

## CHAPTER ONE



### *Healing and Heuristic Potential of Nonordinary States of Consciousness*

This book summarizes my experiences and observations from more than forty years of research of nonordinary states of consciousness. My primary interest is to focus on the heuristic aspects of these states; that is, on what they can contribute to our understanding of the nature of consciousness and of the human psyche. Since my original training was as clinical psychiatrist, I will also pay special attention to the healing, transformative, and evolutionary potential of these experiences. For this purpose, the term *nonordinary states of consciousness* is too broad and general. It includes a wide range of conditions that are of little or no interest from a heuristic or therapeutic perspective.

Consciousness can be profoundly changed by a variety of pathological processes—by cerebral traumas, by intoxications with poisonous chemicals, by infections, or by degenerative and circulatory processes in the brain. Such conditions can certainly result in profound mental changes that would relegate them to the category of “nonordinary states of consciousness.” However, such impairments cause “trivial deliria” or “organic psychoses,” states that are very important clinically, but are not relevant for our discussion. People suffering from such states are typically disoriented; they do not know who and where they are and what date it is. In addition, their intellectual functions are significantly impaired and they typically have subsequent amnesia for their experiences.

In this book, I will focus on a large and important subgroup of non-ordinary states of consciousness which significantly differ from the rest and represent an invaluable source of new information about the human psyche in health and disease. They also have a remarkable therapeutic and transformative potential. Over the years, daily clinical observations convinced me about the extraordinary nature of these experiences and about the far-reaching implications they have for the theory and practice of psychiatry. I found it difficult to believe that contemporary psychiatry does not recognize their specific features and does not have a special name for them.

Because I feel strongly 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 identify with only a small fraction of who we really are. In holotropic states, we can transcend the narrow boundaries of the body ego and reclaim our full identity.

### ***Holotropic States of Consciousness***

In holotropic states, consciousness is changed qualitatively in a very profound and fundamental way, but it is not grossly impaired like in the organically caused conditions. We typically remain fully oriented in terms of space and time and do not completely lose touch with everyday reality. At the same time, our field of consciousness is invaded by contents from other dimensions of existence in a way that can be very intense and even overwhelming. We thus experience simultaneously two very different realities, “have each foot in a different world.”

Holotropic states are characterized by dramatic perceptual changes in all sensory areas. When we close our eyes, our visual field can be flooded with images drawn from our personal history and from the individual and collective unconscious. We can have visions and experiences portraying various aspects of the animal and botanical kingdoms, nature in general, or of the cosmos. Our experiences can take us into the realm of archetypal beings and mythological regions. When we open the eyes, our perception of the environment can be illusively transformed by vivid projections of this uncon-

scious material. 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 typically extends far beyond the limits of our everyday experience, both in their nature and intensity. They range from feelings of ecstatic rapture, heavenly bliss, and “peace that passeth all understanding” to episodes of abysmal terror, murderous anger, utter despair, consuming guilt, and other forms of unimaginable emotional suffering. Extreme forms of these emotional states match the descriptions of the paradisaean or celestial realms and of hells described in the scriptures of the great religions of the world.

A particularly interesting aspect of holotropic states is their effect on thought processes. The intellect is not impaired, but functions in a way that is significantly different from its everyday mode of operation. While we might not be able to rely on our judgment in ordinary practical matters, we can be literally flooded with remarkable valid 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 of the cosmos that by a wide margin transcend our educational and intellectual background. However, by far the most interesting insights that become available in holotropic states revolve around philosophical, metaphysical, and spiritual issues.

We can experience sequences of psychological death and rebirth and a broad spectrum of transpersonal phenomena, such as 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 figures, communicate with discarnate beings, and visit numerous mythological landscapes. Holotropic experiences of this kind are 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 ritual and spiritual life of humanity from shamanism and sacred ceremonies of aboriginal tribes to the great religions of the world.

### *Holotropic States of Consciousness and Human History*

When we examine the role that holotropic states of consciousness have played in human history, the most surprising discovery is a striking difference between the attitude toward these states characterizing the Western

industrial society and those of all the ancient and pre-industrial cultures. In sharp contrast with modern humanity, all the indigenous cultures held holotropic states in great esteem and spent much time and effort developing safe and effective ways of inducing them. They used them as a principal vehicle in their ritual and spiritual life and for several other important purposes.

In the context of sacred ceremonies, nonordinary states mediated for the natives direct experiential contact with the archetypal dimensions of reality—deities, mythological realms, and numinous forces of nature. Another area where these states played a crucial role was diagnosing and healing of various disorders. Although aboriginal cultures often possessed impressive knowledge of naturalistic remedies, they put primary emphasis on metaphysical healing. This typically involved induction of holotropic states of consciousness—for the client, for the healer, or both of them at the same time. In many instances, a large group or even an entire tribe entered a healing trance together, as it is, for example, until this day among the !Kung Bushmen in the African Kalahari Desert.

Holotropic states have also been used to cultivate intuition and extrasensory perception (ESP) for a variety of practical purposes, such as finding lost persons and objects, obtaining information about people in remote locations, and for following the movement of the game. In addition, they served as a source of artistic inspiration, providing ideas for rituals, paintings, sculptures, and songs. The impact that the experiences encountered in these states had on the cultural life of pre-industrial societies and the spiritual history of humanity has been enormous.

The importance of holotropic states for ancient and aboriginal cultures is reflected in the amount of time and energy dedicated to the development of “technologies of the sacred,” various mind-altering procedures capable of inducing holotropic states for ritual and spiritual purposes. These methods combine in various ways drumming and other forms of percussion, music, chanting, rhythmic dancing, changes of breathing, and cultivation of special forms of awareness. Extended social and sensory isolation, such as a stay in a cave, desert, arctic ice, or in high mountains, also play an important role as means of inducing holotropic states. Extreme physiological interventions used for this purpose include fasting, sleep deprivation, dehydration, and even massive bloodletting, use of powerful laxatives and purgatives, and infliction of severe pain.

A particularly effective technology for inducing holotropic states has been ritual use of psychedelic plants and substances. The legendary divine

TABLE I. I Ancient and Aboriginal Techniques for Inducing Holotropic States

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<i>Work with breath, direct or indirect</i> (pranayama, yogic bastrika, Buddhist “fire breath,” Sufi breathing, Balinese ketjak, Inuit Eskimo throat music, etc.)
<i>Sound technologies</i> (drumming, rattling, use of sticks, bells, and gongs, music, chanting, mantras, didjeridoo, bull-roarer)
<i>Dancing and other forms of movement</i> (whirling of the dervishes, lama dances, Kalahari Bushmen trance dance, hatha yoga, tai chi, chigong, etc.)
<i>Social isolation and sensory deprivation</i> (stay in the desert, in caves, on mountain tops, in the snow fields, vision quest, etc.)
<i>Sensory overload</i> (a combination of acoustic, visual, and proprioceptive stimuli during aboriginal rituals, extreme pain, etc.)
<i>Physiological means</i> (fasting, sleep deprivation, purgatives, laxatives, blood letting [Mayas], painful physical procedures (Lakota Sioux sun dance, subincision, filing of teeth)
<i>Meditation, prayer, and other spiritual practices</i> (various yogas, Tantra, Soto and Rinzaï Zen practice, Tibetan Dzogchen, Christian hesychasm (Jesus prayer), the exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, etc.)
<i>Psychedelic animal and plant materials</i> (hashish, peyote, teonanacatl, ololiuqui, ayahuasca, eboga, Hawaiian woodrose, Syrian rue, secretion from the skin of the toad Bufo alvarius, Pacific fish Kyphosus fuscus, etc.)

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potion referred to as *haoma* in the ancient Persian Zend Avesta and as *soma* in India was used by the IndoIranian tribes several millenia ago and was probably the most important source of the Vedic religion and philosophy. Preparations from different varieties of hemp have been smoked and ingested under various names (*hashish, charas, bhang, ganja, kif, marijuana*) in the Oriental countries, in Africa, and in the Caribbean area for recreation, pleasure, and during religious ceremonies. They have represented an important sacrament for such diverse groups as the Brahmans, certain Sufi orders, ancient Skythians, and the Jamaican Rastafarians.

Ceremonial use of various psychedelic materials also has a long history in Central America. Highly effective mind-altering plants were well known in several Pre-Hispanic Indian cultures—among the Aztecs, Mayans, and Toltecs. Most famous of these are the Mexican cactus *peyote* (*Lophophora williamsii*), the sacred mushroom *teonanacatl* (*Psilocybe mexicana*), and *ololiuqui*, seeds of different varieties of the morning glory plant (*Ipomoea violacea* and *Turbina corymbosa*). These materials have been used as sacraments until this day by the Huichol, Mazatec, Chichimeca, Cora, and other Mexican Indian tribes, as well as the Native American Church.

The famous South American yajé or ayahuasca is a decoction from a jungle liana (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) combined with other plant additives.



*Painting from a holotropic breathwork session reflecting the experience of the shaman's transformation into a mountain lion (Tai Ingrid Hazard).*

The Amazonian area and the Caribbean islands are also known for a variety of psychedelic snuffs. Aboriginal tribes in Africa ingest and inhale preparations from the bark of the eboga shrub (*Tabernanthe iboga*). They use them in small quantities as stimulants and in larger dosages in initiation rituals for men and women. The psychedelic compounds of animal origin include the secretions of the skin of certain toads (*Bufo alvarius*) and the meat of the Pacific fish *Kyphosus fuscus*. The above list represents only a small fraction of psychedelic materials that have been used over many centuries in ritual and spiritual life of various countries of the world.

The practice of inducing holotropic states can be traced back to the dawn of human history. It is the most important characteristic feature of

*shamanism*, the oldest spiritual system and healing art of humanity. The career of many shamans begins with a spontaneous psychospiritual crisis (“shamanic illness”). It is a powerful visionary state during which the future shaman experiences a journey into the underworld, the realm of the dead, where he or she is attacked by evil spirits, subjected to various ordeals, killed, and dismembered. This is followed by an experience of re-birth and ascent into the celestial realms.

Shamanism is connected with holotropic states in yet another way. Accomplished and experienced shamans are able to enter into a trance state at will and in a controlled way. They use it for diagnosing diseases,



*Painting from a holotropic breathwork session in which the artists identified with an adolescent girl from a South American tribe participating in a puberty rite. An important part of the ritual was experiential identification with a jaguar (Kathleen Silver).*



*Painting from a holotropic breathwork session representing identification with a virgin from the Yucatan part of Mexico used as sacrificial victim in a ritual celebrating the Corn Goddess. A period of suffocation, panic, and sexual arousal was followed by a beautiful rainbow bringing light and peace (Kathleen Silver).*

healing, extrasensory perception, exploration of alternate dimensions of reality, and other purposes. They also often induce holotropic states in other members of their tribes and play the role of “psychopomps”—provide the necessary support and guidance for those traversing the complex territories of the Beyond.

Shamanism is extremely ancient, probably at least thirty to forty thousand years old; its roots can be traced far back into the Paleolithic era. The walls of the famous caves in Southern France and northern Spain, such as Lascaux, Font de Gaume, Les Trois Frères, Altamira, and others,



are decorated with beautiful images of animals. Most of them represent species that actually roamed the Stone Age landscape—bisons, wild horses, stags, ibexes, mammoths, wolves, rhinos, and reindeers. However, others like the “Wizard Beast” in Lascaux are mythical creatures that clearly have magical and ritual significance. And in several of these caves are paintings and carvings of strange figures combining human and animal features, who undoubtedly represent ancient shamans.

The best known of these images is the “Sorcerer of Les Trois Frères,” a mysterious composite figure combining various male symbols. He has the antlers of a stag, eyes of an owl, tail of a wild horse or wolf, human beard, and paws of a lion. Another famous carving of a shaman in the same cave complex is the “Beast Master,” presiding over the Happy Hunting Grounds teeming with beautiful animals. Also well known is the hunting scene on the wall in Lascaux. It shows a wounded bison and a lying figure of a shaman with an erect penis. The grotto known as La Gabillou harbors a carving of a shamanic figure in dynamic movement whom the archeologists call “The Dancer.”

On the clay floor of one of these caves, Tuc d’Audoubert, the discoverers found footprints in circular arrangement around two clay bison effigies suggesting that its inhabitants conducted dances, similar to those that are still being performed by many aboriginal cultures for the induction of trance states. The origins of shamanism can be traced back to a yet older Neanderthal cult of the cave bear as exemplified by the animal shrines from the interglacial period found in the grottoes in Switzerland and southern Germany.

Shamanism is not only ancient, it is also universal; it can be found in North and South America, in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. The fact that so many different cultures throughout human history have found shamanic techniques useful and relevant suggests that the holotropic states engage what the anthropologists call the “primal mind,” a basic and primordial aspect of the human psyche that transcends race, sex, culture, and historical time. In cultures that have escaped the disruptive influence of the Western industrial civilization, shamanic techniques and procedures have survived to this day.

Another example of culturally sanctioned psychospiritual transformation involving holotropic states are ritual events that the anthropologists call *rites of passage*. This term was coined by the Dutch anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, the author of the first scientific treatise on the subject (van Gennep 1960). Ceremonies of this kind existed in all known native

cultures and are still being performed in many pre-industrial societies. Their main purpose is to redefine, transform, and consecrate individuals, groups, and even entire cultures.

Rites of passage are conducted at times of critical change in the life of an individual or a culture. Their timing frequently coincides with major physiological and social transitions, such as childbirth, circumcision, puberty, marriage, menopause, and dying. Similar rituals are also associated with initiation into warrior status, acceptance into secret societies, calendrical festivals of renewal, healing ceremonies, and geographical moves of human groups.

Rites of passage involve powerful mind-altering procedures that induce psychologically disorganizing experiences resulting in a higher level of integration. This episode of psychospiritual death and rebirth is then interpreted as dying to the old role and being born into the new one. For example, in the puberty rites the initiates enter the procedure as boys or girls and emerge as adults with all the rights and duties that come with this status. In all these situations, the individual or social group leaves behind one mode of being and moves into totally new life circumstances.

The person who returns from the initiation is not the same as the one who entered the initiation process. Having undergone a deep psychospiritual transformation, he or she has a personal connection with the numinous dimensions of existence, as well as a new and much expanded worldview, a better self-image, and a different system of values. All this is the result of a deliberately induced crisis that reaches the very core of the initiate's being and is at times terrifying, chaotic, and disorganizing. The rites of passage thus provide another example of a situation in which a period of temporary disintegration and turmoil leads to greater sanity and well-being.

The two examples of "positive disintegration" I have discussed so far—the shamanic crisis and the experience of the rite of passage—have many features in common, but they also differ in some important ways. The shamanic crisis invades the psyche of the future shaman unexpectedly and without warning; it is spontaneous and autonomous in nature. In comparison, the rites of passage are a product of the culture and follow a predictable time schedule. The experiences of the initiates are the result of specific "technologies of the sacred," developed and perfected by previous generations.

In cultures that venerate shamans and also conduct rites of passage, the shamanic crisis is considered to be a form of initiation that is much

superior to the rite of passage. It is seen as intervention of higher power and thus indication of divine choice and special calling. From another perspective, rites of passage represent a further step in cultural appreciation of the positive value of holotropic states. Shamanic cultures accept and hold in high esteem holotropic states that occur spontaneously during initiatory crises and the healing trance experienced or induced by recognized shamans. Rites of passage introduce holotropic states into the culture on a large scale, institutionalize them, and make them an integral part of ritual and spiritual life.

Holotropic states of consciousness also played a critical role in the *mysteries of death and rebirth*, sacred and secret procedures that were widespread in the ancient world. These mysteries were based on mythological stories about deities symbolizing death and transfiguration. In ancient Sumer it was Inanna and Tammuz, in Egypt Isis and Osiris, and in Greece the deities Attis, Adonis, Dionysus, and Persephone. Their Mesoamerican counterparts were the Aztec Quetzalcoatl, or the Plumed Serpent, and the Mayan Hero Twins known from the Popol Vuh. These mysteries were particularly popular in the Mediterranean area and in the Middle East, as exemplified by the Sumerian and Egyptian temple initiations, the Mithraic mysteries, or the Greek Korybantic rites, Bacchanalia, and the mysteries of Eleusis.

An impressive testimony for the power and impact of the experiences involved is the fact that the mysteries conducted in the Eleusinian sanctuary near Athens took place regularly and without interruption every five years for a period of almost two thousand years. Even then they did not simply cease to attract the attention of the antique world. The ceremonial activities in Eleusis were brutally interrupted when the Christian Emperor Theodosius interdicted participation in the mysteries and all other pagan cults. Shortly afterward, in 395 A.D., the invading Goths destroyed the sanctuary.

In the telestrion, the giant initiation hall in Eleusis, over three thousand neophytes at a time experienced powerful experiences of psychospiritual transformation. The cultural importance of these mysteries for the ancient world and their as yet unacknowledged role in the history of European civilization becomes evident when we realize that among their initiates were many famous and illustrious figures of antiquity. The list of neophytes included the philosophers Plato, Aristotle, and Epictetus, the military leader Alkibiades, the playwrights Euripides and Sophocles, and the poet Pindaros. Another famous initiate, Marcus Aurelius, was fascinated

by the eschatological hopes offered by these rites. Roman statesman and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero took part in these mysteries and wrote an exalted report about their effects and their impact on the antique civilization (Cicero 1977).

Another example of the great respect and influence the ancient mystery religions had in the antique world is Mithraism. It began to spread throughout the Roman Empire in the first century A.D., reached its peak in the third century, and succumbed to Christianity at the end of the fourth century. At the cult's height, the underground Mithraic sanctuaries (*mithraea*), could be found from the shores of the Black Sea to the mountains of Scotland and to the border of the Sahara Desert. The Mithraic mysteries represented the sister religion of Christianity and its most important competitor (Ulansey 1989).

The specifics of the mind-altering procedures involved in these secret rites have remained for the most part unknown, although it is likely that the sacred potion *kykeon* that played a critical role in the Eleusinian mysteries was a concoction containing alkaloids of ergot similar to LSD. It is also highly probable that psychedelic materials were involved in the bacchanalia and other types of rites. Ancient Greeks did not know distillation of alcohol and yet, according to the reports, the wines used in Dionysian rituals had to be diluted three to twenty times and a mere three cups brought some initiates "to the brink of insanity" (Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck 1978).

In addition to the above ancient and aboriginal technologies of the sacred, many great religions developed *sophisticated psychospiritual procedures* specifically designed to induce holotropic experiences. Here belong, for example, different techniques of yoga, meditations used in Vipassana, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism, as well as spiritual exercises of the Taoist tradition and complex Tantric rituals. We could also add various elaborate approaches used by the Sufis, the mystics of Islam. They regularly used in their sacred ceremonies, or *zikers*, intense breathing, devotional chants, and trance-inducing whirling dance.

From the Judeo-Christian tradition, we can mention here the breathing exercises of the Essenes and their baptism involving half-drowning, the Christian Jesus prayer (hesychasm), the exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, and various Cabalistic and Hassidic procedures. Approaches designed to induce or facilitate direct spiritual experiences are characteristic for the mystical branches of the great religions and for their monastic orders.

### *Holotropic States in the History of Psychiatry*

The unambiguous acceptance of holotropic states in the preindustrial era stands in sharp contrast with the complex and confusing attitude toward these states in the industrial civilization. Holotropic states played a crucial role in the early history of depth psychology and psychotherapy. In psychiatric handbooks, the roots of depth psychology are usually traced back to hypnotic sessions with hysterical patients conducted by Jean Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière in Paris and to the research in hypnosis carried out by Hippolyte Bernheim and Ambroise Liébault at Nancy. Sigmund Freud visited both places during his study journey to France and learned the technique of inducing hypnosis. He used it in his initial explorations to access his patients' unconscious. Later, he radically changed his strategy and replaced this approach with the method of free associations.

In addition, Freud's early ideas were inspired by his work with a patient whom he treated jointly with his friend Joseph Breuer. This young woman, whom Freud called in his writings Miss Anna O., suffered from severe hysterical symptoms. During their therapeutic sessions, she experienced spontaneous holotropic states of consciousness in which she regressed to childhood and relived various traumatic memories underlying her neurotic disorder. She found these experiences very helpful and referred to them as "chimney sweeping." In *Studies in Hysteria*, the two therapists recommended hypnotic regression and belated emotional abreaction of traumas as the treatment for psychoneuroses (Freud and Breuer 1936).

In his later work, Freud moved from direct emotional experience in a holotropic state to free association in the ordinary state of consciousness. He also shifted emphasis from conscious reliving and emotional abreaction of unconscious material to analysis of transference and from actual trauma to Oedipal fantasies. In retrospect, these seem to have been unfortunate developments that sent Western psychotherapy in the wrong direction for the next fifty years (Ross 1989). While verbal therapy can be very useful in providing interpersonal learning and rectifying skewed interaction and communication in human relationships (e.g., couple and family therapy), it is ineffective in dealing with emotional and bioenergetic blockages and macrotraumas that underlie many emotional and psychosomatic disorders.

As a result of this development, psychotherapy in the first half of the twentieth century was practically synonymous with talking—face-to-face interviews, free associations on the couch, and the behaviorist decondi-

tioning. At the same time holotropic states, initially seen as an effective therapeutic tool, became associated with pathology rather than healing.

This situation started to change in the 1950s with the advent of psychedelic therapy and radical innovations in psychology. A group of American psychologists headed by Abraham Maslow, who were dissatisfied with behaviorism and Freudian psychoanalysis, launched a new revolutionary movement, *humanistic psychology*. Within a very short time, this movement became very popular and provided the context for a broad spectrum of therapies based on entirely new principles.

While traditional psychotherapies used primarily verbal means and intellectual analysis, these new, so-called experiential, therapies emphasized direct experience and expression of emotions. Many of them also included various forms of bodywork as integral parts of the therapeutic process. Probably the most famous representative of these new approaches is Fritz Perls's Gestalt therapy (Perls 1976). In spite of their emphasis on emotional experience, most of these therapies still rely to a great degree on verbal communication and require that the client stay in the ordinary state of consciousness.

The most radical innovations in the therapeutic field have been approaches so powerful that they profoundly change the state of consciousness of the clients, such as psychedelic therapy, various neo-Reichian approaches, primal therapy, rebirthing, and a few others. My wife Christina and I have developed holotropic breathwork, a method that can facilitate profound holotropic states by very simple means—a combination of conscious breathing, evocative music, and focused bodywork (Grof 1988). We will explore the theory and practice of this powerful form of self-exploration and psychotherapy later in this book.

Modern psychopharmacological research enriched the armamentarium of methods for inducing holotropic states of consciousness by adding *psychedelic substances in pure chemical form*, either isolated from plants or synthesized in the laboratory. Here belong the tetrahydrocannabinols (THC), active principles from hashish and marijuana, mescaline from peyote, psilocybine and psilocine from the Mexican magic mushrooms, and various tryptamine derivatives from the psychedelic snuffs used in the Caribbean area and in South America. LSD, or diethylamid of lysergic acid, is a semisynthetic substance; lysergic acid is a natural product of ergot and its diethylamid group is added in the laboratory. The most famous synthetic psychedelics are the amphetamine derivatives MDA, MDMA (Adam or Ecstasy), STP, and 2-CB.

There also exist very effective laboratory techniques for altering consciousness. One of these is *sensory isolation*, which involves significant reduction of meaningful sensory stimuli (Lilly 1977). In its extreme form the individual is deprived of sensory input by submersion in a dark and soundproof tank filled with water of body temperature. Another well-known laboratory method of changing consciousness is *biofeedback*, where the individual is guided by electronic feedback signals into holotropic states of consciousness characterized by preponderance of certain specific frequencies of brainwaves (Green and Green 1978). We could also mention here the techniques of *sleep and dream deprivation* and *lucid dreaming* (LaBerge 1985).

It is important to emphasize that episodes of holotropic states of varying 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 mental diseases, people experiencing these states are often labeled psychotic, hospitalized, and receive routine suppressive psychopharmacological treatment. My wife Christina and I refer to these states as *psychospiritual crises* or *spiritual emergencies*. We believe that properly supported and treated, they can result in emotional and psychosomatic healing, positive personality transformation, and consciousness evolution (Grof and Grof 1989, 1990). I will return to this important topic in a later chapter.

Although I have been deeply interested in all the categories of holotropic states mentioned above, I have done most of my work in the area of psychedelic therapy, holotropic breathwork, and spiritual emergency. This book is based predominantly on my observations from these three areas in which I have most personal experience. However, the general conclusions I will be drawing from my research apply to all the situations involving holotropic states.

***Western Psychiatry:  
Misconceptions and Urgent Need for Revision***

The advent of psychedelic therapy and powerful experiential techniques reintroduced holotropic states into the therapeutic armamentarium of modern psychiatry. However, since the very beginning, the mainstream academic community has shown a strong resistance against these approaches

and has not accepted them either as treatment modalities or as a source of critical conceptual challenges.

All the evidence published in numerous professional journals and books was not enough to challenge the deeply ingrained attitude toward holotropic states established in the first half of the twentieth century. The problems resulting from unsupervised self-experimentation of the young generation in the 1960s and the misconceptions spread by sensation-hunting journalists further complicated the picture and prevented a realistic evaluation of the potential of psychedelics, as well as the risks associated with their use.

In spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, mainstream psychiatrists continue to view all holotropic states of consciousness as pathological, disregard the information generated in researching them, and do not distinguish between mystical states and psychosis. They also continue using various pharmacological means to suppress indiscriminately all spontaneously occurring nonordinary states of consciousness. It is remarkable to what extent mainstream science has ignored, distorted, and misinterpreted all the evidence concerning holotropic states, whether their source has been historical study, comparative religion, anthropology, or various areas of modern consciousness research, such as parapsychology, psychedelic therapy, experiential psychotherapies, hypnosis, thanatology, or work with laboratory mind-altering techniques.

The rigidity with which mainstream scientists have dealt with the information amassed by all these disciplines is something that one would expect from religious fundamentalists. It is very surprising when such attitude occurs in the world of science, since it is contrary to the very spirit of scientific inquiry. More than four decades that I have spent in consciousness research have convinced me that serious examination of the data from the study of holotropic states would have far-reaching consequences not only for the theory and practice of psychiatry, but for the Western scientific worldview. The only way modern science can preserve its monistic materialistic philosophy is by systematically excluding and censoring all the data concerning holotropic states.

As we have seen, utilization of the healing potential of holotropic states is the most recent development in Western psychotherapy, if we do not take into consideration the brief period at the turn of the century that we discussed earlier. Paradoxically, in a larger historical context, it is also the oldest form of healing, one that can be traced back to the dawn of humanity. The therapies using holotropic states thus represent a rediscovery



and modern reinterpretation of the elements and principles that have been documented by anthropologists studying ancient and aboriginal forms of spiritual healing, particularly various shamanic procedures.

*Implications of Modern Consciousness  
Research for Psychiatry*

As I mentioned earlier, Western psychiatry and psychology do not see holotropic states (with the exception of dreams that are not recurrent or frightening) as having therapeutic and heuristic potential, but basically as pathological phenomena. Michael Harner, an anthropologist of good academic standing, who also underwent a shamanic initiation during his field work in the Amazonian jungle and practices shamanism, suggests that Western psychiatry is seriously biased in at least two significant ways. It is *ethnocentric*, which means that it considers its own view of the human psyche and of reality to be the only correct one and superior to all others. It is also *cognicentric* (a more accurate word might be *pragmacentric*), meaning that it takes into consideration only experiences and observations in the ordinary state of consciousness (Harner 1980).

Psychiatry's disinterest in holotropic states and disregard for them has resulted in a culturally insensitive approach and a tendency to pathologize all activities that cannot be understood in the narrow context of the monistic materialistic paradigm. This includes the ritual and spiritual life of ancient and preindustrial cultures and the entire spiritual history of humanity. At the same time, this attitude also obfuscated the critical conceptual challenge that the study of holotropic states brings for the theory and practice of psychiatry.

If we study systematically the experiences and observations associated with holotropic states, this leads inevitably to a radical revision of our basic ideas about consciousness and about the human psyche and to an entirely new approach to psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy. The changes we would have to make in our thinking fall into several large categories.

*The Nature of the Human Psyche and the Dimensions of Consciousness*

Traditional academic psychiatry and psychology use a model that is limited to biology, postnatal biography, and the Freudian individual unconscious. To account for all the phenomena occurring in holotropic states,

we must drastically revise our understanding of the dimensions of the human psyche. Besides *the postnatal biographical level*, the new expanded cartography includes two additional domains: *perinatal* (related to the trauma of birth) and *transpersonal* (comprising ancestral, racial, collective, and phylogenetic memories, karmic experiences, and archetypal dynamics).

#### *The Nature and Architecture of Emotional and Psychosomatic Disorders*

To explain various disorders that do not have an organic basis (“psychogenic psychopathology”), traditional psychiatry uses a model that is limited to postnatal biographical traumas in infancy, childhood, and later life. The new understanding suggests that the roots of such disorders reach much deeper to include significant contributions from the perinatal level (trauma of birth) and from the transpersonal domains (as specified above).

#### *Effective Therapeutic Mechanisms*

Traditional psychotherapy knows only therapeutic mechanisms operating on the level of the biographical material, such as remembering of forgotten events, lifting of repression, reconstruction of the past from dreams or neurotic symptoms, reliving of traumatic memories, and analysis of transference. Holotropic research reveals many other important mechanisms of healing and personality transformation that become available when our consciousness reaches the perinatal and transpersonal levels.

#### *Strategy of Psychotherapy and Self-Exploration*

The goal in traditional psychotherapies is to reach an intellectual understanding as to how the psyche functions, why symptoms develop, and what they mean. This understanding then becomes the basis for developing a technique that therapists can use to treat their patients. A serious problem with this strategy is the striking lack of agreement among psychologists and psychiatrists concerning the most fundamental theoretical issues and the resulting astonishing number of competing schools of psychotherapy. The work with holotropic states shows us a surprising radical alternative—mobilization of deep inner intelligence of the clients that guides the process of healing and transformation.

#### *The Role of Spirituality in Human Life*

Western materialistic science has no place for any form of spirituality and, in fact, considers it incompatible with the scientific worldview. Modern consciousness research shows that spirituality is a natural and legitimate

dimension of the human psyche and of the universal scheme of things. However, in this context, it is important to emphasize that this statement applies to genuine spirituality and not to ideologies of organized religions.

*The Nature of Reality: Psyche, Cosmos, and Consciousness*

The necessary revisions discussed up to this point were related to the theory and practice of psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy. However, the work with holotropic states brings challenges of a much more fundamental nature. Many of the experiences and observations that occur during this work are so extraordinary that they cannot be understood in the context of the monistic materialistic approach to reality. Their conceptual impact is so far-reaching that it undermines the most basic metaphysical assumptions of Western science, particularly those regarding the nature of consciousness and its relationship to matter.