

An introduction to Holotropic Breathwork™

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The holotropic perspective arises from the work of Stanislav Grof, a psychiatrist with more than 50 years of experience researching the potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness. One of the founders of transpersonal psychology, along with Abraham Maslow and Anthony Sutich, Grof is also one of the chief theoreticians of this domain.

Grof is a pioneer in the research of psychedelics. His work began in the 1960s when he explored the potential of LSD and other psychedelic substances for application in the field of psychiatry. He started this research in Prague where he was Principle Investigator at the Psychedelic Research Institute. His research continued in the United States with his invitation to lead research at Johns Hopkins University, and then the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center.

From the early 1970s, Grof was scholar in residence at Esalen Institute in California, where he remained until 1987. Grof's focus during this time was on deepening his understanding of how processes of healing emerge in non-ordinary states of consciousness, as well as the transformative potential of these states. Much of his most seminal writing took place during this period of his life. It was at Esalen, too, that Grof and his wife, Christina, co-created and developed the practice of Holotropic Breathwork, as a non-drug means to continue the exploration of non-ordinary states of consciousness.

It is worth noting that Grof dislikes the commonly used term, *altered* states of consciousness, because of the inference that there is a preferred state of normal consciousness that is changed, or manipulated, in a specific manner. The connotation is that altered states are negative, or dysfunctional. Instead, Grof prefers to speak of *non-ordinary* states of consciousness or expanded states of consciousness.

What is meant by *Holotropic*? The word was coined by Grof, drawing from the Greek: *holos* meaning whole, and *trepein*, which means moving in the direction of. Holotropic Breathwork, then, is a practice that moves us in the direction of wholeness. As a reference, we can point to the fact that plants are helio tropic: as they grow they are always moving towards the sun. Grof's research led him to understand that, as humans, we have a natural propensity to heal and grow and that growth is a movement towards wholeness.

At times, Grof has referred to this orientation towards wholeness as 'inner wisdom' or 'the inner healer'. Holotropic states of consciousness, then, are those non-ordinary, expansive, states that invite and support this innate movement towards wholeness. In the words of Grof: "Holotropic states bring to consciousness that which has a strong emotional charge in us already. Something that is psychodynamically relevant at the time and is most available for us for conscious processing." When we enter a holotropic state with the intention of healing and self-discovery, it invites a kind of inner radar that scans our unconscious and brings to consciousness that material to which we most need to attend and heal.

Grof's 'Cartography of Consciousness'

While not yet fully integrated into mainstream psychology, Grof's cartography of consciousness increasingly is recognized as an essential continuation and deepening of the work of Carl Gustav Jung. Many who orient to transpersonal psychology believe that in the future, when we look back on what we now know as modern psychology, we will see the full impact of Grof's work to be enormous, and he will have his place alongside other giants in the development of psychological theory and the field of psychiatry.

At the time Grof was involved in his clinical studies, the prevailing wisdom was that we are born a *tabula rasa* – a blank slate. Onto this empty psyche, as we come into contact with our caretakers and the environment after our birth, we slowly but surely develop our personalities, our personas, and all the various fixations, neuroses, and other problems that we later confront in psychotherapy.

Grof proposed the idea that our psyche is already deeply imprinted prior to birth, affected by pre- and perinatal experience, and even prior to that in what he identifies as transpersonal realms. The scope of this proposal was a radical expansion of existing beliefs about human consciousness. For many of us now, this is not such a ground breaking possibility, but certainly during the second half of the last century, when Grof was so actively involved in his research and writing, it was an audacious idea.

When Grof began to sort the data that he had gathered from the thousands of psychedelic sessions he supervised – as well as his own

experiences – he saw a picture that vastly expanded the psyche that he knew as a traditional psychiatrist. He, of course, recognised many experiences arising out of personal biography: accidents, deaths, losses, various forms of trauma, and so forth often accompanied by a strong physical and emotional charge. During sessions, these experiences arise and can be recognised and worked with within the context of the client's personal history and development.

However, Grof also observed a range of somatic, and energetic movements that appeared to be non-verbal, or pre-verbal and often bore a clear resemblance to impulses and gestures seen in foetuses and neonates. While these experiences might be accompanied by strong emotions, there was no cognitive content. Grof proposed that these experiences revealed a somatic or organic memory of our pre- and peri-natal experiences and that these experiences create a kind of substrate that informs and shapes our later development. Considering the power and intensity of the birth process, it is difficult to imagine that it would not have a significant impact upon us. If nothing else, the dramatic and irreversible shift from an aquatic environment to one in which we are dependent upon breathing air and the immediate activation of our lungs, represents a formidable and life changing threshold to be navigated.

Grof proposed four aspects to this pre and perinatal realm of experience: what he calls the Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPM). The first of these is the aquatic realm within which the foetus exists prior to the start of birth contractions. In the best of circumstances, during this period there is an oceanic sense of safety and warmth in which all needs are met. Of course, this is not always the case.

Sometimes this uterine environment is impacted by sickness or other difficulty in the mother's condition; external influences such as violence or war; and by prevailing emotions such as fear, anxiety or anger.

Grof's second BPM describes the period when the birth contractions begin. At this point, although the pressure on the foetus may be increasingly powerful, the cervix has not yet opened and there is literally no way out. The associated feelings are often ones of existential hopelessness and depression. This is a condition in which there is no exit: contained, restricted and pressurized. For many people, these depressive experiences may be familiar in day-to-day life, and Grof suggests they may originate as somaticized memory from this stage of the birth experience.

Once the cervix opens, a dynamic engagement and movement begins. There is a sense of direction, and an end in sight. The pressures on the foetus are massive and the struggle is powerfully physical: literally, a struggle for life in what feels like a passage of destruction. This third BPM involves the experience of being crushed, being torn apart, being faced with terrible violence and potential annihilation, while propelled by a force towards freedom. Enormous energies are felt in and around the body (more than 60 pounds of pressure per square inch) pressurizing the foetus through the birth canal.

The final stage (BPM 4) is the breakthrough of birth itself: the movement out of the mother's body and entry into a completely new form of existence. Energetically this may involve a sense of sudden unexpected change, of expansion, freedom, ecstasy, release, and peace. A relevant image might be that

of the phoenix arising. In the best of birthing circumstances, there will be a feeling of welcome, love, and of coming home.

While often described as a hero's journey, Grof believes that we must also consider the impact of experiences from the birth process in the context of psychiatry. In his view, our bodies carry unresolved somatic and energetic imprints from our pre- and perinatal experience and that these 'incomplete experiences' may have a powerful impact upon our lives. In Grof's view, many of the conditions that psychiatry has traditionally identified as pathological are, in fact, manifestations of unresolved impulses that originated in birth-related trauma.

A further realm on Grof's map of consciousness is that which transcends individual identity: the transpersonal. He found that the intense somatic experiences of biographical memory and birth seem to create a transparency, or a portal, into the transpersonal. The hero's journey as it is felt in the birth sequence may also be encountered literally as a hero's journey in the archetypal realm. It may be experienced as battles with monsters, or as meetings with angels and deities. It could be identification with the natural world and the feeling of being an animal, or a bird, or a rock. Within the context of the transpersonal, we may gain immediate understanding of the suffering of humanity or of the archetypal quality of love. There may be an experience of visionary lucidity, or a profound sense of peace, unity, or enlightened bliss.

The risk with any map is that it can be confused with the actual territory. Presenting Grof's cartography in this way may make it appear linear to those who are on a path of self-discovery. There may be a tendency to think it necessary to

engage with biographical material, followed by the perinatal, and only then is it possible to encounter the transpersonal. However, observation and experience reveal the territory to be an interpenetrating, multi-dimensional matrix of experience through which we swim freely. Holotropic states open us to all these dimensions, often simultaneously. We may bring our focus to a singular aspect of experience, or there may be a dynamic interplay between these realms: shifting between what is in the foreground, and what is in the background of awareness. As facilitators of Holotropic Breathwork, we find that Grof's map of consciousness is a useful resource to help breathwork participants to deepen their understanding and integration of Holotropic sessions.

Holotropic Breathwork

Holotropic Breathwork is a practice that offers language, method and structure through which to experience expanded, or non-ordinary, states of consciousness. This work is typically done in a group setting, and there are a variety of different formats in which workshops can be offered ranging from one-day events in which each participant has just one breathing session to longer workshops in which there are more breathing sessions, as well as time to bring a stronger focus on integration.

The underlying principle of Holotropic Breathwork is the creation of conditions in which our innate wisdom, or inner healing impulse can organically and instinctively move us in the direction of wholeness. This principle holds that all participants have within them the capacity to heal themselves, and the

knowledge and wisdom for this healing is uniquely personal. For this reason, the practice of Holotropic Breathwork is non-directive, emphasizing support rather than guidance.

There are some fundamental principles that must be considered with Holotropic Breathwork, as a methodology:

- It always involves preparation, session, and integration.
- The work is underpinned by the creation of a safe set and setting in which the inner work can happen.
- It is an emergent rather than a directive process – each person will engage with their unique experience in their own way.

The preparation for the breathwork starts when people first sign up to have the experience and, as facilitators, we begin to make connections with the participants. Then, at the beginning of the workshop, there is an intentional and structured preparation talk, usually a minimum of one hour, to introduce the practicalities as well as the kinds of experiences people may have during a session.

In order for a breathwork session to be considered a Holotropic Breathwork session, according to the Grofs, the session must be a minimum of two hours in length. The Grofs did not identify a maximum length for a session but, drawing from experience, the consensus among facilitators is that sessions should run, on average, between two-and-a-half and three hours.

Participants pair up for the sessions: one partner, the breather, lies down on a mat, usually with an eyeshade on so that she can be internal with the process,

and the other partner, the sitter, remains beside the breather to hold the space. The partners then exchange their roles for the next session, alternating the breathing and sitting. There is always a minimum of two facilitators holding the group, with the number of facilitators increasing in ratio to the number of participants.

With the breather lying on the mat, the sitter beside the breather, and the facilitators in the room, one of the facilitators will lead a guided visualisation, inviting relaxation and awareness of breath and body. This supports the breathers to let go of the outside world and to take their focus inside. Towards the end of the relaxation, the facilitator will say something like, “In a moment the music will begin and we wish you a good journey.” At this point a carefully created music set is started and runs for the intended length of the session.

The music for Holotropic Breathwork is crafted in a particular way with a specific trajectory. The first third of the music has a rhythmic intensity to it, supporting the breather in taking full, deep breaths. The intention for the music at this stage is to encourage effective breathing. It is an invitation, the call to adventure.

The next section of the music has emotional intensity and ‘epic’ quality. It is evocative heart music and, even though in the background, it can invite the breather into a whole spectrum of emotions and experiences.

The final hour of music evokes a homecoming. The music is gentle, relaxing, and meditative. The sense is that the participant is washing back up on the shore at the end of a really deep dive into the ocean of their consciousness. The arc of

the whole music set, therefore, is of building up into a peak experience during the first two thirds of the session and then back down again in the last third.

When Grof talks about how to do the breathing in a session, he is emphatic that there is not any specific technique. His guidance is often to: 'find your own rhythm'. The invitation is simply to breathe more fully and more deeply than usual. There may be the suggestion to connect the in and out breaths during the beginning of the session in order to support the breathing process, but the participants are encouraged to find their own way with the breathing over the course of the session. It is the combination of the safe set and setting, the focused breathing, and the powerful music that enables the breather to enter into an expanded state of consciousness.

Essential to Holotropic Breathwork, and to many forms of work with non-ordinary states of consciousness, is an understanding of what the roles of sitting and facilitating bring to the experience. A vital aspect of both these roles is presence: sitter presence and facilitator presence.

By presence, we mean *being* with the person who is having the experience. As facilitators or sitters, we are not the 'doers'. In fact, this is a practice of NOT doing. We are there to be with the participant in her experience, to witness it, to support her to have the fullness of the experience that her inner healing mechanism, her innate wisdom, is bringing her. We accompany the participant, not intruding upon, or directing her experience in any way, simply and wholeheartedly available to give support. The role is that of a compassionate witness, bringing presence, patience, and love, and putting any agenda of our

own onto the back burner. We simply bring ourselves mind, body and soul into a place in which we are absolutely there for the experience of the participant for the whole session.

Holotropic Breathwork, as a methodology, is an excellent example of an integrative learning cycle: inviting deep experience, and bringing various reflective processes and support for participants in making meaning out of their experience. Immediately after the end of the breathwork session we encourage participants to create visual mandalas, as well as writing, journaling, and talking with each other about their journeys. At the end of the day, the whole group, or subsets of the group, meet for sharing. As in ancient human tradition, participants sit together and hear the stories of the day in order to understand more about what they have learned, and how they have been changed by the experience.

Finally, as a practice, whether you are a therapist, or involved in research, if you are a human being who cares about other human beings and the world around you, Holotropic Breathwork is a powerful practice through which to learn how to be fully present with each other, with oneself, and with the huge range of human experiences.

References

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