

Ingo Benjamin Jahrsetz: Holotropic Breathwork: Therapeutic work with states of Altered Consciousness.
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Holotropic Breathwork: On therapeutic work with states of Altered Consciousness.

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1. Holotropic Breathwork. Psychotherapy and Spirituality

Holotropic Breathwork was first developed in the 1980s by *Stanislav* and *Christina Grof* as a method in which intensive breathing (hyperventilation) is combined with evocative music, as named by *Stan Grof*. This is a strong type of music that is played to react with the energy in a group. *Focussed energy work* (process-oriented body work in the Altered Consciousness) and *Mandala painting* (expression-oriented painting of the experiences in the Altered Consciousness) are also part of the setting of Holotropic Breathwork.

The process of Holotropic Breathwork is both a method of psychotherapy as well as an aid on the spiritual path. The process of Holotropic Breathwork allows unprocessed dynamics of ones personality to integrate. These are made up the various levels of the current, the biographical, perinatal and transpersonal unconsciousness. Here, I refer to the *psychotherapeutic* components of Holotropic Breathwork.

Through Holotropic Breathwork, *Altered States of Consciousness* are triggered. These states bring greater clarity of spirit, which has a great potential for bodily, emotional and spiritual *healing* and *fulfilment* of the person. Experiences in *Altered Consciousness* change according to the perspective. In this way, a new dimension is added to the attention of the person in question. In the focus of the perspective, the divine can appear, and does so in all manner of forms. The personality, its changing identities, the Self, Death and Birth can be experienced in the perspective of the “Large Chain of Being”, which is a description for the *order of the spirit*. This is the spiritual aspect of Holotropic Breathwork.

The maturation of personality, reaching adulthood, and spiritual development are all integrated into this work. Holotropic Breathwork also strengthens the Self and dissolves the Ego. In transpersonal psychology, I often come across the misunderstanding that the one can only happen after the other. In the process of Holotropic Breathwork, they happen simultaneously – the Self and the Dissolution of the Ego touch each other.

The psycho-spiritual process of Holotropic Breathwork is led by the self-healing potential of the human soul, by the “*inner healer*”, as described by *Stan Grof*. This apparatus chooses the contents of the process, decides the intensity, the pathways and short cuts, the nature, the level and depth of the dissolution of the entanglements of the personality. “*To trust the process*” even when the results may sometimes feel bizarre, contradictory or absurd. This is one of the central statements of *Stanislav Grof*. It is the basis for the decisions of the experiencing

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person in the *Altered Consciousness* and for the Sharing Group in therapeutic interventions when attempting integration.

At the same time, it is the reference to the power of healing (one's self) that lies at the core of consciousness a sort of "spiritual hallmark": from this one is given to understand that *Transpersonal psychotherapy is not a form of psychiatric work that includes the transpersonal and spiritual. Instead, it is a spiritual assignment, a task, which through psychotherapeutic competence clears the stumbling blocks and other obstacles from the spiritual path.*

2. On the setting of Holotropic Breathwork

I would now like to list some key points on the setting of Holotropic Breathwork. Other than the already described components (hyperventilation, music, bodywork, and Mandala painting) there are also the following:

The pairing of Sitter/Breather within a group,

The open and flexible timeframe for the end of the process. Every participant is allowed their own individual time within the group process.

The *facilitator* (group leader of Holotropic Breathwork) makes sure that entities encountered in the experience of *Altered Consciousness* are successfully brought to a close. We can assume that experiences of *Altered Consciousness* can have various triggers, but that it is an art form to end them in a way that can be well integrated into the daily life of the West. The ability to support people in adequately ending the process of Holotropic Breathwork is the hallmark of a well-trained and experienced *facilitator* of Holotropic Breathwork.

For the integration of a *deep experience*, *Sharing* is important within a group. Here, the archetypal experience in the *Altered Consciousness* acquires a social meaning and becomes grounded in this way. The group as a collective, as a whole being, becomes a *morphogenetic field*, so termed by *Rupert Sheldrake*. I would like to say that the morphogenetic field of a collective consciousness is similarly structured to the *Altered Consciousness* of the individual. Morphogenetic fields are organised in a similar perspective – they transport the so-called *inner healer* through the social element of the group dynamics and probably also in macro-sociological units.

Within the energy of such a field, the *Sharing Group* can add to an individual deep experience, giving it a transformative power to better understand everyday life. When we come to realize the mystery of life in our daily routine, we can sense an indescribable joy and we begin to understand that life is full of contact

Experiences in the process of Holotropic Breathwork can be short or long, and eventually reach the stage of *Initiation*, as termed by the shamans. This usually begins with the appearance of *perinatal experiences* that build towards a climax. *Stan Grof* calls this climax the *Ego-Death*. This term comes with its share of problems, but I will use it here since it best describes a person may feel at this existential point. Some people may fully or partly experience their own birth for the second time. In every case, it is the experience of *death and rebirth* on one of

many different levels. These levels range from the more symbolically and metaphorically understood experiences, then on to several levels in between, then to the more physical experience of death and rebirth.

In the present psycho- and “transformation-“ culture, what is often avoided is the initiating personality and its main share of the *Ego-Death*, or *Fragmentation*, *Death*, *Rebirth*, as it is called by the shamans. Those who avoid the experience of death (the *Ego-Death*) in their own (self-) exploration may know and have everything, but wield no real power.

This is often a major problem in transpersonal psychology today: many people nowadays have all sorts of good ideas but lack the energy to organize their lives so that they need not fear themselves and others as much. We may perceive others and ourselves as being attractive, creative and successful if we take the risk of living with our hearts on our sleeves and allowing the divine to shine through a little from time to time. Such a risk will always include something akin to *Ego-Death*.

3. Experiences in Altered Consciousness: The personal and transpersonal. Grof's perinatal matrices.

What levels of experience are we talking about in the *Altered Consciousness*? Levels of consciousness that are usually experienced *separately* come together and cooperate to achieve a logical unison, to form *a reason for life*, to reach a certain goal in life. What are these levels?

What is usually experienced hierarchically or separate or constructively, all comes to a *holarchic order*. In the words of *Ken Wilber*: The transpersonal becomes the all-encompassing level of the personal. The personal becomes the necessity for further concealments and developments of the transpersonal.

The personal and transpersonal are not built upon each other, and are also not dissimilar. Rather, there seems to be a smooth flow between the personal and transpersonal, in both directions. This becomes very apparent during experiences of *Altered Consciousness*. One can oscillate between the personal and transpersonal, the two can be connected. Any alert moment of the experience can hold personal as well as transpersonal qualities.

Quite paradoxically however, the opposite also occurs: the move from the experience of the personal to the transpersonal occurs as a qualitative leap, and this becomes clear when one experiences the *Ego-Death*, as termed by *Stan Grof*.

The theoretical term *Ego-Death*, as used by *Stan Grof*, has always been criticised. I will not be going into the exact details of why this is so, but will continue to use this term here to describe the experience of the qualitative difference between life and death; of death as the end of life, and of birth as a possibility of a new beginning and also as a *possible experience in the Altered Consciousness*, where death and birth can be experienced as two sides of the same coin. The *Ego-Death*, as used by *Stan Grof*, should not be confused with the spiritual tradition of Enlightenment. It is not a singular experience, but more of a gradual process of fading out the ego on the path to spiritual realisation. However, the quality of the experience of *Ego-Death* in the *Altered Consciousness* has a lot to do with death and rebirth: it can be experienced as the close to a phase of life, letting go completely and starting anew on a completely different existential level. Some say that spiritual Enlightenment, *realisation* and deliverance are not possible without the experience of *Ego-Death*.

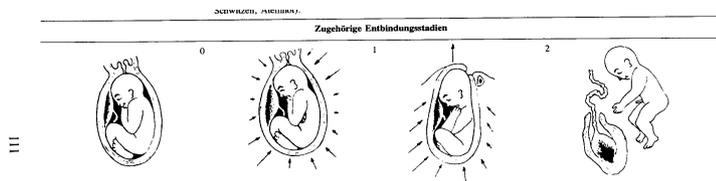
Experiences of the *Ego-Death* in the *Altered Consciousness* can be an indicator of the absoluteness of the separation of the personal and transpersonal. In this

respect, no one who has had an authentic transpersonal experience can have attempted to avoid the experience of *Ego-Death*.

In Grof's theory of the path from the personal to the transpersonal, he usually distinguishes between several levels: the *current unconsciousness*, the *biographic unconsciousness*, and the *perinatal* and the *Ego-Death* as the layer between the personal and transpersonal. The transpersonal and personal constantly influence each other and oscillate permanently into each other on all of these levels, but can be most strongly observed on the *level of the perinatal*.

Digression: Perinatal Matrices:

More detailed descriptions can be found in Grof's publication in various places, however, due to their importance I would like to shortly summarize them here. I have also added a sketch of the four birth phases with which Grof demonstrates the connection between the perinatal matrices and a biological birth.



Grof distinguishes between the four phases of a biological birth: conception and pregnancy, dilation (the gradual opening of the cervix), labour and the "expulsion", the actual birth. These correspond to four *perinatal matrices*:

The *amniotic universe* in the time of conception and pregnancy,

The expulsion from paradise and the beginning of labour pains,

The *Birth Struggle* and the advancement of the foetus in the birth canal,

The experience of death and rebirth and the actual birth of the child.

These four matrices are patterns of energy, specific “colourings” of life, which can be directly experienced in the *holotropic processes*. These energy patterns can shine on a person’s whole life. They decide the structure of what may happen in a certain phase of life, in what ways a person may be productive or creative, in what ways a person may face relationships and with what people, how that person may experience God and who God is to them, how that person experiences the divine and what theories on this he represents. Structural changes in this basic pattern and the respective somato-psychic pathology can only exist if the corresponding dynamics in the perinatal space have been worked out. Most people have one or two typical perinatal patterns, which may be observed in the process of Holotropic Breathwork. Changes in these patterns usually lead to significant changes in behavioural patterns, attitudes, the entire personality. In this context, it is interesting to observe how these aspects of a specific matrix may manifest themselves in the life of an adult, how the life of a person can be formed by a specific perinatal matrix over decades, deciding which theories, cultural creations and spiritual attitudes they hold. I will now shortly characterise the four matrices from this context:

The first matrix characterizes the “Sunday-born” children of the world. Their lives seem charmed. They are creative, popular, and have uncomplicated romantic relationships. They are often unreliable with appointments, but once they appear somewhere, they are happily welcomed by most. They are the so-called “Winners”, the “Heroes” of the day.

But, like any hero, they have a point of fatal vulnerability – this can mostly be connected to their strong bonds to their mother. All goodbyes are hard for these people, yet the separation of this bond to their mother (and it is sometimes not so clear that is in fact *this* bond) is fatally threatening. They only unwillingly enter any kind of conflict. In an altercation, they will tend to attempt reconciliation or retreat. First-Matrix People are nourished by the strength of archaic amalgamation. Where this is no longer possible, they tend towards obfuscation.

The people in such a phase of life have to ability to sense God everywhere and in everyone. Everyday life and experiences of God become one. This universal bond appears to be in connected to a definite tradition, conventions with fast rules that, assuming old paradigms. Breaking this bond may open the gates of Hell.

Hell, in its various forms, is the subject of the second matrix.

A coldness and lack of emotions seems to pervade these people. People in such a phase of life feel as if they are trapped in a labyrinth of dead ends. Their relationships and everything that they do seem futile. These people seem to live as automatons. Work, eat, sleep, wake, work, eat sleep, wake "Hell is other people," said *Jean-Paul Sartre*. Other people are perceived as opponents. In romantic relationships (if these exist at all) there is barely any cooperation. Duties and "marital duties" rule life.

People in this phase of life devitalize through the immense strain they are under, which leads to nothing. Life with them is often dominated by deep silences or constant fighting, and altercations with them often end in the absurd. The energy of the amalgamation as a energy potential and as a possibility of development has been lost. In extreme forms, even desire dies out. The mind makes decisions between absurd possibilities.

The universe is perceived as being absurdly empty, life has become a stony desert, forever and ever, there is no concept of time, "the tortures of Hell are eternal". The second matrix appears as the most extreme expression of a rational "enlightened" consciousness. It is equivalent to, for example, the character structure of the Germans after World War Two, as described by *Max Horkheimer* and *Theodor Adorno* as the *Authoritarian Personality*.

There is no love in everyday life for the "second matrix personality". Even God (the memory of life in the first matrix) has been banned from his daily way to church. He has been created by the powerful of the world and is the opium for the masses of poor.

The fight against power and suppression, enormous qualities and quantities, sexuality in various forms, perversions and patterns of sexual abuse, a titanic fight between good and evil, the exposure of the sanctimonious, the seduction of the demonic and of witches, war, social oppression and revolution... etc. are the subjects of the *third matrix*.

Despite all this, there is hope in life. The cervix has dilated fully, and similarly, life in the third matrix has certain optimism, despite all these hardships. A light has been lit, yet it must still fight the darkness.

People of the third matrix are fierce and warrior-like. They are hot tempered and will use all their strength to make sure the truth comes to light. They are masters of pursuing conflict. At the end of an altercation, there is always a new form of insight, an enrichment of truth. Constant movement, constant change appears to be the basis of this phase of life.

People of the third matrix love the big city life, restlessness, the sensational, catastrophes, constantly meeting new and different people, anonymity and interchangeability. The constant action and change serve as a mask. Lovers of the third matrix love intensity and have extreme sexual affairs, then separate very quickly – often before their masks have fallen.

God is brought back from the church back into ones life. People of the *third matrix* challenge him: He must prove his power, his presence and his glory, lest they degrade him as nothing but a media vehicle. From time to time, the almighty God will really appear in daily life and will show his ubiquity, his omnipotence and his omniscience. Because of his love for mankind, he will show himself from time to time, suddenly and unexpectedly.

These are the moments in which the spiritual may surface in daily life. These are brief moments that bring relief to existential and spiritual crises, in which the Good and the Evil, lies and truth, sanity and insanity, lust for life and mortal fear all face each other. The old view of the world threatens to collapse.

People in such phases of their development tend to act as those drowning, holding on for dear life to the last bit of rope. Ultimately, they will realize that they have returned to the *second matrix* and have moved into the “cold Hell” of their salvation.

In the process of *Holotropic Breathwork*, the move from the third to the fourth matrix is usually a small step, yet there are legions in between the two structures. I have just described the meaning of the *Ego-Death*. It is said that *Ego-Death*, as Death itself, is simply a barrier, a crossing. However, the opposite is also true: Death is the absolute end; every human must give up *everything* when it arrives. It is the true end. Most people cannot control when this end comes.

In the experience of therapeutic companions, it is unpredictable when *Ego-Death* occurs. It is similar to the hour of death and birth: outsiders can determine an estimated time span in which the events occur, but an exact time is not foreseeable. The appearance and mental state of the experiencing person can bring about large differences: they can experience existential fear, a strenuous fight, strong emotional charges, the change from incredible exertion to a feeling of deep exhaustion, sweat and other bodily fluids may be uncontrollably discharged – all this is followed by a sudden moment of stillness. There may be a loss of consciousness, and the whole Body-Soul System may “awake” in a state of deep relaxation and contentedness. Some people experience an opening of their heart and feel a desire to *give love*. Feelings of the deepest peace may be roused, as well as the experience of feeling at one with all of creation. Some people also experience ecstatic joy and a renewed sense of vitality. In the Altered

Consciousness, one experiences in such moments the *overcoming of all Duality*, as described by the *spiritual traditions*.

I am describing the structure of the *fourth matrix* as a possible experience in the *Altered Consciousness*. In contrast to the preceding *perinatal matrices*, it is not easy to find people who fully embody all aspects of the *fourth matrix* in their lives. It seems as if the evolution of the human consciousness has not quite reached the level at which a person can fully develop such a personality construct in their daily lives. Of course, there are whole phases of life or moments for many people where such personality constructs may be experienced. And yet, the holy and wise of this planet display imperfections, ignorance, emotional disruptions, injustice, and inconsistencies when one comes into their personal space. Their personal lives are also affected by what *Buddha* called the three signs of human imprisonment: sickness, age and death.

Stanislav Grof describes the personality construct of the *fourth matrix* as that of a freed person. However, his theory is unclear in respect to how relative or absolute such a freeing is meant. I have previously assigned this uncertainty to the *Death of Ego*. *What* and *who* dies and is reborn seems to vary with the individual.

Life is not suited for the formation of such ideals. Enlightened people are not distinguished by the fact that they have no conflicting feelings, or no shadows, but by the fact that they stand by their shadows and imperfections with humility. The personality construct of the *fourth matrix* should therefore be understood as a new context, a changed point of reference of daily behavior, rather than of the behavior itself. In the *fourth matrix*, consciousness changes its perspective from the one in which daily life is felt, thought and acted in.

The *Self* has become more humble and sees the world from the perspective of the *Within*. Human contact, intimacies as values and openness to one's own creativity and that of others all take the place of the Self-related actualization. The point of reference of the personal life changes. Feelings, thoughts, and actions stop centering around the family and one's own well-being. An all-round feeling of connection can become the most basic feeling of life: solidarity and being at one with all humans and creatures, with nature and the energy of our planet, with the Earth that has given a home to human life in the universe.

People that have allowed themselves such changes in the *context* of life are easily recognizable to others. They distinguish themselves by the human humility and their strength of being there in the right moment. They have a good judgment for the content of daily life. These people do not always have spiritual practices. Some only go to their church every now and then, to find some rest. However, when they do meditate or attempt another form of spiritual practice, they remain

grounded, and never lose their sense of proportion for daily needs. Visions and mystical experiences in this context can be precious gifts, inspiration for life and a consolation, if the subject of death is involved. Beyond that, they are *simply* inner visualizations.

The experience of the *Ego-Death* is the crossing from the third to the fourth matrix. This passage means a change in perspective in life: the perspective of the personal (=the perspective of *I want*) is advanced into the transpersonal. Perceptions, feelings, thoughts and actions are all increasingly seen through this perspective: What is healing for this situation, this relationship, for people, for our planet.

However, the transpersonal must also be understood as being an infringement for the infinite possibility of transpersonal and spiritual identification. Transpersonal experiences are less realities than most people may think. Instead, they are identifications of the soul with specific archetypes and forms of consciousness.

An infinite number of experiences can be made in the *Altered Consciousness*: symbolic experiences, archetypes of the collective unconsciousness, the consciousness of animals and plants, the consciousness of shamans, as well as the experience of divine lights, cosmic emptiness in its many-layered meanings, divine omnipotence and omnipresence, Evil as a transpersonal quality, experiences of clairvoyance, karmic experiences, etc., etc. *Stan Grof* describes this in detail in his books. *The Adventure of Self-Discovery* must be particularly mentioned.

All these experiences revolve around *identification* and *pictures*. Even if these mystic experiences speak for themselves, they constantly refer beyond themselves. I view them as the index finger of God, not as God.

Experiences in the *Altered Consciousness* can be very impressive. The experiencing person may sometimes have the impression that their inner visualization may be equal to their experience of reality, or may even have exceeded this. Under certain circumstances, experiences in the *Altered Consciousness* may be rated higher by the experiencing person than the so-called normal life with its challenges and satisfactions.

There may arise the error that there are *pure experiences* that are by themselves incredibly convincing, experiences that exist *without theory*. I would like to contradict them: I do not believe that they exist. It appears to me that each experience is an *interpreted experience*. Its meaning is dependent on the socio-historical and biographical context of the experiencing person, as well as their *intentions*.

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Body and Energy experiences, and visualizations of decreased or extremely intensive intensity can be interpreted in the transpersonal and personal context: they often have symbolic contexts, and refer to familiar and personal structures.

Under some circumstance, it can be very important to avoid symbolic references and allow the *experience* to speak for itself. Experiences can always be interpreted; however, hasty conceptualizations are a widespread shadow amongst people who are used to interpreting things and assigning them meaning. In the middle of the last century, there was a collection of literature devoted to diagnosing *shamans* as *schizophrenics*. Even today, there is still the tendency to pathologize the *holy*. It sometimes takes great courage and respect to simply let *experiences of the holy* stand for themselves.

4. What is the heart of transpersonal psychotherapy?

The expansion of the human soul is infinitely wider than the area of the biographical unconsciousness. At the point of deepest self-discovery, the person does not recognize their own psychological mechanism, which is made up of identifications, transferences, defence, and the search for alternatives in life. At the deepest point of one's self-discovery, the person meets the divine in its various forms as well as its absolute formlessness.

Self-discovery clearly becomes a mystic process, of which its deepest secret is that people are able to recognise the other-worldly of themselves, their inner truth. This recognition appears to be large and simple – in such moments, there is nothing to say anymore, silence becomes the appropriate reaction. Today, there is a large group of people for whom this experience is simply the end of a long story.

The experience of mystic unity can be a gift to a person deep in the heart of transpersonal psychotherapy, and yet I do not believe that this is the point. I am convinced that the enlightening aspect will remain incomplete, perhaps even misinterpreted, as long as this planet is home to starving children, raped women, abused animals, wars and other violence perpetrated by mankind to its cosmic neighbours. In the spiritual traditions of the East, this view is embodied by the *Bodhisattvas*.

The wish to be one with the divine is the basis of most religions and the drive for the evolution of the human consciousness. However, even this simple wish contains a number of questions and implications and, more importantly, the problem of how this divine entity will be understood by people. There have been and are different answers to this question in the different historical periods and in different socio-cultural contexts.

I believe that in transpersonal psychology we must part with the belief that we know what distinguishes *the Taste of One*, as Ken Wilber said.

One glance into the private life of a realised person is enough to show that this unity is not everything. Even in known areas of the *unio mystica*, which are borne by the knowledge of the unity of Man and God, the unity of all religions, unity in love; there is always the exclusion of those who feel different, there is violence and blackmail, sexual abuse of children, whose *Ego* has arisen for an infinite time in the universal consciousness.

The experience of divine unity is the heart of transpersonal psychology and psychotherapy. At some times the *Heart* in the history of evolution of the human consciousness and also the discussion in the area of transpersonal psychology was in danger of being forgotten through all the difficulties of construction and interpretation. However, the opposite is also true: the heart of transpersonal psychology was blackened and made unrecognizable because the widespread knowledge on mystic unity became too obvious, too unveiled. It seems to belong to the common knowledge of the spiritual scene of the West what the *Taste of One* is. Yet the *One* is as affected as with the *nudity of the body*. Concealment enhances the attractiveness and eroticism. The *One* needs its veiled form, so we may learn the taste of God.

If I may be allowed a small aside: what appeals most to my personal *Taste of One* is the description of *Buddha's* Enlightenment underneath the *Bodhi Tree*, as it was so grippingly and soberingly – and at the same time factually – told by *Thich Nhat Hanh* in his book *Alter Pfad, weiße Wolken*. *Buddha* recognized “the alternating dependence of all things on nature.” For *Buddha*, unity of all living things meant that everyone and everything was dependent on one another, had to rely on one another in their thoughts and actions through all-encompassing orientation and dependence. This is termed by *Buddha* as the recognition of *emptiness (Shunyata)*, in which the human subject as *Ego* can dissolve into.

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I would like to claim that only few people really know who God is, and what it means to carry the divine within you. There is a myriad of ideological and educated commentary on this subject. Most answers will be given in the form of *pictures*. Perhaps they contain emotional experiences, or may cause your heart to contract, but they are only pictures. For the most part, these pictures are the projection of the ideal parent figures: pictures formed from a childish wish for an *ideal father* and *ideal mother* who can satisfy all your needs. Such depictions of God can refer to various historic and culture sources, for example, one such collective view is the belief that we must give up our small self in order to give ourselves completely to the divine. It is the occidental and through Plato heavily influenced concept of divine unity that has kept Western history so fascinated for two thousand years.

There is also a space that is past all visual things – emptiness, or *Shunyata* as it is called in Sanskrit. This means the knowledge that everything is dependent on everything else and that reality is greater than one can imagine. Is God that which cannot be visualised? And yet, what does it really mean when you say that at this very moment you are carrying the indescribable, the imageless deep within you?

Perhaps God is simply that which moves us deeply.