

CHAPTER ONE

Historical Roots of Holotropic Breathwork

1. Sigmund Freud and the dawn of depth psychology

Holotropic breathwork is one of the more recent contributions to depth psychology, a discipline initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century by the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. Since Freud single-handedly laid the foundations of this new field, depth psychology has had a complex and stormy history. Freud's contributions to psychology and psychiatry were truly groundbreaking. He demonstrated the existence of the unconscious and described its dynamics, developed the technique of dream interpretation, identified the psychological mechanisms involved in the genesis of psychoneuroses and psychosomatic disorders, discovered infantile sexuality, recognized the phenomenon of transference, invented the method of free association, and outlined the basic principles of psychotherapy (Freud and Breuer 1936; Freud 1953, 1962).

Although initially Freud's interest was primarily clinical—to explain the etiology of psychoneuroses and to find a way of treating them—in the course of his explorations his horizons expanded enormously. The range of phenomena that he studied included, besides the content of dreams and psychodynamics of neurotic symptoms, such themes as the mechanism of jokes and slips of the tongue and a number of cultural and sociopolitical phenomena—problems of human civilization, history, wars and revolutions, religion, and art (Freud 1955a and b, 1957a and b, 1960a and b, 1964a and b).

Freud surrounded himself with a group of unusually talented and imaginative thinkers (the “Viennese circle”), several of whom had their own unique perspectives and developed renegade schools of psychotherapy.

While Freudian psychoanalysis became an important part of thinking in mainstream psychology and psychiatry, the so-called renegade schools—Adlerian, Rankian, Reichian, and Jungian—have never been accepted by official academic circles. However, as we will see later, in the last several decades some of them have become increasingly popular and influential as alternative approaches to psychotherapy and many ideas of their founders have been integrated into the theory and practice of holotropic breathwork.

2. Humanistic psychology and experiential therapies

In the middle of the twentieth century, American psychology was dominated by two major schools—behaviorism and Freudian psychoanalysis. Increasing dissatisfaction with these two orientations as adequate approaches to the understanding of the human psyche led to the development of humanistic psychology. The main spokesman and most articulate representative of this new field was the well-known American psychologist Abraham Maslow. He offered an incisive critique of the limitations of behaviorism and psychoanalysis, or the First and the Second Force in psychology as he called them, and formulated the principles of a new perspective in psychology (Maslow 1962, 1964, and 1969).

Maslow's main objection against behaviorism was that the study of animals, such as rats and pigeons, could only clarify those aspects of human functioning that we share with these animals. It thus has no relevance for the understanding of higher, specifically human qualities that are unique to human life, such as love, self-consciousness, self-determination, personal freedom, morality, art, philosophy, religion, and science. It is also largely useless in regard to some specifically human negative characteristics, such as greed, lust for power, cruelty, and tendency to "malignant aggression." He also criticized the behaviorists' disregard for consciousness and introspection and their exclusive focus on the study of behavior.

By contrast, the primary interest of humanistic psychology, Maslow's Third Force, was in human subjects, and this discipline honored the interest in consciousness and introspection as important complements to the objective approach to research. The behaviorists' exclusive emphasis on determination by the environment, stimulus/response, and reward/punishment was replaced by emphasis on the capacity of human beings to be internally directed and motivated to achieve self-realization and fulfill their human potential.

In his criticism of psychoanalysis, Maslow pointed out that Freud and his followers drew conclusions about the human psyche mainly from the study of psychopathology and he disagreed with their biological reductionism and their tendency to explain all psychological processes in terms of

base instincts. By comparison, humanistic psychology focused on healthy populations, or even individuals who show supernormal functioning in various areas (Maslow's "growing tip of the population"), on human growth and potential, and on higher functions of the psyche. It also emphasized that it is important for psychologists to be sensitive to practical human needs and to serve important interests and objectives of human society.

Within a few years after Abraham Maslow and Anthony Sutich launched the Association for Humanistic Psychology (AHP) and its journal, the new movement became very popular among American mental health professionals and even in the general public. The multidimensional perspective of humanistic psychology and its emphasis on the whole person provided a broad umbrella for the development of a rich spectrum of new, effective therapeutic approaches that greatly expanded the range of possibilities when addressing emotional, psychosomatic, interpersonal, and psychosocial problems.

Among the important characteristics of these new approaches was a decisive shift from the exclusively verbal strategies of traditional psychotherapy ("talking therapies") to the direct expression of emotions. The therapeutic strategy also moved from exploration of individual history and of unconscious motivation to the feelings and thought processes of the clients in the here and now. Another important aspect of this therapeutic revolution was the emphasis on the interconnectedness of the psyche and the body and overcoming the taboo against touching that previously dominated the field of psychotherapy. Various forms of work with the body thus formed an integral part of the new treatment strategies; Fritz Perls' Gestalt therapy, Alexander Lowen's bioenergetics and other neo-Reichian approaches, encounter groups, and marathon sessions can be mentioned here as salient examples of humanistic therapies.

3. The advent of psychedelic therapy

A serendipitous discovery of Albert Hofmann, a Swiss chemist conducting research of ergot alkaloids in the Sandoz laboratories in Basel, introduced into the world of psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy a radically new element—the heuristic and healing potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness. In April 1943, Hofmann discovered the psychedelic effects of LSD-25, or diethylamide of lysergic acid, when he accidentally intoxicated himself during the synthesis of this substance. After the publication of the first clinical paper on LSD by Zurich psychiatrist Walter A. Stoll in the late 1940s (Stoll 1947), this new semisynthetic ergot alkaloid, active in incredibly minute quantities of micrograms or *gammas* (millionths of a gram), became overnight a sensation in the world of science.

In clinical research and self-experimentation with LSD, many professionals discovered that the current model of the psyche, limited to postnatal biography and the Freudian individual unconscious, was superficial and inadequate. The new map of the psyche that emerged out of this research (Grof 1975) added to the current model of the psyche two large transbiographical domains—the perinatal level, closely related to the memory of biological birth, and the transpersonal level, harboring among others the historical and archetypal domains of the collective unconscious as envisioned by C. G. Jung (Jung 1959a). Early experiments with LSD also showed that the sources of emotional and psychosomatic disorders were not limited to traumatic memories from childhood and infancy, as traditional psychiatrists assumed, but that their roots reached much deeper into the psyche, into the perinatal and transpersonal regions (Grof 2000). This surprising revelation was accompanied by the discovery of new, powerful therapeutic mechanisms operating on these deep levels of the psyche.

Using LSD as a catalyst, it became possible to extend the range of applicability of psychotherapy to categories of patients that previously had been difficult to reach, such as alcoholics and drug addicts, and even positively influence the behavior of sexual deviants and criminal recidivists (Grof 2006c). Particularly valuable and promising were the early efforts to use LSD psychotherapy in the work with terminal cancer patients. Research with this population showed that LSD was able to relieve severe pain, often even in patients who had not responded to medication with narcotics. In a large percentage of these patients, it was also possible to ease or even eliminate difficult emotional and psychosomatic symptoms, such as depression, general tension, and insomnia, alleviate the fear of death, increase the quality of their life during their remaining days, and positively transform the experience of dying (Cohen 1965; Kast and Collins 1966; Grof 2006b).

4. Abraham Maslow, Anthony Sutich, and the birth of transpersonal psychology

In the 1960s, the observations from the research of non-ordinary states of consciousness—analysis of experiences from psychedelic sessions and Maslow’s study of spontaneous mystical experiences (“peak experiences”)—revolutionized the image of the human psyche and inspired a radically new orientation in psychology. In spite of the popularity of humanistic psychology, its founders Abraham Maslow and Anthony Sutich grew dissatisfied with the discipline that they had themselves fathered. They became increasingly aware that they had left out an extremely important element—the spiritual dimension of the human psyche (Sutich 1976).

Maslow's own research of "peak experiences," the therapeutic use of psychedelics, widespread psychedelic experimentation of the young generation during the stormy 1960s, and the renaissance of interest in Eastern spiritual philosophies, various mystical traditions, meditation, and ancient and aboriginal wisdom, made the current conceptual framework in psychology untenable. It became clear that a comprehensive and cross-culturally valid psychology needed to include observations from such areas as mystical states; cosmic consciousness; psychedelic experiences; trance phenomena; creativity; and religious, artistic, and scientific inspiration.

In 1967, a small working group, including Abraham Maslow, Anthony Sutich, Stanislav Grof, James Fadiman, Miles Vich, and Sonya Margulies, met repeatedly in Menlo Park, California, with the purpose of creating a new psychology that would honor the entire spectrum of human experience, including various non-ordinary states of consciousness. During these discussions, Maslow and Sutich accepted Grof's suggestion and named the new discipline "transpersonal psychology." This term replaced their own original name, "transhumanistic" or "reaching beyond humanistic concerns." Soon afterward, they launched the Association of Transpersonal Psychology (ATP) and started the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. Several years later, in 1975, Robert Frager founded the (California) Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, which has remained at the cutting edge of transpersonal education, research, and therapy for more than three decades.