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Introduction

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. . . . He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.

—Albert Einstein

Use the light that dwells within you to regain your natural clarity of sight.

—Lao-tzu

This book addresses some of the most fundamental questions of existence that human beings have been asking since time immemorial. How did our universe come into being? Is the world we live in merely a product of mechanical processes involving inanimate, inert, and reactive matter? Do we have to assume the existence of superior cosmic intelligence responsible for the creation and evolution of the cosmos? Can material reality be explained solely in terms of natural laws or does it involve forces and principles that elude such descriptions?

How can we come to terms with such dilemmas as finiteness of time and space versus eternity and infinity? What is the source of order, form, and meaning in the universe? What is the relationship between life and matter, and between consciousness and the brain? Many of the issues that we will explore in this book have great relevance for everyday existence. How should we understand the apparent conflict between good and evil, the mystery of karma and reincarnation, and the problem of the meaning of human life?

These are not questions that are usually asked in the context of psychiatric practice or psychological research. And yet, in my work as a psychiatrist, these issues emerged quite spontaneously and with extraordinary urgency in the minds of many of the people with whom I have worked. The reason for this is the unusual field of study that has been the main focus of my interest during the forty years of my professional life—research of non-ordinary states of consciousness.

This interest began quite unexpectedly and in a very dramatic way in 1956, only a few months after my graduation from medical school, when I volunteered for an experiment with LSD in the Psychiatric Department of the School of Medicine in Prague, Czechoslovakia. This experience profoundly influenced my personal and professional life and provided the inspiration for my lifelong commitment to consciousness research.

Although I have been interested in the entire spectrum of nonordinary states of consciousness, I have had most personal experience with psychedelic research, with therapeutic work involving individuals undergoing spontaneous psychospiritual crises (spiritual emergencies), and with holotropic breathwork, a method that I have developed jointly with my wife Christina. In psychedelic therapy the nonordinary states of consciousness are induced by chemical means; in spiritual emergencies they develop spontaneously for unknown reasons in the middle of everyday life; and in holotropic breathwork they are facilitated by a combination of faster breathing, evocative music, and a specific form of focused body work. In this book, I will be drawing on all these three areas, since the insights from all of them are very similar, if not identical.

Consciousness Research and Perennial Philosophy

In my previous publications, I have described the important implications of systematic study of nonordinary states of consciousness for the understanding of emotional and psychosomatic disorders and for psychotherapy (Grof 1985, 1992). This book has a much larger and general focus: it explores the ex-

traordinary philosophical, metaphysical, and spiritual insights that have emerged in the course of this work. The experiences and observations from this research have revealed important aspects and dimensions of reality that are usually hidden from our everyday awareness.

Throughout centuries, these experiences and the realms of existence they disclose have been described in the context of spiritual philosophies and mystical traditions, such as Vedānta, Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Gnosticism, Christian mysticism, Cabala, and many other sophisticated spiritual systems. The findings of my research and contemporary consciousness research in general essentially confirm and support the position of these ancient teachings. They are thus in radical conflict with the most fundamental assumptions of materialistic science concerning consciousness, human nature, and the nature of reality. They clearly indicate that consciousness is not a product of the brain, but a primary principle of existence, and that it plays a critical role in the creation of the phenomenal world.

This research also radically changes our conception of the human psyche. It shows that, in its farthest reaches, the psyche of each of us is essentially commensurate with all of existence and ultimately identical with the cosmic creative principle itself. This conclusion, while seriously challenging the worldview of modern technological societies, is in far-reaching agreement with the image of reality found in the great spiritual and mystical traditions of the world, which the Anglo-American writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley referred to as the “perennial philosophy” (Huxley 1945).

Modern consciousness research has generated important data that support the basic tenets of the perennial philosophy. It has revealed a grand purposeful design underlying all of creation and has shown that all of existence is permeated by superior intelligence. In the light of these new discoveries, spirituality is affirmed as an important and legitimate endeavor in human life, since it reflects a critical dimension of the human psyche and of the universal scheme of things. The mystical traditions and spiritual philosophies of the past have often been dismissed and

even ridiculed for being “irrational” and “unscientific”. This is an uninformed judgment that is unwarranted and unjustified. Many of the great spiritual systems are products of centuries of in-depth exploration of the human psyche and consciousness that in many ways resembles scientific research.

These systems offer detailed instructions concerning the methods of inducing spiritual experiences on which they base their philosophical speculations. They have systematically collected data drawn from these experiences and subjected them to collective consensus validation, usually over a period of many centuries. These are exactly the stages necessary for achieving valid and reliable knowledge in any area of scientific endeavor (Smith 1976; Wilber 1997). It is very exciting that the claims of various schools of perennial philosophy can now be supported by data from modern consciousness research.

The approaches to self-exploration that make this modern validation possible, as they are described in this book, do not require the same degree of commitment and personal sacrifice as the ancient spiritual practices. They are more accessible and practical for Westerners who are trapped in the complexity of modern life. The use of psychedelics has been compromised by widespread unsupervised experimentation and is at present seriously barred by a host of administrative and legal restrictions. However, holotropic breathwork is a method that is available for all those interested in exploring the validity of the insights described in this book. The experiences from our workshops conducted all over the world and the feedback from several hundred people who have completed our training and facilitate holotropic breathwork sessions themselves have convinced me that the observations I have described in this book are fully replicable.

Holotropic States of Consciousness

Before we begin to explore the spiritual and philosophical insights from my work, I would like to clarify in which sense I will be using in this book the term *nonordinary states of consciousness*. My primary interest is to focus on experiences that repre-

sent a useful source of data about the human psyche and the nature of reality, particularly those that reveal various aspects of the spiritual dimension of existence. I would also like to examine the healing, transformative, and evolutionary potential of these experiences. For this purpose, the term *nonordinary states of consciousness* is too general, since it includes a wide range of conditions that are not interesting or relevant from this point of view.

Consciousness can be profoundly changed by a variety of pathological processes—by cerebral traumas, by intoxications with poisons, by infections, or by degenerative and circulatory processes in the brain. Such conditions can certainly result in profound mental changes that would be included in the category of nonordinary states of consciousness. However, they cause “trivial deliria” or “organic psychoses,” states that are very important clinically, but are not relevant for our discussion. People suffering from delirious states are typically disoriented. They might be confused to such a degree that they do not know who and where they are and what month or year it is. They typically show a disturbance of intellectual functions and have subsequent amnesia for the experiences they have had.

I will, therefore, narrow our discussion to a large and important subgroup of nonordinary states of consciousness for which contemporary psychiatry does not have a specific term. Because I am convinced that they deserve to be distinguished from the rest and placed into a special category, I have coined for them the name *holotropic* (Grof 1992). This composite word literally means “oriented toward wholeness” or “moving in the direction of wholeness” (from the Greek *holos* = whole, and *trepein* = moving toward or in the direction of something). The full meaning of this term and the justification for its use will become clear later in this book. It suggests that in our everyday state of consciousness we are not really whole; we are fragmented and identify with only a small fraction of who we really are.

Holotropic states are characterized by a specific transformation of consciousness associated with perceptual changes in all sensory areas, intense and often unusual emotions, and profound alterations in the thought processes. They are also usually

accompanied by a variety of intense psychosomatic manifestations and unconventional forms of behavior. Consciousness is changed qualitatively in a very profound and fundamental way but, unlike in the delirant conditions, it is not grossly impaired. In holotropic states, we experience intrusion of other dimensions of existence that can be very intense and even overwhelming. However, at the same time, we typically remain fully oriented and do not completely lose touch with everyday reality. We experience simultaneously two very different realities.

Extraordinary changes in sensory perception represent a very important and characteristic aspect of holotropic states. With the eyes open, we typically experience profound changes in the shapes and colors of the environment. When we close our eyes, we can be flooded with images drawn from our personal history and from the collective unconscious. We can also have visions portraying various aspects of nature, of the cosmos, or of the mythological realms. This can be accompanied by a wide range of experiences engaging other senses—various sounds, physical sensations, smells, and tastes.

The emotions associated with holotropic states cover a very broad spectrum that extends far beyond the limits of our everyday experience. They range from feelings of ecstatic rapture, heavenly bliss, and “peace that passeth all understanding” to episodes of abysmal terror, overpowering anger, utter despair, consuming guilt, and other forms of extreme emotional suffering. The intensity of these agonizing experiences can match the descriptions of the tortures of hell in some of the great religions of the world. The physical sensations that accompany these states are similarly polarized. Depending on the content of the experience, it can be a sense of extraordinary health and well-being, optimal physiological functioning, and orgasmic sexual sensations of enormous intensity, but also extreme discomfort, such as excruciating pains, pressures, nausea, or feelings of suffocation.

A particularly interesting aspect of holotropic states is their effect on the thought processes. The intellect is not impaired, but it operates in a way that is significantly different from its everyday functioning. While we might not be able to rely in these states on our judgment in ordinary practical matters, we can be

literally flooded with remarkable new information on a variety of subjects. We can reach profound psychological insights concerning our personal history, unconscious dynamics, emotional difficulties, and interpersonal problems. We can also experience extraordinary revelations concerning various aspects of nature and the cosmos that transcend our educational and intellectual background. By far the most interesting insights that become available in holotropic states revolve around philosophical, metaphysical, and spiritual issues. Exploration of these insights is the main focus of this book.

Philosophical and Spiritual Insights from Holotropic States

The content of holotropic states of consciousness is often philosophical and mystical. In these episodes, we can experience sequences of psychospiritual death and rebirth or feelings of oneness with other people, nature, the universe, and God. We might uncover what seem to be memories from other incarnations, encounter powerful archetypal beings, communicate with discarnate entities, and visit numerous mythological domains. The rich spectrum of these states also includes out-of-body experiences during which the disembodied consciousness maintains the capacity of optical perception and can accurately observe from unusual angles and distances the events in the immediate environment of the body, as well as in various remote locations.

Holotropic experiences can be induced by a variety of ancient and aboriginal techniques, "technologies of the sacred." These procedures combine in various ways drumming, rattling, sounds of bells or gongs, chanting, rhythmic dancing, changes of breathing, and cultivation of special forms of awareness. They might include extended social and sensory isolation, fasting, sleep deprivation, dehydration, and even drastic physical interventions, such as blood-letting, powerful laxatives and purgatives, and infliction of severe pain. A particularly effective technology of the sacred has been ritual use of psychedelic plants and substances.

These mind-altering techniques have played a critical role in the ritual and spiritual history of humanity. Induction of holotropic

states has been absolutely essential for shamanism, rites of passage, and other ceremonies of native cultures. It also represented the key element of the ancient mysteries of death and rebirth that were conducted in different parts of the world and particularly flourished in the Mediterranean area. Holotropic experiences have been equally important for various mystical branches of the great religions of the world. These esoteric traditions have developed a variety of technologies of the sacred—specific methods of inducing such experiences. Here belong various forms of yoga, meditation and concentration techniques, multivocal chanting, whirling of the dervishes, ascetic practices, the Christian hesychasm or “Jesus prayer,” and many others.

In modern times, the spectrum of mind-altering techniques has been considerably enriched. The clinical approaches include the use of pure alkaloids from psychedelic plants or synthetic psychedelic substances, as well as powerful forms of experiential psychotherapy, such as hypnosis, primal therapy, rebirthing, and holotropic breathwork. The most popular of the laboratory methods for inducing holotropic states has been sensory deprivation, an approach based on various degrees of reduction of sensory stimuli. Another well-known method is biofeedback, which makes it possible to use the information about the changes in one’s brain waves as a guideline to specific states of consciousness. Many special electronic devices use the principle of “entrainment” or “driving” of the brainwaves by various acoustic and optical stimuli.

It is important to emphasize that episodes of holotropic states of varying depth and duration can also occur spontaneously, without any specific identifiable cause, and often against the will of the people involved. Since modern psychiatry does not differentiate between mystical or spiritual states and psychotic episodes, people experiencing these states are often diagnosed as mentally ill, hospitalized, and subjected to routine suppressive pharmacological treatment. My wife Christina and I have suggested that many of these states are actually psychospiritual crises or spiritual emergencies. If they are properly understood and individuals undergoing them are supported by experienced facilitators, episodes of this kind can result in

psychosomatic healing, spiritual opening, positive personality transformation, and consciousness evolution (Grof and Grof 1990).

Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science

As we have seen from the above description, holotropic experiences are the common denominator in many procedures that have throughout centuries shaped the ritual, spiritual, and cultural life of many human groups. They have been the main source of cosmologies, mythologies, philosophies, and religious systems describing the spiritual nature of the cosmos and of existence. They are the key for understanding the spiritual life of humanity from shamanism and sacred ceremonies of aboriginal tribes to the great religions of the world. But, most important, they provide invaluable practical guidelines for a rich and satisfying life strategy that makes it possible to realize to the fullest our creative potential. For all these reasons, it is important that Western scientists free themselves from their materialistic prejudices and subject holotropic states to unbiased systematic research.

I have been deeply interested in all the categories of holotropic states of consciousness mentioned above and have had important personal experiences in many of them. However, as I have mentioned earlier, most of my professional work has been in the areas of psychedelic therapy, holotropic breathwork, and "spiritual emergency." Although the experiences observed in these three situations differ in terms of the triggers that initiate them, they seem to be remarkably similar in terms of their experiential content and of the spiritual and philosophical insights that they convey.

During my professional career, I have personally conducted over four thousand psychedelic sessions with such substances as LSD, psilocybine, mescaline, dipropyl-tryptamine (DPT), and methylene-dioxy-amphetamine (MDA), and had access to over two thousand sessions conducted by my colleagues. A significant proportion of these sessions involved psychiatric patients suffering from various forms of emotional and psychosomatic disorders,

such as depression, psychoneurosis, psychosomatic disorders, alcoholism, and narcotic drug addiction.

Another large group consisted of patients suffering from various forms of cancer, most of them terminal. In this study, the objective was not only to relieve the emotional distress and severe physical pain associated with this illness, but also to offer these patients an opportunity to achieve mystical states in order to alleviate their fear of death, change their attitude toward it, and transform their experience of dying. The remaining subjects were "normal volunteers," such as psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, clergy, artists, and scientists from various disciplines, who volunteered for psychedelic sessions because they sought understanding and insight.

The breathing sessions were conducted in the context of a long-term training program of professionals and of experiential workshops with a broad cross-section of the general population. Over the years, my wife Christina and I have supervised over thirty thousand holotropic sessions, mostly carried out in groups, only exceptionally on an individual basis. Besides the experimentation with psychedelics and with the holotropic breathwork, I have also worked with many individuals undergoing spontaneous psychospiritual crises. This occurred occasionally as part of my personal and professional life and was not carried out systematically as a specific project.

In writing this book, I used the records that I had amassed during more than forty years of work in the field of consciousness studies. I have focused specifically on those parts of the records that described experiences and observations related to basic ontological and cosmological questions. To my surprise, what emerged from these accounts of holotropic states was a comprehensive and logically consistent alternative to the understanding of human nature and of existence that has been formulated by materialistic science and that represents the official ideology of the Western industrial civilization.

People who experience holotropic states and integrate them effectively do not develop idiosyncratic delusional worldviews representing disjointed distortions of "objective reality." They discover various partial aspects of a grand vision of a universe

that is created and permeated by superior cosmic intelligence. In the last analysis, this ensouled cosmos is commensurate with their own psyche and consciousness. These insights show a remarkable similarity to the understanding of reality that has repeatedly emerged, often quite independently, throughout history in different parts of the world. In many variations, this vision of reality has been shared by all the people who have had the opportunity to complement their everyday experience of material reality with insights from holotropic states of consciousness.

This finding brings good news to the millions of Westerners and people in technologized societies who have had various forms of holotropic experiences and were unable to integrate them with the belief system of their mainstream cultures. Because of this discrepancy, many of them questioned their own sanity or had their sanity questioned by others, including the mental health professionals from whom they sought advice or to whom they were brought against their will. The study of holotropic states vindicates these people and reveals the shortcomings of contemporary psychiatry. It shows an urgent need for a radical revision and revisioning of our understanding of human nature and of the nature of reality.

As the revolutionary advances of various disciplines of modern science continue to lift the spell of the outdated materialistic worldview, we begin to see the outlines of a new comprehensive understanding of ourselves, nature, and the universe. It is increasingly clear that this emerging alternative approach to existence will integrate science and spirituality and introduce important elements of the ancient wisdom into our technological world. Even at present, we have much more than just a disjointed mosaic of revolutionary theories and a vague outline of such a vision. Ervin Laszlo has already provided a brilliant synthesis of the most important theoretical breakthroughs in various fields of modern science (Laszlo 1993). Ken Wilber has formulated an extraordinary interdisciplinary framework that provides the necessary philosophical foundations for such integral understanding of reality (Wilber 1995, 1996, 1997).

Clearly, when this new vision of the cosmos is completed, it will not be a simple return to prescientific understanding of

reality, but an overarching creative synthesis of the best of the past and the present. A worldview preserving all the achievements of modern science and, at the same time, reintroducing into the Western civilization the spiritual values that it has lost, could have profound influence on our individual, as well as collective life. I firmly believe that the experiences and observations from holotropic states explored in this book will be an integral part of this exciting new image of reality and of human nature that is now painfully being born.