

## Introduction to Stanislav Grof's *The Ultimate Journey*: **An Interview with Peter Gasser**

By David Jay Brown



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**In 2008, Swiss psychiatrist Peter Gasser, M.D.,** became the first medical researcher in the world to obtain government approval to do therapeutic research with LSD. This was the first government-approved LSD study since Stanislav Grof was forced to shut down his research in 1972. Gasser's LSD/end-of-life anxiety study is being sponsored by MAPS, who is also sponsoring other medical research into the psychotherapeutic value of psychedelic drugs. (This interview appears as the introduction to the new edition of Stanislav Grof's book *The Ultimate Journey*, which was recently published by MAPS.)

**David: Can you talk a little about how you started doing LSD research, and what it feels like to be the first researcher to receive government approval to do human studies with LSD in thirty-five years?**

Peter: In January, 2006—around the time that we held the symposium for Albert Hofmann's 100th birthday celebration—Rick Doblin and I were walking through the snowy Swiss mountains. While we were walking, Rick said that he thought that it would be great to do research with LSD again, as MAPS had just successfully launched studies with MDMA. After speaking with Rick, I began the process of gaining approval and meeting all the requirements. Getting a license to work with LSD felt like a great honor. It also filled me with a sense of hope, as this means the end of a thirty-five year Ice Age, where all therapeutic research with LSD was totally blocked.

**David: What have you learned from Stanislav Grof's work that helps you conduct your own research?**

Peter: When some friends of mine discovered that I would be working with people who were seriously ill, or possibly dying, they gave me a warning. They told me that they thought that this would be too heavy of an emotional burden for me. However, one friend also recommended that I read Stan Grof's book *The Ultimate Journey*, which I wasn't

familiar with at the time. Grof's book taught me to have an open, natural, and interested attitude towards the patients in this study. At that time I had no special training in psycho-oncology [the psychological aspects of cancer], although I had had some experience over the years working with people suffering from life-threatening diseases.

From Grof's book *The Ultimate Journey*, I learned that the issues that people faced in his studies were basically the same issues of our common human condition, only in a different intensity and priority. Grof's book is a rich treasure chest, filled with cultural, historical, philosophical, and religious links that help us to understand the individual psychological process. Like Carl Gustav Jung, Grof is an author with an extremely broad background of knowledge about the history of mankind—in all its shapes. He is capable of linking the individual process with the collective process—which may be a great comfort and relief, especially for dying people.

**David: What kind of process and struggles did you have to go through to get your LSD study approved?**

Peter: During the approval process for the study, there were two critical questions that needed to be addressed. The first one was: Is it possible to convince the Ethics Committee that the potential risk of LSD-assisted psychotherapy is not higher than in other drug

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research studies, and that the potential benefits that could be gained from this study make it worth doing? As you can imagine, the answer to this questions can't be obtained with any kind of mathematical precision, and rather depends upon the attitudes and prejudices of the members of the committee. Ethical decisions are always decisions of personal judgment, even if they rely on a clear and rational decision process. Fortunately, the Ethics Committee was able to discuss the question of LSD-assisted therapy in an open manner, and after much discussion, finally, it was decided that yes, such work could be done.

The second question was: Will the authorities at the Ministry of Health be influenced by political processes that might inhibit an approval of our study? It was satisfying to learn that their work was based on legal, ethical, and scientific requirements. I am convinced that Kairos—the Greek God of the opportune moment—was lending a hand, as something that brings together and orchestrates so many factors, and results in a success like this, must have played a role. It was greatly satisfying for everyone involved in this study that Albert Hofmann was still alive when the research began. He witnessed that steps were being taken to help develop LSD into what it only sometimes was—a medicine.

**David: Can you share an anecdote or two from your studies, and talk a little about how your subjects are responding to the LSD-assisted psychotherapy?**

Peter: Since we have a placebo-controlled design—and because of the obvious inherent difficulties involved with giving inactive placebos to subjects in psychedelic drug studies—the placebo patients also receive a very low dose of the active drug, which is 20 micrograms of LSD. Albert Hofmann said that he was convinced that even a low dose of 20 micrograms was enough to create a psychic effect in people—and he was right. One patient (who received placebo) reported that he had a very realistic impression that the floor of the room we were in opened up and the devil appeared. Although this scene was quite short, it was very naturalistic.

Of course, the 200 microgram verum dose that the experimental subjects get is much more powerful and longer lasting. I was very touched when one subject, a 57 years old man suffering from metastatic gastric cancer, reported his LSD session. It was his first session in the study, as well as the first experience with hallucinogens in his life. He went out of his body, and had the experience of flying like a bird, which was very fulfilling for him. Then he flew up higher and higher, until he

met his dead father. The patient had had a difficult relationship with his father, who withdraw from conflictual situations in the family, leaving the patient alone with his overwhelming mother.

Although his father had died a long time ago, the patient was full of criticism and reproach towards him. However, his encounter on LSD was very different. He felt free. It was just two men meeting at the same level, without any father/son dynamics. The patient loved feeling the closeness, and there was no longer any feeling of building up an inner wall when he thought of him. Later the subject said that he thought that in his process of dying it was very important for him to meet with his father at his place, where the dead people are, and to feel their vicinity without any fear or negative feelings.

**David: Have you seen anything in your sessions that influenced your understanding of, or perspective on, death?**

Peter: For me, one of the most satisfying aspects of my work in this study comes from my encounter with the patients. People who are going to die automatically put more emphasis on the “here and now.” They search and long for intensity and open awareness right now—not in some distant future which might not exist. This is what makes working with these people so rich.

**David: What sort of promise do you see for the future of LSD research?**

Peter: With this pilot study that we're now doing, my vision is to show that LSD-assisted psychotherapy is safe and effective—so that we can plan further studies based on that result. This would not be something new for insiders, but it would be new to much of the world—because it would be based on research that meets the medical requirements of contemporary drug research. I absolutely believe that LSD has broad potential for healing and relief. •

Stanislav Grof's book *The Ultimate Journey*, second edition, just published by MAPS is now available. For more information see page 48.