic perinatal matrices” around the clinical experience of birth and the intrauterine life of the infant, all creatively relived (and no doubt reinterpreted) within the LSD experience. There are four such basic perinatal matrices: BPM I, II, III, and IV, described respectively as “Primal Union with Mother,” “Antagonism with Mother,” “Synergism with Mother,” and “Separation from Mother.” All of this flows out of Grof’s Rankian conviction that there exist “astonishing parallels” between the patterns seen under LSD and the clinical stages of delivery.<sup>29</sup>

BPM I is related to the infant’s primal union with the mother and manifests itself under psychedelic conditions as undisturbed states of cosmic unity. Here the erotogenic zones of the body are free from tension and the libidinal drives are satisfied. Soon, however, powerful chemical signals and muscular contractions will signal the early stages of delivery, which in turn

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 68. I am indebted for this line of thought to William Parsons and his *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling* (New York: Oxford University Press).

<sup>28</sup> Otto Rank, *The Trauma of Birth* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929).

<sup>29</sup> Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy*, 71.

will produce an experience of cosmic engulfment or restriction for the infant. Hence are initiated the cluster of experiences around BPM II, characterized by alienation, helplessness, guilt, constriction, and destruction. The erotogenic zones are highly tensive here, related (in the adult) to feelings of hunger, thirst, retention, sexual tension, and early delivery pains. BPM III accentuates these processes, even as it opens up (quite literally in biological birth) a way out. In terms of actual delivery, the infant may come into intimate contact with blood, urine, even feces, hence the scatological motifs of some types of religious experience (including Tantric ritual, by the way). Symbolically, an agonistic struggle or fight ensues that constitutes a classic death-rebirth experience. Within this struggle, powerful energies, many of them sexually related, can flood the organism, resulting in intense pain and pleasure and a whole series of pornographic and violent visions, a kind of “volcanic ecstasy,” as Grof describes it.<sup>30</sup> Sudden release and relaxation define the erotogenic zones here, as we find most classically in sexual orgasm and delivery (itself sometimes accompanied by overwhelming sexual spasms). Finally, BPM IV revolves around the expulsion through the vaginal canal and the sudden relief of birth and spiritual renewal. The erotogenic zones are defined by that kind of satisfaction and peace that constitute the satiation of basic drives.

Under the right conditions, such perinatal experiences can mediate access to what Grof refers to as the transpersonal realm, those levels of consciousness where the individual and the cosmos are intimately connected, where all sorts of parapsychological experiences may occur and “orgiastic feelings of cosmic proportions, spiritual liberation and enlightenment” can appear alongside “mystical union with the creative principle in the universe.”<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, the individual may be ushered into absolute reality or what Grof calls the Supracosmic and Metacosmic Void.

Significantly, the Hindu Tantric goddess Kali is consistently named by Grof as one of those archetypal patterns that constitute the perinatal matrices (particularly in matrix III and IV), usually as an example of the Jungian archetypes of the Great Mother and the Terrible Mother. Moreover, like much of Tantric mysticism in India, Grof’s entire basic perinatal matrix model is centered on the infant’s experience of the Mother—structurally speaking, it is a maternal mysticism through and through. Add to this the essentially Hindu-perennialist nature of Grof’s

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 72.

worldview evident in such later works as his *The Cosmic Game* and the dialectical nondual metaphysics that he works with, and one begins to sense that there is something profoundly Tantric about all of this.<sup>32</sup> When we encounter explicitly Tantric *yantras*, authors, and deities in his texts and recall the central place that sexuality plays in his conclusions, our hunches are confirmed further.

And Freud, of course, is always just around the corner:

This paradigm demonstrates, among other things, the close parallels between the stages of biological delivery and the pattern of sexual orgasm. The similarity between these two biological patterns is a fact of fundamental theoretical importance. It makes it possible to shift the etiological emphasis in the psychogenesis of emotional disorders from sexual dynamics to perinatal matrices, without denying or negating the significance and validity of the basic Freudian principles for understanding the psychodynamics phenomena and their mutual interrelations.<sup>33</sup>

Put simply if perhaps too anatomically, the female organ that spasms in orgasm is the same female organ that spasms in childbirth, and the two contractions are very much related. Grof is crystal clear that the triad of “birth, sex, and death” are physically and spiritually related, and that the religious traditions are wrong to suppress or deny this connection. In his own words: “Because of their intimate link with spirituality, birth, sex, and death also show a significant experiential overlap with each other. For many women, an uncomplicated delivery under favorable conditions can be the strongest sexual experience of their lives. Conversely, a powerful sexual orgasm in women, as well as men, can occasionally take the form of psychospiritual rebirth. The orgasm can also be so overpowering that it can be subjectively experienced as dying.”<sup>34</sup> Here also he points out that the classic near-death experience—with the soul traveling through a tunnel to an ecstatic Light—looks a lot like a transformed memory of birth through the vaginal canal. This is not to suggest that one can be reduced to the other, but to

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<sup>32</sup> Stanislav Grof, *The Cosmic Game: Explorations of the Frontiers of Human Consciousness* (Albany: SUNY, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Grof, *LSD Psychotherapy*, 71.

<sup>34</sup> Grof, *The Cosmic Game*, 136.

reiterate the ontological point that birth, death, sex, and spirit are all apiece throughout the entire human lifecycle (and beyond).

Moreover, and even more provocatively, if we are to read the relevant LSD session reports with Rank and Grof as coded memories of the birth process, we must acknowledge that the fetus and birthing infant also experience intense sexual pleasure, particularly around the common experience of near-suffocation during the delivery process. Along these same lines, Grof notes that people who try to hang themselves and are then rescued sometimes report unspeakable sexual arousal during their near suffocation, and that males executed by hanging have often displayed erections or even ejaculating phalli before their deaths. Indeed, there are even cases of individuals who have intentionally used near-suffocation or hanging as a sexual technique only to have the stratagem go horribly wrong and die in the botched process. On a relevant personal side-note here, Grof offered a corrective reading to one of the scenes of my *Kali's Child* based on this same sexual suffocation. In the relevant scene, Ramakrishna is putting a noose around his neck, allegedly to control the sexual response of his penis as he stands before a prostitute.<sup>35</sup> I had originally read the scene as an example of the symbolic connection between the head and the penis in Indian thought and understood it, with the tradition, to be ascetic in intention, that is, I read it as an attempt to control or suppress the male sexual response. Grof pointed out to me, however, that, given what we know about suffocation and sexual arousal, such a scene is better read as an attempt to *increase* sexual pleasure. This, of course, only deepens and radicalizes the head/penis symbolic connection (as it gives it a known physiological base), but in the process it also changes, indeed reverses, the traditional ascetic reading of the scene to an erotic one.<sup>36</sup>

### *Beyond Freud to the Hindu Tantra*

Grof's system, however, should not be confused with Freud's. It certainly incorporates psychoanalysis, but it also goes way beyond it, particularly in its metaphysical conclusions. Grof draws a number of these from his long years of research with both LSD and Holotropic Breathwork, which we might summarize as follows:

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<sup>35</sup> Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), REF.

<sup>36</sup> It also explains why the passage might describe a homoerotic mystic having erections before a (female) prostitute: it is not the woman who is arousing here; it is the act of self-suffocation.

“consciousness is not a product of the brain, but a primary principle of existence,” and “it plays a critical role in the creation of the phenomenal world”;<sup>37</sup>

“the psyche of each of us is essentially commensurate with all of existence and ultimately identical with the cosmic creative principle itself”;<sup>38</sup>

the material universe is “a virtual reality created by Absolute Consciousness through an infinitely complex orchestration of experiences”;<sup>39</sup>

as a virtual reality, akin to a kind of cosmic movie or theatre, the universe is “a cosmic game” that we should delight in playing in the spirit of the Tantric branches of Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, all of which have “a distinctly life-affirming and life-celebrating orientation”;<sup>40</sup>

as these same ancient Tantric texts suggest, “the human body literally is a microcosm that reflects and contains the entire macrocosm,” thus “[i]f one could thoroughly explore one’s own body and psyche, this would bring the knowledge of all the phenomenal worlds”;<sup>41</sup>

finally, the universe is not moral in any normal social sense of that term; rather, it is, to use a Nietzschean phrase (itself reflective of the Upanishads), “beyond good and evil,” hence “aggression is woven into the natural order and . . . it is not possible to be alive except at the expense of other living creatures”;<sup>42</sup> this in turn forces us to acknowledge that “the creative cosmic principle . . . is directly responsible for all the suffering and horrors of existence.”<sup>43</sup>

For the sake of space and economy, I have listed these metaphysical conclusions in a brief and overly abstract way here, but it is important to point out that Stan Grof also embodies them in his person. I realized this myself with some force during a lunch conversation with Grof. For some reason, we were talking about the popular fascination with end-of-the-world scenarios. Stan became reflective, looked up from his clams and cappuccino, and said something to the effect that the archetypal reality of the apocalypse first became meaningful to him in a fascinating MDMA session in which he realized for the first time that all we see around us and

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<sup>37</sup> Grof, *The Cosmic Game*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 113; Grof relates a fascinating series of LSD visions highly reminiscent of Kali to explicate this difficult nondual ethical position (ibid., 123ff).

assume to be real is in fact a kind of virtual illusion, that in actual fact *it does not exist* in any real way: at that moment the world literally ended for him. Now this was hardly news to me, as I had encountered this belief a thousand times before in my reading of the world's mystical literature, particularly that of India and its famous doctrine of *maya* or "illusion." But I had never heard anyone say the same with such conviction and in such an obvious matter-of-fact way. It wasn't what Stan said; it was *how* he said it. Put a bit differently, Stan Grof was not telling me that he believed this. He was telling me that he *knew* this. (see the account of the MDMA session on the Apocalypse I faxed to you)

*Tantric Energies and Spiritual Emergence: The Life and Work of Christina Grof*<sup>44</sup>

Like any Tantric teacher or deity, however, Stan Grof cannot be properly understood or fully appreciated apart from his co-worker, soul-mate, and wife, Christina. As a teenager, Christina (born Goodale) remembers various spiritual experiences involving Jesus around Easter, but she also remembers having no real context in which to understand these. Her education at Sarah Lawrence College certainly helped, particularly through the lectures and friendship of a certain professor named Joseph Campbell. Still, she somehow couldn't quite shake the sense that such things only really happen to "them," that is, to people living in other countries, like India. She, of course, was hardly alone in this conviction. We might recall an exceptionally well-read Huston Smith taking more or less the same position at M.I.T. before he was initiated into the mystical by Leary's LSD one New Years Day.

Christina graduated from Sarah Lawrence in 1964. She married, moved to Honolulu with her new husband, and soon became pregnant. To help her through the pregnancy, she practiced yoga and did Lamaze training, focusing on how to relax and breathe deeply. The birth, however, was not to be a simple one. The cosmic womb (*yoni*) showed itself to Christina here in dramatic and traumatic form. During the birth of her first child, Christina experienced an eruption of what the Indian Tantric traditions call the *kundalini*, the "coiled" serpent power of Tantra said to lie dormant at the base of the spine awaiting awakening through various intentional yogic postures or spontaneous life experiences. All kinds of nonordinary states of experience flowed out of her. The doctors were baffled and didn't know what to do. As white light and ecstatic energies shot

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<sup>44</sup> This section is based largely almost entirely on a phone conversation with Christina Grof, 28 January 2004.

up her spine and her body began to manifest various spontaneous movements (what the yoga traditions call *kriyas*), the medical staff gave her medications to control and subdue them.

Significantly, the same thing happened two years later with the birth of her second child. Christina definitely thought that something was wrong with her now, and she became depressed. She was, however, still practicing hatha yoga, now at a fairly advanced level. Around 1973, she heard that an Indian saint named Swami Muktananda, who taught in a Tantric lineage often referred to as simply Kashmir Shaivism, was coming to town with Ram Dass (the Hindu-American guru previously known as Richard Alpert, the Harvard psychologist and co-conspirator of Timothy Leary) and Werner Earhardt (charismatic inventor of EST). Later there would be a four-day retreat with Swami Muktananda or “Baba” (literally “Papa”), as he was affectionately called by his devotees. Christina took *darsana* with him and asked him questions about her now failing marriage. Later, in the context of a group meditation, she received the initiation of *sakti-pat* (literally “energy-descent,” here understood to be a kind of initiatory transmission event in which the guru transmits his energy and consciousness directly into the disciple). She did not understand what was happening. Baba simply touched her with a peacock feather. Later, when she opened her eyes and saw him looking at her, the *sakti* took effect: “Everything I had tried to hold down came rocketing up my spine, spontaneous tremors, much stronger than childbirth episodes; it all just developed from there.”

In some way, this only made things worse, as she was now living in two seemingly incompatible worlds: “I was a very good girl, and I was a housewife with two small children; I was doing yoga simply for exercise. I saw no connection between it, Joe [Campbell], and these *kundalini*-like experiences. I was scared and magnetized at the same time.” She was also separated from her husband and was about to be in a serious automobile accident. On the way home from yoga class one day, the brakes of that archetypal counter-cultural vehicle, the Volkswagen bus, failed her. She was speeding down an eight-lane highway at the time. Her bus careened across all four lanes, hit a retaining wall, bounced back, and slammed into a large construction truck sitting on the side of the highway. While all of this happened, Christina could see what she describes as “a continuum of spirit or consciousness beyond death.” “I could see the curtain of death, then myself going through that opaque curtain and seeing that I was part of everything. It was blissful, and it all happened before the impact and the injury. I remembered looking down and seeing blood, and that I had lost a toe, but I was in this other place. I was

watching it all from some other place.” Unfortunately, she had no knowledge about what researchers were beginning to identify as the NDE or “near-death experience.” For Christina at least, such bliss and transcendence were just more evidence that she was “nuts.”

She left the islands as soon as she could, went back to New York, called up Campbell, and sat down with him over dinner together in a small Italian restaurant to tell him about her birth (and death) experiences. She remembers being scared. Campbell told her that he had never been through such things, and that he liked to keep his feet on the ground, as it were. But he knew someone who could help her from both the experiential and intellectual planes. His name was Stan Grof, and he was living at a place on the West Coast called Esalen. Joe offered to call Stan for Christina. He introduced them over the phone. A few weeks later—it was now the summer of 1975—Christina asked her former husband to take care of the children, got on a plane, and visited the Grofs in their Big Sur home. During this visit, she decided to attend a six-week seminar on Buddhism and western psychology co-led by Stan, Joan Halifax (Stan’s wife), and Jack Kornfield. In the meantime, she also decided to stay on the mainland, primarily to be around Swami Muktananda.

By the time Christina arrived at Esalen for the workshop in the Fall of 1975, it was becoming increasingly clear to both Stan Grof and Joan Halifax that their marriage was nearly over. In November of 1975 when the workshop ended, Christina moved in with Stan. They were living in the house just off the Esalen property where Ida Rolf had lived. Neither thought of themselves as her successors, but the two of them would live here for the next twelve years and help define the Esalen culture of the 70’s and early 80’s. The torch had passed.

In the spring of 1976, Christina had what she calls her first “spiritual emergency.” A friend of theirs known for his psychedelic research sat with her for five full days. Visions, past lives, and spontaneous bodily movements were “all over the place.” The *kundalini* experiences intensified, and she began to realize that they were somehow connected to her original *sakti-pat* initiation with Muktananda. Looking back after years of work on the spiritual emergencies of others, Christina also realizes now that such events are often triggered by an experience of deep loss, and she remembers that when her own emergency began she had just heard the news that she would lose custody of her children.

In order to get some intellectual handle on all of this, she began to read in the growing literature on *kundalini*. She had already read Muktananda’s autobiography, *The Play of*

*Consciousness*, in which he recounts his own awakening to these mystical energies, occasionally in some rather graphic sexual terms: his own awakening, for example, was accompanied by an extended erection that burrowed into his belly.<sup>45</sup> Now she was reading Gopi Krishna's autobiography, *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* (significantly, with an elaborate Jungian commentary written by James Hillman).<sup>46</sup> Both texts would have been classic reads within the California counter culture of the 70's. But neither really helped her. In her own words, she needed "to hear it from a westerner," that is to say, she needed western psychological categories to make sense of it all and to integrate these Tantric energies into her own psyche and American life. Lee Sannella's *Kundalini: Psychosis or Transcendence?* was the turning point.<sup>47</sup> It was western psychology, not Asian yoga, that ultimately did the trick or, more accurately, it was western psychology put into intimate dialogue with Hindu Tantrism that ultimately gave Christina what she needed: an integral understanding of what she had been experiencing in her cosmic womb and in (and outside) her own body for years.

About this same time, Stan and Christina began to work closely together on a shared religious calling. In Christina's words now, "Stan opened his whole life to me, including his heart and work. He very much wanted a partner in the work, and I was very honored." It helped that Christina was teaching yoga at the time. Their backgrounds in LSD research and *kundalini*- and hatha-yoga began to meld. Christina took Stan up to Oakland to meet Swami Muktananda. Stan, unlike Christina, never became a devotee of Muktananda, but the guru's Kashmir Shaivism matched to an astonishing degree both what Christina had been experiencing in her inner world and what Stan had been mapping in the minds of his LSD participants. As if to express this psychedelic-Tantric confluence, they jointly organized in cooperation with the Siddha Yoga Ashram in Ganeshpuri a large international Transpersonal Conference entitled Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science. It took place in the Oberoi Hotel in Bombay in February 1982 and Muktananda was one of the main speakers. For his part, Baba had become increasingly interested in western psychology and in the work of Christina and Stan. Before his death, he even held a few small intensives with a select group of psychologists to explore the possibilities.

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<sup>45</sup> Swami Muktananda, *The Play of Consciousness* (REF).

<sup>46</sup> Gopi Krishna, *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* (Berkeley: Shambalah, 1971); originally 1967.

<sup>47</sup> Lee Sannella, *The Kundalini Experience: Psychosis or Transcendence* (Lower Lake, CA: Integral Publishing, 1987); originally 1976.

### *The Spiritual Emergency Network*

Dick Price had begun his religious career in a state of psychosis imbued with transcendent possibilities, almost all of them shut down by the brutality of insulin, electricity, and institutionalization. He had co-founded Esalen to help build a place and a space in which people who had been put through similar experiences could come and be healed. Such a spirit fit beautifully the life experiences of Christina Grof. She too, after all, had been through “spiritual emergencies” that she did not understand at the time and that she learned to interpret only with considerable study, discussion, and help later. It was only a matter of time, then, before her life-experiences, Stan’s therapeutic training, and Dick’s vision for Esalen came together in some concrete form.

In 1980, with the moral support and financial assistance (?) of Dick, Christina started the Spiritual Emergency Network (or SEN) at Esalen. Dick offered Stan and Christina one of the Esalen houses and enough financial backing to bring in two work scholars every month to work with them. The SEN began putting together contact lists, names of individuals across the country in every major city to whom they could then refer individuals who called their hot-line for help. They also sponsored week-long workshops to look at the notion of spiritual emergency in a more intense and systematic way. Later they would organize a four-week seminar on the same with, among others, the Jungian psychiatrist John Perry, the Buddhist teacher and meditator Jack Kornfield, ophthalmologist Lee Sannella, Esalen psychologist Julian Silverman, and two of Muktananda’s devotees. By 1989, SEN had grown to become an international organization with 1,100 helpers and a mailing list of over 10,000 names. At this point, moreover, it was handling approximately 150 calls a month. An analysis of 501 calls and 117 letters from November of 1986 through July of 1987 revealed that the typical caller was a forty-year-old female (69 per cent) experiencing some type of *kundalini* awakening (24 per cent).<sup>48</sup> Christina Grof was on to something.

The real crisis, it turned out, was often a hermeneutical and cultural one, that is, westerners were undergoing intense spiritual experiences that could not be understood, much less appreciated, within their own cultural frames. They thus were experiencing tremendous

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<sup>48</sup> Stanislav and Christina Grof, eds., *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher 1989, 227).

cognitive, religious, and emotional dissonance. In colloquial language, they felt that they were going mad when in reality, according to the Grofs, they were often undergoing a kind of spiritual rebirth that was best understood within the vocabulary and categories of the Asian traditions (inevitably in one of their Tantric forms). There were also, of course, real cases of psychotic suffering that needed to be handled professionally, but they were careful to try to distinguish between the psychotic and the transcendent, even if, as numerous writers from R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz to Kazimierz Dabrowski and Lee Sannella had shown, the line between these two realms was a very thin and wavy one. Or as Joseph Campbell had so memorably put it: “The mystic, endowed with native talents . . . and following . . . the instruction of a master, enters the waters and finds he can swim; whereas the schizophrenic, unprepared, unguided, and ungifted, has fallen or has intentionally plunged and is drowning.”<sup>49</sup>

When SEN had become too large for Esalen, it was taken over by the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and later by California Institute of Integral Studies, two institutions that had the advantage of drawing on their large student populations. All along, it struggled financially, since its main support came from donations. Currently, the SEN activities have been temporarily suspended for lack of funds. Christina Grof continued to pursue various types of therapeutic and healing work, particularly in the realm of addiction and alcoholism, from which she herself suffered and recovered. Her most recent book, *The Thirst for Wholeness*, argues that physical, sexual, and emotional abuse are very much related in people with addictive problems, and that addiction itself often displays powerful spiritual currents.<sup>50</sup>

### *Critical Questions*

We may and should ask critical questions of the Grofs, particularly of their perennialist commitments, which simultaneously tends to ignore real and important differences in doctrine and paint much too positive a picture of the historical religions’ political and social performance. I also worry about the kind of ethical nondualism that Stan Grof proposes as a metaphysical conclusion of his researches. Whether this nonduality is ontologically true or not, the social fact remains that it leaves precious little room for human agency and real social change. Personally, I

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>50</sup> Christina Grof, *The Thirst for Wholeness: Attachment, Addiction, and the Spiritual Path* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

would much prefer to live in a functional illusion with little or no grounding in cosmic reality (like democracy) than in a dysfunctional social system that accurately reflects some deep dimension of the cosmos. Having said that, I am very conscious that Grof is fully aware of these ethical problems and has struggled openly and honestly with them both in his seminars and in print. One cannot also help but wonder about what all of this might mean for contemporary debates over abortion: if, after all, the fetus is as conscious and as human as this research so dramatically suggests, how can one possibly justify something like abortion? At the very least, the abortion procedure would be the ultimate example of the “bad womb” and the ultimate act of the Terrible Mother. The radical liberalism of the human potential movement here results in a strange and unpredictable turn to an ethical position usually identified with conservatism and the right. I am not sure what to make of this, but it is certainly worth noting.

#### *A Yoni-Tantra for Our Times*

Stan Grof’s psychoanalysis and LSD research, Christina Grof’s *kundalini*-laced childbirth experiences and Tantric transmissions from a modern Hindu saint, and two lifetimes of Holotropic Breathwork, spiritual counseling, and public writing have produced a psychology of religion that dramatically confirms the findings of classical psychoanalysis (even as it also relativizes them), sexualizes mystical states in a Tantric fashion, struggles openly with issues ranging from the spiritual needs of terminal cancer patients to the addictive behaviors of alcoholism and drug abuse, and concludes, after thousands of experiments with tens of thousands of participants and patients, with what is essentially a nondual American-Hindu worldview that is fundamentally Tantric in nature and function. And why not? Christina knew early on and subjectively from her own spasming mystical womb what Stan was mapping, from the other side as it were, in his LSD researches: subject and object met and united here. The couple’s later meeting through the arrangement of the era’s most famous mythologist (Joe Campbell), marriage, and life-long partnership constitute a kind of archetypal union of western psychology and Indian Tantra for our times. Psychoanalysis, in both its Freudian and Jungian streams, has morphed into an American Tantra, and in the process the Indian Tantric traditions have been enriched by an encounter with both western psychology and that most potent of all western mystical technologies, LSD-25.

The result, in the end, is a decades-long meditation on the human experience of the female body, a kind of western *Yoni-Tantra* or “Text on the Cosmic Womb” that incorporates the ecstatic and visionary experiences of literally thousands of individuals in order to explore and then map out the *yonis* (as mystical uterus and vagina) in all of its sexual, traumatic, mythological, and transcendent complexities. There is, in fact, such a text in Indian history. Perhaps we should read the corpus of Stan and Christina Grof as a western rewriting of, or commentary on, the same. Such an eccentric reading may appear stretched or odd to the uninformed or uninitiated, but it is not in the end really inexplicable. Stan Grof’s constant reference to what he calls the “cosmic creative principle” is in fact a very traditional translation of the Sanskrit *yonis*, and it was this same ecstatic *yonis* that initiated Christina into a spiritual path that would take her directly into the heart of modern-day Hindu Tantrism in the person of Swami Muktananda and simultaneously make her sensitive to the original therapeutic vision of Dick Price, who knew his own spiritual emergenc(e)y and found his own sexuality awoken in a state of enlightened psychosis.

Significantly, if far less consciously, the Grofs’ life-affirming Tantric spirituality would also echo many of the themes of Michael Murphy’s reading of Sri Aurobindo and the latter’s own life-affirming Tantric vision. Certainly there were also important differences in accent and focus here. Murphy, for example, never focused on what Stan Grof called the central issues of “birth, sex, and death,” and he would consciously avoid, as we shall see in a later chapter, the topics of both tantric sex and psychedelics in his magnum opus on the transformations of the human form, *The Future of the Body*. But bidden or not, conscious or unconscious, the Tantric resonances between Stan, Christina, Dick, and Mike were still very much there, harmonizing the separate visions in the background or hyperdimensional space that is “Esalen.”

Given this double resonance with both founders, it should probably not surprise us that Stan and Christina Grof lived on the grounds as Esalen guides, teachers, and beloved seminar leaders for fourteen years. With the important exception of Dick Price, no Esalen visionary was there longer, and few have done as much to define what the place would and could be. Nor should it surprise us that Stan and Christina Grof’s work on the cosmic womb and the counsels of spiritual emergenc(e)y constitute some of the most provocative and clearest examples of Tantric thought and practice at Esalen. The place and the vision were very much at one here, at least for a time.