

Holotropic Breathwork with Dr. Stanislav Grof

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Holotropic Breathwork, our group facilitator told us, does not begin at a retreat, but is part of a process, a journey that is already underway. Our journey began at 2:00 a.m. on a Friday morning at the dorms of New College in Sarasota, Florida. That was when my fellow students, Brandy and Jag, and I embarked on our trip to Atlanta where we would enter another realm of consciousness with the guidance of psychedelic pioneer Dr. Stanislav Grof.

Holotropic Breathwork was developed by Dr. Grof as a non-drug alternative to reaching altered states of consciousness. When doing Holotropic Breathwork, one breathes in such a way as to flood the body with oxygen. A buildup of oxygen in the blood in combination with evocative music and a special set and setting causes the breather to experience a sort of mild trip. Types of experience usually fall into one or more of several categories - sensory, biographic, perinatal, and yogic sleep states. Holotropic Breathwork incorporates techniques from modern consciousness research, anthropology, various depth

psychologies, transpersonal psychology, Eastern spiritual practices, and mystical traditions of the world to form a profound approach to self-exploration and healing. The name Holotropic literally means “moving toward wholeness.”

Our journey brought us to Stanislav Grof's final U.S. breathwork workshop, as he will soon retire from facilitating Holotropic Breathwork after having passed on the skills needed to conduct workshops to the many facilitators. The workshop was held April 20-22, 2001, in a secluded hotel just outside of Atlanta, Georgia.

As Brandy, Jag, and I wandered through the hallways on the morning of our arrival, we could identify the other Breathwork participants by their oversized smiles and inviting eyes. Besides these two similarities, the crowd was surprisingly heterogeneous. The approximately six hundred people in attendance broke into more intimate groups of twenty each for

the therapeutic breathing and sharing sessions. The group of twenty that Brandy and I worked with contained everyone from a junior high school student who came with his dad, to a grandmother from San Francisco with purple hair and toenails, to a mid-30s couple who own an organic farm.

We looked like six hundred overgrown children having a mid-morning slumber party on the day of the breathing sessions. After filling one of the hotel's large banquet halls with blankets, pillows, and soft things, the first set of breathers lay down in their nests while the sitters sat beside them. There would be two identical three-hour sessions and each 'sitter-breather pair' would switch roles in the afternoon. The role of the sitter is to assist the breather in a way that does not interfere with or interrupt the process.

Dr. Grof prepared the breathers for their journeys and sent them off with the simple phrase, “Now link your breaths together.” Tribal music boomed in the background as the breathers took off, and it was

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soon punctuated with screams, moans, and laughter from across the spectrum of emotions. The sitters stood vigil while their partners journeyed into the space inside of their own minds. Dr. Grof and his fellow facilitators watched over the room, occasionally stopping to answer questions or perform focused energy work on any breathers who were experiencing physical tension.

My personal experience at the workshop left me feeling very calm. While breathing, I lost consciousness several times and fell into a yogic sleep state. I was disappointed that I wasn't aware of my thoughts like I had been in my previous experience with Holotropic Breathwork, when I had been barraged with rapid flashes of inspiration. Dr. Grof addressed this concern during his speech that night though, when he told us that the most powerful healing occurs in yogic sleep states.

My sitting session, however, was incredible. I sat for Brandy, who was very calm and didn't require much maintenance as a breather except for occasionally asking for water. This allowed me to disperse my attention throughout the room. I watched several people get up off of the floor and begin dancing. Others appeared to be reliving birth experiences. The thing that touched me the most was an elderly woman on the far side of the room. Towards the end of the session, she began screeching and sobbing above all of the other noise. "No don't leave me! Why do you have to go?" I watched Dr. Grof kneel at her side to comfort her. She continued crying as everyone began trickling out of the room for lunch and mandala drawing. Tears came to my eyes as her screams penetrated my ears. I began sobbing uncontrollably just as she was; I was feeling her pain become my own. I glanced across the room and saw that other people were experiencing the same effect. After Brandy was finished breathing we left the room so that she could draw her mandala. Dr. Grof stayed at the woman's side.

After witnessing the incredible gentleness and compassion with which he worked on the individual level, the three of us had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Grof the following morning, and learn about his larger perspective on his career. Here is what he had to say.

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MAPS: Is this your last Breathwork workshop?

Grof: It's very likely. I was planning to do more reading and writing, but I am still planning to do the retreats in

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Napa Valley. We also do one in Switzerland.

MAPS: So how do you feel about doing one of your last Breathwork weekends? What were some of the highlights?

Grof: The very wonderful feeling about it is that so many people have been trained and will continue to work. That part is very encouraging. Obviously, whenever a big era is ending, there is always some sadness involved, a bit of nostalgia.

MAPS: Was there anything special about this weekend?

Grof: Besides being the last one, it was certainly one of the larger groups. I really like the energy of the large groups.

MAPS: What are your plans for the future, outside of Breathwork?

Grof: Christina and I did the virtual reality consulting for a movie called Brainstorm in 1982. It is a very interesting screenplay about two scientists who develop a helmet. When someone has an experience, the helmet can record

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it, and another person can wear the helmet and relive the experience. One of the two scientists is working late in the laboratory, has a heart attack and records it. In the morning the other scientist comes in and sees her dead, and the tape is still rolling. They realized they had recorded the death experience.

The director of the movie found us because he wanted to use the best special effects to portray the death experience. We were very excited about it, and we helped

design the special effects. I believe that with the right kind of imagery, we could not just portray these altered states but induce them. I wrote a science fiction novel that I would like to turn into a screenplay so that I could portray transformative and psychedelic experiences. My most immediate focus is really on science fiction feature movies. There is not really a great interest in academic books among American audiences. Movies reach all levels and have more cultural impact. The critical interface is really the media. The media still has a defensive attitude toward spiritual issues. It would be a major turning point if the power of the media could be used in a positive way to dissipate the negative attitudes of their audiences.

MAPS: How has your perspective on non-ordinary states changed over the years?

Grof: I think that the significance of non-ordinary states was increasing as I was getting more deeply involved. Initially, there was the sense that they were anomalies. I was trying to explain it in the context of the existing theories.

Then I saw that there was a major challenge, and that to explain what people were experiencing would require some kind of radical revision to psychology and psychiatry. The concept of spiritual emergency came from it. Then I realized that it was not just a challenge for psychology and psychiatry, but for the whole philosophy of Western science. It would radically change the whole worldview of science.

I think the last realization was that non-ordinary states would not only have major planetary significance, but I started seeing it as something, maybe the only thing, that could avert the global crisis. If enough people could experience the kind of psychospiritual change that we see individually, it could really make a difference in the world. Even if people did not study ecology, or would just focus on inner transformation during their sessions,

automatically they would move to worldviews that include greater ecological sensitivity, a reduction of hostility, an increase of tolerance to racial, political, and cultural differences. It just automatically generates the kind of transformation that would make a difference in

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the world. The understanding and respect for cycles, could help people see the need for renewable energy, the need not to create waste and to emulate nature by operating in cycles rather than this linear binge—the bigger the better and so on.

MAPS: What do you see in the future of psychedelic research?

Grof: The situation is much better than when psychedelics first came. One reason is that the concept of psychotherapy at the time was lying on the couch and free-associating. When there were strong emotions involved it was called acting out and it was something that should not happen. The kinds of things that were happening in psychedelic sessions were seen as pathologies. Psychedelic states were called experimental psychoses. In that kind of situation it was very difficult to convey the message that those sorts of things could be therapeutic. The second reason was that the experiences that we were having and seeing were not supposed to happen, they were considered impossible. The medical community dismissed it as nonsense.

Today there is a very different situation. There is a great popularity of experiential therapies used to work with intense emotions. For people involved in these types of therapies, moving to psychedelics would not be a very big step. Also beneficial is the development of the new paradigm of thinking, the philosophical implications of quantum interruptions of physics, the Chaos Theory and so on. We have a completely different way of approaching these experiences, a way to bridge to science, not mainstream science, but science.

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MAPS: Do you think that more people are feeling the need for rituals in their lives?

Grof: Throughout history all cultures absolutely independently have developed rituals, which obviously reflects a very deep need in human beings. I think we are paying a toll for having lost the rituals. Christina went to a conference in New York, convened by the NY state legislature. They were very concerned about the young generation - sex and drugs and criminality. One man noticed that there were many ritualistic elements in the behavior of gangs. For example in some African tribes, when a boy comes of age they will send him out with a spear and when he comes back he will return with a lion. This is what makes him a man. In these NY gangs, if you want to be a member, they give you a gun and you have to shoot somebody. If you are a girl, you have to have sex with all the men in the group. He also noticed that when somebody is killed in a street fight, there are very elaborate rituals. Since they are missing meaningful rituals, they develop their own. He had this idea that we should create some rites of passage for the younger generation.

MAPS: Can you share a special psychedelic experience of your own?

Grof: Well there's so many. . .

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After thinking about our interview with Dr. Grof, I realized that as young adults, we have been introduced to mind-altering substances by our peers. We have also watched our peers get arrested for possessing or selling some of those substances. Altered states of consciousness, for many young people in America, are rarely associated with growing up or enlightenment as they are in many more "primitive" cultures, and are too often associated with sirens, drug-sniffing dogs, and the threat of jail. Drug-using youth are labeled as "the wrong crowd" by parents, teachers, and the other kids. Once a member of this group, it is only natural for the child to engage in other socially unacceptable behaviors - stealing, fighting, or skipping school. By being exposed to a legal route of altered consciousness such as Breathwork, perhaps these youth could explore themselves without the negative stereotype. While many parents and/or advocates of the War on Drugs may cringe when they hear the words "altered" and "consciousness" in the same sentence, few could find the phrase "breathing exercises" objectionable. The three of us are fortunate to have experienced

altered consciousness in such a loving and non-judgmental environment during the time in our lives when we are passing from youth to adulthood. Perhaps the solution to our culture's missing rites of passage can be found in Holotropic Breathwork. Maybe someday soon our culture will embrace a ritual such as Holotropic Breathwork and it will be just as common as getting a driver's license for young people like Brandy, Jag, and I to go through a session upon entering adulthood.

Our journey took us to explore a new realm of consciousness. For Stanislav Grof, the process of working with non-ordinary states of consciousness began over forty years ago. Stanislav Grof, M.D., was born and educated in Czechoslovakia. Grof's early research in the clinical uses of psychoactive drugs was conducted at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague, where he was Principal Investigator of a program systematically exploring the heuristic and therapeutic potential of LSD and

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other psychedelic substances. He came to the United States in 1967 to complete a fellowship at Johns Hopkins University. He went on to become Chief of Psychiatric Research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the Henry Phipps Clinic of Johns Hopkins University, and Scholar-in-Residence at the Esalen Institute in California where he developed the Holotropic Breathwork technique. He has since founded the International Transpersonal Association where he has organized large international conferences and held countless workshops. Grof has published over 100 articles in professional journals and authored several books, including *LSD Psychotherapy*, the new edition of which is now available from MAPS. Additional information about Holotropic Breathwork and upcoming workshops can be found at the Grof Transpersonal Training and Holotropic Breathwork website: <http://www.dnai.com/~gtr/>