

## 1. Roman

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This same principle can be found in other words too, like the word “entropic” meaning “trending towards chaos”, or “heliotropic” meaning “moving toward the sun” (used with reference to plants that tend to follow the movement of the sun).

## Holotropic Breathwork What is it & Why it is Needed

**H**olotropic Breathwork is a powerful *psychospiritual transformative practice*, originally developed by Stanislav and Christina Grof. Another way of looking at it would be as an *experiential psychotherapeutic technique*. Although Dr. Grof often refers to Holotropic Breathwork in his writings as “Holotropic Therapy”, we usually prefer to talk about it primarily as a tool for self-exploration, rather than a psychotherapeutic technique per se. This is because Holotropic Breathwork has proven to be of significant benefit not only in times of psychological difficulty, but also when we generally feel well, but still experience curiosity, a yearning for adventure and for a deeper understanding of ourselves, our relationships, and the world around us. Some of us may even develop an interest in the possibility of opening ourselves up experientially to a transcendent dimension of reality, in which case Holotropic Breathwork will also be of exceptional value. Thus it follows that psychological difficulty (or even dysfunction) on the one hand, and spiritual awakening and enlightenment on the other hand, may well be seen as two extremes of a single spectrum of human mental functionality.

## What Does “Holotropic” Mean?

Now, let’s take a closer look at the terminology. The central concept of the whole process is captured in the word *holotropic*. It consists of two Greek words: “όλο” [*holo*] meaning “whole”, and “τρεπειν” [*trepein*] meaning “trend”. The word “holotropic” thus means “trending towards wholeness”.<sup>[1]</sup> It reflects the fundamental idea that, as human beings, we start off in a state of *fragmentation* and then aspire to achieving ever greater degrees of *wholeness*, or *completeness*. This notion pertains primarily to our *self*, or, generally speaking, to the inner experiential reality with which we identify. This idea of a *holotropic* process being intrinsic to our human nature is consistent with many psychological schools, notably with the work of Carl Gustav Jung, with Developmental Psychology (Piaget), Humanistic Psychology (Maslow), Integral Psychology (Wilber) and

Transpersonal Psychology in particular. Perhaps even more importantly, it widely resonates across both Western and Eastern philosophical schools, and is central to all great spiritual traditions worldwide.

So, how does Holotropic Breathwork fit in here? It's quite simple and natural. Since we now know that there is an intrinsic, ever-active tendency in us to move towards ever greater levels of completeness (or *integrity*), and we also know that this movement towards ever higher levels of wholeness can be viewed as analogous to moving towards higher levels of health (psychological, but also physical), the only question that remains is: how do we remove any obstacles which hinder this process?

This is where Holotropic Breathwork comes in. Holotropic Breathwork is a sophisticated, yet startlingly simple and elegant method for temporarily removing a substantial part of the obstacles that usually block, or at least significantly hinder the self-healing process naturally occurring in our organism. It thus opens up a window of opportunity for accelerating our overall development. You will learn more about how this is achieved in the article on the **method** of Holotropic Breathwork.

## **Psychospiritual Transformative Practice**

We previously stated that Holotropic Breathwork is a *psychospiritual transformative practice*. So what do we mean by that? A couple of things can be derived from those words. Firstly, there is the connection of the psychological and spiritual domains of our existence. When we think of the psychological component of ourselves, what we usually mean is actually the *psychodynamic* aspect of our *mind*, in other words the interplay between the various parts of our personality – memories, motivations, intentions, patterns of emotions and thoughts – all of these mostly emerging from the depths of the unconscious mind. As we all know from personal experience, these internal parts can sometimes conflict with one another, and the degree to which they do, largely determines our overall wellbeing. Most of us also know that some of these internal conflicts can be really persistent. The introduction of expanded (holotropic) states of mind can, if well facilitated and

integrated, add a very wholesome, new dynamic to this whole situation. Often it is experienced as introducing “the missing piece of the puzzle”. Others may describe it as adding a missing cogwheel into the workings of a clock, which can now start functioning and moving forward: a developmental process is activated. This is where *transformation* comes in. Depending on the unique conditioning of every person, this developmental process may sooner or later result in a major transformational event, marked by a radical shift in perceptual capacity, opening the gateway for the individual to a whole new, vast dimension of experiential reality. This radical event in a human being’s life has been recognized across many cultures and spiritual traditions as the initial *spiritual opening* (not to be confused with *awakening*, or *enlightenment*, in the sense of advanced stages of human spiritual maturity).

## **Experiential Psychotherapeutic Technique**

Finally, let’s complement our understanding of what Holotropic Breathwork is by examining the term *experiential psychotherapeutic technique*. Nowadays, the popularity of all kinds of psychotherapeutic approaches and techniques is on the rise, so everyone roughly knows what we are talking about when discussing Psychotherapy. Perhaps we could say that it all started already in prehistoric times, where the predecessor of present-day Psychotherapy would be an intimate conversation with a wise, elderly member of the family or community, perhaps one’s grandmother, a priest or a shaman. People would naturally seek out the kind, empathic and accepting presence of their most experienced and trustworthy peers, sharing with them their heartaches, and, by virtue of expressing themselves and sharing their pain, finding relief and inner reconciliation. All this has been preserved in many cultures up to the present day. The value of this kind of simple sharing of one’s suffering within a context of trust and respect has lost nothing of its important healing power.

In modern times, the world has seen much systematic development in the field of Psychotherapy, particularly after Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung contributed their groundbreaking observations, theories and psychoanalytic methods. A substantial part of this evolution occurred in the work of Stanislav Grof, who

became acutely aware of the limitations of the mostly verbal therapeutic approaches of his forerunners. Drawing on his expertise in Psychology and Psychiatry, a remarkable acquaintance with an array of other scientific disciplines, knowledge about ancient indigenous shamanic traditions, Eastern spiritual traditions with their systems of transformative practices, Western mystical schools, as well as his own systematic clinical research with psychiatric patients, Grof eventually realized that, for any psychotherapeutic technique to be truly effective, it has to step out of the constraints of merely verbal (analytic) processing, and expand to include the realm of *non-ordinary states of consciousness*, where the healing process, if met with understanding and support, can take place on all the levels of our existence (bodily, emotional, conceptual and spiritual) simultaneously and spontaneously – in other words, through actual lived *experience*, rather than only by talking. The method of Holotropic Breathwork emerged out of this knowledge and understanding; the same kind of knowledge and understanding that the world's indigenous shamans and authentic traditional healers have been safeguarding for millennia.

### **Is There a Need for Holotropic Therapy?**

When it comes to emotional wellbeing, our psychological and physical health, most of us naturally understand that we need to keep those aspects of our lives in the best shape possible, in order to have a fulfilled and happy life. Most of us intuitively experience our bodies and minds as *ourselves*, and so it comes rather naturally that we wish to keep them healthy, strong and well-functioning, possibly free of suffering and capable of growth, development and regeneration. Everybody wants to be happy and healthy. So, yes, any kind of effective tool for promoting development and healing processes in us is undoubtedly good and useful.

But there's more to it. Holotropic Breathwork, like any kind of authentic and effective spiritual practice, can provide benefits that wildly exceed the boundaries of mere individual health and happiness. Once we achieve a certain degree of inner integration, the wholesome effects of our practice begin to overflow naturally from our inner self into the world around us, through intention, speech and action. This principle has been well known for thousands of years in spiritual traditions and their systems of practices, such as Buddhism and Yoga. This is the result of the *holotropic* process, you see? Through exploring our inner realities, discovering increasing numbers of previously disconnected inner parts of ourselves, getting to know them, and including them into our ever more integrated, authentic self, we



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That is to say, insight into the nature of the actual “substance” of the mind, as opposed to merely the internal dynamics of it.

become increasingly *whole* – accepting both the bright and the dark aspects of the psyche into our maturing self.

But it doesn't stop there! As we keep going with our practice, a true miracle begins to emerge right before our eyes, in our bodies and minds. As we continue gaining direct insight into the nature of consciousness *itself*<sup>[2]</sup>, it becomes increasingly self-evident to us that what we previously saw as “out there”, “outside” or “other”, is actually an integral part of our expanding, conscious self – a truly Copernican revolution in how we perceive the world! Not only does this constitute a quantum leap in our personal freedom, since we now begin to see that it is actually our very own mind which creates the world we live in, but, even more importantly, since we now perceive the world as being a part of ourselves, we instinctively start to relate to the environment, Nature, and everybody around us, with the same intuitive care and loving attention that we would naturally pay to ourselves. This is the true benefit of holotropic practice. This is how humanity needs to take its next step forward.

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The word “psychedelic” consists of two Greek words: “ψυχή” [psukhḗ] meaning “mind, soul”, and “δῆλος” [dêlos] meaning “manifest, visible”. Thus the word “psychedelic” means “mind-manifesting”.

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2D and 3D models of LSD image

# History

## Early Psychedelic Research

When reviewing the history of Holotropic Breathwork, we have to go all the way back to the 1960s, the euphoric era of the Free Love movement, the flower children and the Woodstock festival. It was at that time that the Human Potential Movement entered the scene in the USA, emerging from recent developments in Western Psychology, while simultaneously being driven by a growing awareness of Hindu Philosophy and the rapidly spreading popularity of Yoga as a tool for promoting self-development and enlightenment. Indeed, much of the holotropic paradigm itself later became associated with these specifically American cultural phenomena. However, first of all let us examine the entirely opposite direction, in order to find the origins of Stanislav Grof's groundbreaking work, which later led to the discovery of Holotropic Breathwork. It was 1960 when the 29-year-old Stanislav Grof, still a relatively fresh graduate from Prague's Charles University in communist Czechoslovakia hidden behind the Iron Curtain, was just about to launch his pioneering, experimental research into the promising field of Psychedelics-Assisted Psychotherapy, using the recently available, mind-bogglingly powerful <sup>[1]</sup> psychedelic drug, LSD-25<sup>[2]</sup>. During that short period between 1960 and 1970, psychedelic research was booming on both sides of the Atlantic. Scientists in the field were busy pursuing their promising research projects, while several dedicated international conferences took place — Princeton, London and Amsterdam being among the hosting cities.

Grof continued his research for the following seven years at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague, before relocating to the United States in 1967. There he carried on with his research for another seven years, holding positions at the Johns Hopkins University and the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. It was out of these 14 years of research that his theory and methodology of Psychedelics-Assisted Psychotherapy emerged.

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Fun fact: according to Wikipedia  
“The last country to produce LSD  
legally (until 1975) was  
Czechoslovakia”.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_lysergic\\_acid\\_diethylamide#From\\_1960\\_to\\_1980](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_lysergic_acid_diethylamide#From_1960_to_1980)

Already during the late 1960s, the use of LSD and other psychedelics became increasingly problematized, due to a wild upsurge in recreational use, mainly in the USA. State authorities in California, where Grof was conducting his research, declared a public ban on LSD as early as 1966. Unfortunately, even the use of LSD for scientific research was eventually disallowed.<sup>[3]</sup> Forced to stop his promising psychedelic research, Dr. Grof was left with the question of whether it might be possible to find a drug-free approach, with which he could substitute the effect of psychedelic substances in therapy, in order to meaningfully continue his exploratory work.

### ***Esalen – the Birth of Holotropic Breathwork***

Roughly at the time when the nationwide ban was enforced, a letter appeared in Dr. Grof's mailbox. This was an invitation to become a Scholar-in-Residence at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California (1973). It was at the Esalen Institute where, a couple years later, Stanislav met his future wife Christina. Together, they began to develop Holotropic Breathwork, a brand-new, substance-free method for inducing and working with non-ordinary states of consciousness. Stan (as he was known) and Christina continued their pioneering work at the Esalen Institute for the following 14 years, during which they developed and led a series of 30 experimental month-long educational programs, as well as many 5-day and weekend experiential workshops. During those years, the method of Holotropic Breathwork was perfected to a great degree, in a form which has been preserved in a substantial part to the present day.

It is impossible even to imagine the number of times Dr. Grof has been asked the question of how on earth he could have discovered the strikingly simple, yet remarkably potent effect which hyperventilation has on the human mind and body, opening it up experientially to normally inaccessible realms of the unconscious. The answer he always gives is that there were several clues which came together. Some of them, like the existence of traditional breathing techniques of ancient spiritual systems, like Yoga Pranayama, or Taoist breathing techniques, which were known to produce changes in human consciousness, were among the more foreseeable

ones. But no one could have predicted what Dr. Grof was to witness time and again during his experimental work with patients on high doses of psychedelic substances, predominantly LSD.

Towards the end of many of the therapeutic sessions, it happened that the effect of the drug had started to wear off and the patient began to return to his normal waking state of mind. However, the still ongoing psychedelic episode was yet to reach its full resolution. Some psychological contents, perhaps upsetting, difficult and confusing, together with conflicting or tough emotional energies, emerged while under the full effect of the drug. Then, towards the end of the session, some of this material remained partly stuck as if “half-complete”, as a consequence of the effect of the drug no longer being sufficient to carry out the final stages of the process with adequate intensity. Grof observed that whenever this situation arose, his patients often started hyperventilating spontaneously. Through this hyperventilation, they appeared to be able partially to reactivate the psychedelic process, to complete what had been left unresolved, and consequently to reach a state of contentment and peace, free of inner conflict. Another observation Dr. Grof made was that, during the final stages of a psychedelic session, his patients would often point to a place or area on their body, which they subjectively perceived as being intrinsically connected with the emotional difficulty of their current state. They would request physical contact, a touch or some sort of pressure on that spot. Dr. Grof followed their lead and soon discovered that, through this physical activation of the relevant spot or area on the body, emotional content would become co-activated into a catharsis, leading again to a meaningful resolution of the experience, and the ensuing emotional and physical relief.

So this is how the two principal components of the method of Holotropic Breathwork were discovered, namely hyperventilation and bodywork (or *focused energy release work*): it was the people undergoing the psychedelic healing process themselves who unwittingly introduced them to Dr. Grof.



The young Stanislav and Christina Grof

## **Founding Grof Transpersonal Training**

The Esalen residence ended for the Grofs in 1987. Indeed, the whole era culminated a few years later, in 1989, when Stan and Christina launched *Grof Transpersonal Training (GTT)*. Many of those who had experienced Holotropic Breathwork with the Grofs, also wanted to be able to work further with this method themselves. So, after a few years of initially training people in closed groups and working on developing an appropriate training model, the time was ripe to launch an organized endeavor to train future facilitators systematically. At that time, the current modular scheme of the training program was already established, relying

for the main part on a set of 7 six-day long intensive training “modules”. Each module included four breathwork sessions, as well as a series of theoretical lectures.

GTT quickly established itself on several continents. In the early 1990s already, certification programs were launched and completed in South America, Europe, and Australia. Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Stan and Christina returned to Czechoslovakia, which was now freed from the tyranny of the communist regime. Once again, through the person of Václav Havel, Stanislav Grof’s native country of Bohemia was setting the tone for the global debate on human rights. In this exalted atmosphere following the end of communist rule in Eastern Europe through the Velvet Revolution, Stanislav and Christina generously helped to train the first generation of professional Holotropic Breathwork facilitators in the country where Dr. Grof’s original psychedelic research had started 30 years earlier.



In 2007, Stanislav Grof received the prestigious Vision 97 Award from the Dagmar and Václav Havel Foundation.

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Tav Sparks - deceased on August 9th, 2020.

In 1998, the Grofs handed GTT over to Tav and Cary Sparks, their early students and later long-standing colleagues. Since that time, Tav and Cary have been the organizers of the training courses.<sup>[4]</sup> For many years, Stan and Christina continued (until her death in 2014) to participate as mentors and consultants for the training. Stan continued for some time to lead the six-day training modules. He eventually withdrew, teaching only two-day theoretical components. Other GTT teachers and staff members conducted the remaining parts of the modules, including the breathwork sessions. Dr. Grof retired from teaching all modules in 2017.

Past groups of GTT students have completed certification in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Germany, India, Italy, Mexico, Russia, the Scandinavian countries, and Spain. Currently, modules are held in the United States, Australia, multiple countries in Europe and Latin America, Russia and India. Holotropic Breathwork training continues to expand into new locations each year, creating ever more opportunities for people around the globe to follow this amazing and important path of self-discovery.

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In the ancient Chinese Taoist tradition, the term Wu-Wei is to be found. Among its English translations we find the likes of “non-doing”, or “effortless action”.

The cited verses appear in the seminal, most ancient Taoist text Inward Training.

[Excerpt taken from Harold D. Roth's book Original Tao.]

## Method

### “Doing Non-Doing”

形不正

*When your body is not aligned,  
The inner power will not come.*

中不靜

*When you are not tranquil within,  
Your mind will not be well ordered.*

正形攝德

*Align your body, assist the inner power,  
Then it will gradually come on its own.*

Perhaps it is because of the word “breathwork” that people, mostly those who have never had the opportunity to experience a Holotropic Breathwork workshop before, often get the impression that the method consists simply of doing some very specific type of breathing, which causes our consciousness to switch into an *altered* state. Well, while the rationale behind this impression may seem reasonable enough (and, to be fair, there actually is some truth in it), this can by no means be deemed an adequate, let alone comprehensive description of what Holotropic Breathwork really is. Linked with this image of manipulating the breath, with the goal of altering mental function, is the following underlying subtle presumption: to engage in the holotropic process means somehow deviating from “reality”, imposing a change, something slightly unnatural, on oneself. The tempting thought might even arise at times that it is we ourselves who are somehow *doing* this whole “holotropic healing thing”.

However, if we are to engage in holotropic practice in any way meaningful, then this approach will not serve us well! Should we choose to cling to this standpoint, it will increasingly obstruct us. In fact, it's the important task of every dedicated spiritual practitioner to work towards gradually *letting go* of even the subtle layers of this *doing* attitude. In reality, entering the holotropic state of consciousness is much



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The promise that is the basis of the term “Promised Land” is contained in several verses of Genesis in the Torah. In Genesis 12:1 it is said:

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.”

In other words: “Go and have an adventure!”

more like gently immersing oneself in a stream (or sometimes unexpectedly jumping right into the middle of it), and allowing oneself to be carried away by the flowing water wherever it happens to flow at that particular time and place. With breathwork, we never know where the stream is going to take us – are there wild rapids, or deep, calm crystal-clear waters ahead? We can only find out by trying it for ourselves ...

It’s like life itself, isn’t it? We might live comfortably with the impression that we are in control, that we are steering the course of events in our chosen direction. On a certain level of apprehension, this might well be true, especially if we are currently living a reasonably happy and successful life. But as soon as we run into obstacles, or even just take our self-reflection one step further towards greater sincerity, we quickly begin to realize that we really don’t have all that much control over where life will take us in the next instant. Those people who have proceeded to the more advanced stages of the path to enlightenment, also seem to be progressively more willing to admit to this realization. Perhaps then we can try to join them for a moment. Let us also confess that it’s by no means a piece of cake to gather enough courage and inner integrity to, at least temporarily, attempt to give up our notion of doing, and actually to leap into the stream of expanded consciousness (or life itself) around the next meander, as deep or as wild as it will probably become. But then again, we love our stream of life passionately, and deep down intuitively know that it can take us to places of greater prosperity, health, and intellectual and spiritual realization. So it is apparent that we are left with basically two options – either we try to stick to some relatively comfortable place on the dry river bank, attempting to forget about the Promised Land that may await further downstream, and hoping that floods will somehow not return any time soon; or alternatively, we can start learning to swim. As it turns out, there are even professionally led swimming <sup>[2]</sup> courses available – they are called Holotropic Breathwork workshops.<sup>[2]</sup>

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The popular term “set & setting” which is now widely used in Depth Psychology and psychedelic circles, was originally coined by Timothy Leary in the early 1960s.

## Set & Setting

What we have just described as being the appropriate attitude and approach towards holotropic practice, constitutes the core part of the “set” (short for 3 “mindset”) for the practice to take place within.<sup>[3]</sup> And while there is certainly more to consider regarding a proper holotropic mindset, this makes a good starting point. You will learn about other subtle aspects of a good holotropic mindset as you progress with your practice. Let’s examine the “setting” part now.

## Protected Environment

As our practice unfolds, we slowly begin to appreciate the intriguingly fine line between *doing* and *letting go* in the holotropic process, and the crucial role of allowing ourselves to incline towards the latter and away from the former. It becomes increasingly obvious why the most important thing needed to be done in order to actually benefit from the process is to secure for oneself an environment that is safe, supportive, protective, caring, accepting, reliable and trustworthy. It is this type of environment that will permit us (and everybody else in the workshop) to let go into the expanded state and allow intuitive healing wisdom to take over and lead the process. While it is always the trained facilitator who is in charge of creating and sustaining the appropriate environment, participants are also most welcome to join in. They can possibly contribute by a smile, caring attention, or sense of humor, to whatever degree they feel naturally comfortable. In fact, one of the most important parts of a professional facilitator’s training is to learn and practice how to create and sustain a good, proper setting for a holotropic session.

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Holotropic Breathwork® is an internationally registered trademark, and only holders of a GTT certificate have the right to use it for their public practice.

## Choosing a Facilitator

In addition to the set & setting, there are a few more important components in the method of Holotropic Breathwork. In fact, to meet the criteria required to call someone's practice "Holotropic Breathwork", several components are essential, while some other specific aspects need to be avoided. One of these components that we should always look for, before choosing to take part in a Holotropic Breathwork workshop, is whether the person (people) running and facilitating the workshop is certified by Grof Transpersonal Training (GTT). Only graduates of the GTT program are authorized to run workshops in the Holotropic Breathwork method.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Theory

Now, let's briefly outline some of the other essential elements of a Holotropic Breathwork workshop. Every workshop will have a theoretical component, typically in the form of a lecture given on the night preceding the experiential part. In some cases, this is held separately, a few days in advance. During that lecture, the leading facilitator will typically cover a brief history of the method, reveal the basics of Stan Grof's unique cartography of the human psyche and explain the main principles of the holotropic process. Naturally, there will be in-depth elaboration of the practical aspects of the method, e.g. basic strategies for navigating the experience, what it takes to be a good sitter, and the specifics of focused energy-release work (bodywork), with perhaps a few practical demonstrations. Occasionally, one may even encounter a workshop where the theoretical part is squeezed into the morning prior to the entire experiential part on that same day. However, this is to be considered rather extreme, since the amount of theoretical knowledge required to be well prepared for the holotropic experience is relatively extensive (not to mention the time necessary for participants to become accustomed to each other). So this type of workshop might be best reserved for the experienced breather, if not totally to be avoided.

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An exception here may be a single-participant session, with only the breather and a qualified facilitator present. Even single-participant sessions, however, can be conducted with a sitter present, in addition to the facilitator.

## Sitters & Breathers

Another unmistakable feature of Holotropic Breathwork is the dyad of “sitters & breathers”. This is something very typical of the Holotropic Breathwork working format, and will *always* be a part of every Holotropic Breathwork workshop.<sup>[5]</sup> Therefore, all participants will be encouraged to form working couples for that particular workshop. They then take turns in the roles of sitters and breathers. This arrangement has multiple benefits. Firstly, it contributes to the establishment of the protective and supportive context – the sitter always pays attention to his or her breather during the experiential session, handing him/her water if requested, covering the breather with a blanket should it be requested, etc. In this way, the breather knows that he/she can be immersed fully in the experience, and safely let go of control, because everything practical is taken care of at all times. There is also the supportive feeling of having a “buddy” during the whole workshop. In addition, it transpires that the experience of caring for someone who is in a holotropic state of mind is perceived by many as particularly inspiring and emotionally enriching. What’s more, simply witnessing the holotropic experience in another can often bring forth important clues as to how to make sense of one’s own process, or even be perceived as an integral part of it, without which some essential meaning would be missed. So much potential benefit is hidden in this one, simple arrangement!

## Music

Of course, it would be impossible to imagine a Holotropic Breathwork workshop without music. Music is a key driver of the holotropic experience. It facilitates a smooth unfolding of it, acts as a fantasy stimulus, and inspires and encourages the release of emotionally rich content. In Holotropic Breathwork workshops, facilitators use music tracks specifically selected for this purpose, and combine them into sets, which, again, have a specific structure. A set like that would typically have a runtime of approximately 3 hours, which in most cases reflects the natural duration of a Holotropic Breathwork-induced experience. This will be divided into 3 main parts, each part lasting for about 1 hour. The first hour features powerful and

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Since bodywork obviously involves some degree of physical contact, it is important to say that, in Holotropic Breathwork, bodywork is always initiated by the breather, and never takes place without the breather's consent. GTT certified facilitators are carefully trained in Focused Energy Release Work and are required to follow high ethical standards in their practice.

rhythmical tracks, with lots of repetitive beats and forward-moving energy, often filled with tribal motives, instruments and vocals, as well as electronic, trance-like passages. This stimulates the initial opening of the experience, motivates us to let go of control, and helps us to connect internally with the elemental forces in ourselves. The second hour will provide powerfully emotional and evocative music of all types and genres, reaching out to many different facets of the human soul and its endeavors, often dramatic, or explosively ecstatic. After reaching a climax, the music settles into a progressively relaxed and calming mode, and the entire third hour is then devoted to peaceful and soothing pieces, helping to bring the whole experience to a relaxed, pleasant and meaningful closure.

## Bodywork

*Bodywork* or *Focused Energy Release Work* is another signature component of Holotropic Breathwork. Besides facilitating the holotropic process, it is also important for maintaining safety during the whole session. The effective release of emotional energy that is pent up in many layers in our body is crucial for the holotropic healing process. Until we actually experience it ourselves, it is hard to imagine how much emotional energy can be stored deep within the tissues of our body, and how enormous the manifestations of these energies can become, once we open up the way for them to safely and effectively express and discharge themselves during a Holotropic Breathwork session. Holotropic Breathwork often gets quite physical and can involve a lot of force and kinetic energy. Often it will be necessary to contain the active, fast-moving breather within the limited space of his or her mattress. Alternatively, the breather may feel that he or she needs to push vigorously against a barrier or “wrestle” with a resisting body, so that a large amount of emotional and kinetic energy may be released. At other times, pain or accumulated tension may occur in a specific part of the breather's body. In those cases, simply having the facilitator's hand resting on that spot for a while often leads to relief. Many more variations of the above-mentioned examples may occur during a Holotropic Breathwork session. Professional facilitators are trained to assess each of those situations and to offer an adequate amount of weight, resistance or touch. Most of them will also use various props, e.g. cushions,

blankets, etc.<sup>[6]</sup>

## **Mandala Drawing**

The next important component of the method of Holotropic Breathwork is drawing, or painting a *mandala*. All participants are always encouraged to draw a mandala, regardless of their artistic skills or inclination to visual art in their everyday life. This is more like an intuitive kind of drawing, the value of which is entirely independent of how elaborate or highly stylized the picture happens to be. Some people even tend to draw multiple mandalas during a single workshop, or continue drawing in the days following the weekend. Painting and drawing are great methods of initially anchoring the holotropic experience, the contents of which may often exceed the limitations of mere verbal description.

## **The Sharing Circle**

Last but not least, there is the very important component of the *sharing circle*. No practice can be called “Holotropic Breathwork” if it does not involve the sharing circle. During the course of every workshop, we will find ourselves sitting in a circle several times, together with the facilitators and all the other participants, sharing what we have experienced on our journey to the inner realms, but mostly – *listening*. There is tremendous value in listening – a value that all too often goes unrecognized and underappreciated. To listen – carefully, with focused attention and authentic interest – means to give an invaluable gift, both to the person we listen to, as well as to ourselves. The sharing circle is perhaps the most ancient part of the practice, pre-dating in all probability even the discovery of non-ordinary states of consciousness themselves. Even before prehistoric people began to recognize the effects that prolonged dancing and drumming, fasting, not getting enough sleep, or eating some specific kinds of plants and mushrooms had on the way they perceived themselves and the world around them, they were gathering in the evenings around a fire, sitting in a circle ... Perhaps it was in this very sharing circle where the evolution of language itself took place, when our early ancestors tried to describe to their peers where they had been that day, what they had seen, and what adventures and challenges they had encountered while exploring the

world, to seek new understanding and progress on their journey through life. Who knows ...?

At this point, we understand that Holotropic Breathwork is by no means a unidimensional enterprise. On the contrary! The multitude of dimensions to be discovered in the inner realms is truthfully reflected in the complex nature of the method itself. Only after all the components come together in a harmonious and seamless way, does the method of Holotropic Breathwork come alive in all its true beauty and power.

Let's go to the next chapter now, to equip ourselves with the knowledge of a few fundamental concepts of Transpersonal Psychology. They will come in handy once we get past the initial stages of our holotropic practice...

## Theoretical Framework

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### Contents:

1. Transpersonal Psychology and Grof's Extended Cartography of the Psyche
  2. Systems of Condensed Experience - COEX Systems
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    - Psychospiritual Death and Rebirth
    - Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPM)
  4. Beyond the Perinatal and on The "Inner Radar"
- 

Considering the theoretical framework of holotropic therapy, the best strategy by far will be to go out, hit the local public library, dig up a few of Stanislav Grof's books and see for ourselves what Dr. Grof has been trying to tell us over the course of his 60-year-long professional career. Nowhere else will we find the theory of Holotropic Breathwork explained so clearly and comprehensively. As already mentioned elsewhere, Grof has been drawing upon multiple scientific disciplines, and philosophical thought systems stemming from manifold sociocultural domains. He also drew from the work of numerous individual thinkers, theorists and spiritual leaders. Many of these brilliant minds were his friends and colleagues, others influenced him through their published work, most notably perhaps Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. Having said that, we must add that the primal source of Grof's work is based on medical science, namely Psychiatry, which is his original field of expertise.

So, let's delve into it! The following is a brief summary of a few of the most prominent concepts of the theoretical framework that informs holotropic practice.



## 1. Roman

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You can find a list of Stanislav Grof's books in the Study section of this website. There is also a list with additional recommended reading, links and further information sources in the Integration section.

## 2. Roman

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Abraham Maslow's book "Religions, Values and Peak-Experiences" is widely recognized as the initiatory paper of Humanistic Psychology.

In this way, we gain an initial insight into the ideas that underpin our understanding of the many unusual experiences to be encountered during our practice, as well as the impact these can have on our everyday lives.

May this serve as an inspiration to you to keep exploring and garnering more understanding, be it on this website, or from other sources. There is no shortage of written, as well as audio-visual content available, elaborating on this

<sup>[1]</sup> extraordinarily intriguing topic.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Transpersonal Psychology

Let's begin with a brief history of the developments in modern Psychology. In the mid-20th century, a new thought movement emerged in the field of Psychology, which became known as *Humanistic Psychology*. Sometimes this movement is regarded as the third force of Psychology, as it sought to overcome the limitations of the first and second forces, namely Behaviorism and Psychoanalysis, respectively. While Freud and his Psychoanalysis eventually ended up revolving somewhat disproportionately around the darker realities of the human psyche, the new pivotal element introduced by the humanistic approach was a recognition of the individual's inherent human drive toward *self-actualization* – the process of realizing and fulfilling one's own creative and spiritual potential. It is this same idea of self-actualization that was somewhat later adopted and expanded upon by the emerging branch of *Transpersonal Psychology*, which then became known as the fourth force. While Carl Rogers and <sup>[2]</sup> Abraham Maslow are considered the founders of Humanistic Psychology<sup>[2]</sup>, it is again Abraham Maslow, together with Anthony Sutich and Stanislav Grof, who, at the dawn of the 1970s, forged the fundamental tenets of Transpersonal Psychology.

Both Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychologists were closely interconnected with the Human Potential Movement. This movement took as its premise the

### 3. Roman

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Citation from Wikipedia - Human Potential Movement

### 4. Roman

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Some indigenous peoples have been using psychoactive plants (and sometimes animal products) for healing and spiritual purposes for thousands of years. Many of them developed original, elaborate contexts for this, both theoretical and practical. These so-called shamanic traditions can be found within tribal communities all over the world, with the Amazonian region being the richest, both in quantity and variety.

belief that through the development of “human potential”, people can experience an exceptional quality of life, filled with happiness, creativity, and fulfillment.<sup>[3]</sup> Another prominent characteristic of the transpersonal movement was its ideological link to the teachings of the Eastern spiritual traditions and their systems of mind-cultivating practices, oriented towards the realization of advanced stages of mind and personality development, and their understanding of such a realization as being equivalent to the fulfillment of the most fundamental purpose of a human being’s life. Holotropic Breathwork itself, being one of the signature therapeutic applications of Transpersonal Psychology (besides, perhaps most notably, Psychedelic Therapy) can thus be seen as a Western counterpart, or, strictly speaking, a complement, to the ancient Eastern spiritual practices. Lastly, Transpersonal Psychologists and practitioners have also established a constructive link to living shamanic traditions, particularly those using “plant medicines”.<sup>[4]</sup>

Right, enough of history! Now we are ready to take a closer look at the basic concepts of Stanislav Grof’s theoretical work...

## Grof’s Extended Cartography of the Human Psyche

Working right from the beginning of his career in the field of experimental psychedelic research, Grof soon discovered that the established psychological models of the human psyche cannot offer a functional, or at all sensible framework for the observations he made with his patients on a day-to-day basis. People undergoing Psychedelic Therapy were reporting experiences for which traditional Psychology and Psychiatry had no explanation whatsoever, except for labeling them as delusional, irrelevant, and pertaining to a state of mental illness. Grof, being a careful observer, and having undergone psychedelic experiences himself, was not ready to settle for these conventional rationalizations. Having spent the first 14 years of his career conducting several thousands of high-dose psychedelic

sessions with psychiatric patients — observing, describing and evaluating, as well as interviewing the subjects and recording their reports — Grof was now ready to formulate what later became known as his *extended cartography of the human psyche*. It is this cartography that serves us in our holotropic practice as the primary reference frame for our personal experiences. It helps us to orient ourselves on the path of self-exploration and is an essential tool for facilitating an effective integration of the newly accessed material after an experiential session.

Grof's map introduces three general territories: *biographical, perinatal and transpersonal*.

The first domain – **biographical** – comprises all the experiential material, ranging from the moment of our biological birth, all the way to the present time. This is pretty much equivalent to what was already dealt with by Freud's Psychoanalysis, and can also be called the *psychodynamic* domain. It includes experiences such as early childhood memories, memories of traumatic events e.g. accidents or abusive relationships, unresolved emotional conflicts, mutually incompatible internal drives and suppressed personality fragments, fantasies about sexual domination or submission, etc. During a Holotropic Breathwork session, people may re-experience situations from their past, which they would normally not expect to be capable of recalling, often with new levels of clarity, or insight into previously unrecognized aspects of those situations. This experiential process bears significant potential for accessing new opportunities for healing and is especially powerful when combined with verbal Psychotherapy.

The next domain – **perinatal** – represents perhaps the most unique component of Grof's description of the psyche. Nowhere else, with regard to maps of the human psyche, will we find such emphasis on this period of our development. In Grof's model, the perinatal experiential domain spans our history from the moment of conception to the event of biological birth. The idea that one could experientially access contents from this period of very early development, i.e. memories of one's birth, or even intrauterine life, was so revolutionary that even today, several decades later, conventional Psychology still refuses to accept it. Yet, as anyone seriously involved in the study and utilization of holotropic states of consciousness would attest, these experiences are exactly what we observe time

## 5. Roman

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“While the traditional model of Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis is strictly personalistic and biographical, modern consciousness research has added new levels, realms, and dimensions and shows the human psyche as being essentially commensurate with the whole universe and all of existence.”  
Grof, 1985, *Beyond the Brain*

## 6. Roman

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This is to say that, during the transpersonal experience, we may, for instance, experientially identify with some other being, e.g. an animal or a person, in contrast to our usual identification with our regular self. During this experience, we will be fully and intimately aware of that being’s mental and physical constituents and characteristics, as it experiences them in and of itself. However, we may also experientially transcend the associated sense of “I-ness” itself. This is the “self-reflecting” aspect that remains constant across both the examples considered — experiencing yourself as the ordinary “you”, as well as the “you” being the animal or other person. The psychedelic or holotropic experience may, on occasion, move beyond this sense of “I-ness” altogether. At that point, there is no “you”.

In the theory of Psychoanalysis, we have the classic categories of id, ego and superego. Roughly speaking, the id represents unconscious biological drives, the superego internalized rules of conduct from childhood (personal hygiene training, boundary enforcement, etc.), and the ego a self-aware “I”, functioning as a balancing mediator between the other two. In the expanded, holotropic state of consciousness, we may, for instance, have a vivid experience of identifying simultaneously with our regular self and the self of our father, resulting in a new perspective on our relationship with our actual father, as well as the relationship of the respective internal sub-personalities (ego and superego). At other times, our experience may exceed the boundaries of the psychoanalytic model (if, for instance, we happened to be previously familiar with it, and tended to view the internal workings of our mind through its optics) so dramatically and to such a degree, that it would render the entire conceptual construction completely irrelevant. Consequently, it would be necessary for us to adopt a broader, more comprehensive

and again in people undergoing holotropic therapy. When we enter the perinatal domain, we discover that our usual ways of making sense of categories like time and space, me and not me, or body and mind, start becoming increasingly challenged. It is a domain of huge emotional and physical energies, dominated for a large part by a peculiar mixture of sexuality and enormous violent and aggressive impulses. In addition, it is a place where we may obtain a direct taste of Heaven and Hell. Roots of some of the most widespread emotional disorders may be found here, including depression, phobias and various sexual deviations. At the same time, it is in the perinatal domain that we may gain crucial, direct insights into the nature of the cyclical, universal, and all-pervading principle of (psychospiritual) death and rebirth. In that case, we may subsequently find ourselves suddenly being able intuitively to derive completely new meaning from a great deal of the world’s religious and philosophical doctrines.

- The third domain is the **transpersonal**. This is the broadest and largest of all the three territories discussed. In fact, it may be considered limitless.<sup>[5]</sup> The transpersonal experience is typically marked by the overcoming of the usual confines of time, our physical body with its definite location in space, transcending our personality, or even the self as such.<sup>[6]</sup> We may also be confronted with the existence of other than linear causal relationships, the revelation of which may or may not take us by surprise, as well as other, previously perhaps unimaginable phenomena, e.g. the possibility of a co-manifestation of mutually exclusive occurrences within a single context (be it spatiotemporal, or otherwise). Our sense of experiential identification and subjective relating may occur anywhere in the cosmos, inner or outer, known or unknown, in the present, past or the future, or entirely beyond all these categories. Discovering and accepting the existence of the transpersonal domain ultimately means realizing that we are capable of accessing any process or phenomenon in the universe as a subjective experience, by virtue of having a mind and body. It also means that any and all boundaries in the universe — physical and mental — are ultimately illusory and, under certain conditions, subject to dissolution. This kind of realization can be tremendously liberating and enlightening, as well as, at times, deeply terrifying and disconcerting. It cannot be overstated how critically important it is for a person who embarks on the journey of exploration of the transpersonal domain (and the perinatal, for that matter), to

image of our self.

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## 7. Roman

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Quantum mechanics is a difficult subject, and few, if any, people really understand it in its entirety. Fortunately, a number of authors have done a fantastic job in popularizing the basic ideas involved, e.g. Amit Goswami, Fred Alan Wolf, Michio Kaku and Fritjof Capra (The Tao of Physics, 1975), among others. As to general systems theory, Fritjof Capra delivered a good and accessible introduction in his books The Turning Point (1982) and The Web of Life (1996).

## 8. Roman

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Grof elaborated on the concepts of both COEX Systems and Basic Perinatal Matrices already in his first book Realms of the Human Unconscious, originally published in 1975, which was shortly after he was forced by the new legislation to abandon his psychedelic research.

## 9. Roman

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Stanislav Grof conducted more than 4500 LSD-assisted therapeutic sessions. While not all of these were completed as early as the time when he formulated the concepts of COEX Systems and Basic Perinatal Matrices, these concepts remain as relevant for the work with holotropic states of consciousness today, as they were back in the '70s.

be equipped with a thorough knowledge of at least one comprehensive map of the territory explored, but preferably of several. Grof's theoretical work will make for a good starting point, possibly complemented with some knowledge of Ken Wilber's writings, plus maybe, as a bonus, a limited insight into the theory of quantum mechanics and the general systems theory.<sup>[7]</sup> Of course, some acquaintance with the Eastern spiritual thought systems, especially e.g. Buddhism, Yoga, and Taoism, will be of significant benefit here as well.

Let's zoom in one step closer now on our map, to get a slightly more detailed understanding of the territory to which our holotropic practice might take us. Within each of the broad categories of biographical, perinatal and transpersonal, further sub-structures can be identified. Once more, Grof offers some very interesting and useful conceptualizations in this respect. It is again based on his original experimental research into Psychedelics-Assisted Psychotherapy, which he conducted during the '60s and '70s in Czechoslovakia and the USA.<sup>[8]</sup>

On the basis of his observations from the extensive number of experimental psychedelic sessions<sup>[9]</sup>, Grof developed several additional concepts that proved particularly useful in the understanding of the immense variety of internal experiences that were manifested in his patients during the sessions.

## Systems of Condensed Experience – COEX Systems

*Systems of Condensed Experience* (or COEX systems) is a concept somewhat akin to the well-known concept of *complexes*, found predominantly in the work of Freud and Jung. COEX systems, however, cover a larger phenomenological area, reflecting the extended understanding of the human psyche found in Grof's work.

A COEX system consists of emotionally similarly flavored memories that form meaningful, thematically coherent structures. COEX systems govern a great deal of how we see the world, how we see ourselves, how we behave and react to the

world, and how we experience our relationships. These memories may originate in various periods of our life, usually associated with instances of exceptionally strong emotional activation, e.g. physical or psychological trauma. However, they contain material from non-biographical levels of the psyche as well. Grof recognized that COEX systems practically always contain a significant perinatal component, and their roots can usually be traced to the transpersonal domain as well. As we progress in the holotropic process, we discover that the material that surfaces into our consciousness is always organized into a COEX system, with a particular theme and emotional character. We subjectively perceive this as an unfolding of a personal “story” or “journey” that we can follow and make sense of. It may take many months, or years of holotropic therapy to become fully aware of an entire COEX system. A COEX may comprise painful and traumatic memories, as well as ecstatic and blissful content. According to Grof, every human individual can have several of these systems operative in their psyche.

Let’s examine a few examples of some classic themes, or “common denominators” of COEX systems, as found in Grof’s book *Psychology of the Future*:

*“The layers of a particular system can, for example, contain all the major memories of humiliating, degrading, and shaming experiences that have damaged our self-esteem. In another COEX system, the common denominator can be anxiety experienced in various shocking and terrifying situations or claustrophobic and suffocating feelings evoked by oppressive and confining circumstances. Rejection and emotional deprivation damaging the ability to trust men, women, or people in general, is another common motif. Situations that have generated profound feelings of guilt and a sense of failure, events that have resulted in a conviction that sex is dangerous or disgusting, and encounters with indiscriminate aggression and violence can be added to the above list as characteristic examples. Particularly important are COEX systems that contain memories of encounters with situations endangering life, health, and integrity of the body.”*

## 10. Roman

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The occurrence of this kind of mismatch is sometimes called “cognitive dissonance” and it counts in Psychology and Psychiatry as a cause of extreme psychological discomfort. Hence we have our personality set up in such a way as to prioritize the avoidance of such a state by all means.

## 11. Roman

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Now and then, cases are even reported in which people undergoing particularly turbulent episodes of surfacing difficult COEX systems, seem to be attracting external situations they apparently can be in no control of, e.g. perhaps unexpectedly occurring accidents or calamitous events, which nonetheless appear to be complementing their subjective experiential realities with striking relevance.

These types of events would fall under the category of synchronistic occurrences, a concept originally outlined by Carl Gustav Jung. To the present day, we don't have much satisfactory understanding of this phenomenon and the concept of synchronicity has been criticized by some as rather unscientific. Scientific or not, it remains true that those who have encountered a major synchronicity at first hand in their lives, usually have little doubt about the significance of the event.

## 12. Roman

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Bear in mind that this rather extreme example comes from experimental research with sustained administrations of very high doses of LSD, and involves a person with a serious psychiatric diagnosis. It gives, however, a good example of how far holotropic therapy (in this case psychedelics-assisted) can potentially reach.

Another very interesting and important feature of the COEX systems is their ability to influence our behavior in such a way that we unconsciously create external situations or contexts that match the internal state brought forward by whatever COEX happens to govern our psychological setup at that time.

(Interestingly, at the time this is happening, we usually conceptualize the situation as if “inside out”, assuming that our internal emotional state is being produced by the external circumstances, as, for certain reasons, the reverse causality seems counterintuitive to us.) One of the ways to understand this process is by conceptualizing it as an autonomous protective mechanism of our psyche, the function of which is to avoid a mismatch between our internal and external

[10] realities.<sup>[10]</sup>

Thus, for example, if a COEX is active in an individual's psyche, containing material characterized by a mixture of thrill and excitement, sexual arousal and an appetite for risk-taking, accompanied by elements of disgust and obscenity, this person may find himself acting out those impulses by roaming red-light districts at night, interacting with prostitutes, spending undue amounts of money and taking cocaine. Or, if the active COEX is characterized by states of paranoia, distrust, self-pity and envy, that person may find himself repeatedly trapped in situations where the people around him turn their backs on him; he may unknowingly arouse

[11] hostility in colleagues or family and attract intruders to his property.<sup>[11]</sup>

To round off our understanding of how a powerful destructive COEX system can negatively influence an individual's life, and subsequently be resolved in the process of holotropic experiential therapy, the following is a concrete example, again taken from Grof's book *Psychology of the Future*. In his book, Grof chose for this purpose the fairly harsh story of Peter, a 37-year-old tutor who had been intermittently hospitalized and treated in Grof's Psychiatric Department in Prague, during the years of his intensive research into the possibilities of

[12] Psychedelics-Assisted Psychotherapy.<sup>[12]</sup>



*At the time we began with the experiential sessions, Peter could hardly function in his everyday life. He was almost constantly obsessed with the idea of finding a man with certain physical characteristics and preferably clad in black. He wanted to befriend this man and tell him about his urgent desire to be locked in a dark cellar and exposed to various diabolic physical and mental tortures. Unable to concentrate on anything else, he wandered aimlessly through the city, visiting public parks, lavatories, bars, and railroad stations searching for the "right man".*

*He succeeded on several occasions to persuade or bribe various men who met his criteria to promise or do what he asked for. Having a special gift for finding persons with sadistic traits, he was twice almost killed, several times seriously hurt, and once robbed of all his money. On those occasions, where he was able to experience what he craved for, he was extremely frightened and actually strongly disliked the tortures. In addition to this main problem, Peter suffered from suicidal depressions, impotence, and infrequent epileptiform seizures.*

*Reconstructing his history, I found out that his major problems started at the time of his involuntary employment in Germany during World War II. The Nazis used people brought to Germany from occupied territories for work in places threatened by air-raids, such as foundries and ammunition factories. They referred to this form of slave labor as *Totaleinsatzung*. At that time, two SS officers repeatedly forced him at gunpoint to engage in their homosexual practices. When the War was over, Peter realized that these experiences had created in him a strong preference for homosexual intercourse experienced in the passive role. This gradually changed into fetishism for black male clothes and finally into the complex obsessive-compulsive masochistic behavior described above.*

*Fifteen consecutive psychedelic sessions revealed a very interesting and important COEX system underlying his problems. In its most superficial layers were Peter's more recent traumatic experiences with his sadistic partners. On several occasions, the accomplices whom he had recruited actually bound him with ropes, locked him into a cellar without food and water, and tortured him by flagellation and strangulation according to his wishes. One of these men hit him on his head, bound him with a rope, and left him lying in a forest after stealing his money.*

*Peter's most dramatic adventure involved a man who claimed he had in his cabin in the woods just the kind of cellar Peter wanted and promised to take him there. When they were traveling by train to this man's weekend house, Peter was struck by the strange-looking bulky backpack of his companion. When the latter left the compartment and went to the bathroom, Peter stepped up on the seat and checked the suspect baggage. He discovered a complete set of murder weapons, including a gun, a large butcher knife, a freshly sharpened hatchet, and a surgical saw used for amputations. Panic-stricken, he jumped out of the moving train and suffered serious injuries. Elements of the above episodes formed the superficial layers of Peter's most important COEX system.*

*A deeper layer of the same system contained Peter's memories from the Third Reich. In the sessions where this part of the COEX constellation manifested, he relived in detail his experiences with the homosexual SS officers, with all the complicated feelings involved. In addition, he relived several other traumatic memories from World War II and dealt with the entire oppressive atmosphere of this period. He had visions of pompous Nazi military parades and rallies, banners with swastikas, ominous giant eagle emblems, scenes from concentration camps, and many others.*

*Then came layers related to Peter's childhood, particularly those involving punishment by his parents. His alcoholic father was often violent when he was drunk and used to beat him in a sadistic way with a large leather strap. His mother's favorite method of punishing him was to lock him into a dark cellar without food for long periods of time. Peter recalled that throughout his childhood she always wore black dresses; he did not remember her ever wearing anything else. At this point, he realized that one of the roots of his obsession seemed to be craving for suffering that would combine the elements of punishment inflicted on him by his parents.*

*However, that was not the whole story. As we continued with the sessions, the process deepened and Peter confronted the trauma of his birth with all its biological brutality. This situation had all the elements that he expected from the sadistic treatment he was so desperately trying to receive: dark enclosed space, confinement and restriction of the body movements, and exposure to extreme physical and emotional tortures. Reliving of the trauma of birth finally*

### 13. Roman

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The concept of psychospiritual death and rebirth is specifically relevant to Psychology, Mythology (the universal myth of the “Hero’s Journey”, as described notably by Joseph Campbell, currently being also powerfully popularized by Jordan B. Peterson), Christianity, and Eastern spiritual traditions and practices. In each of these contexts, ego death will have a slightly different meaning or emphasis, although they are all complementary, and pertain to the general idea of death and rebirth. We can also find an equivalent concept in Shamanic traditions, where it is connected to the so called “shaman’s illness” and the experience of “dismemberment”.

*resolved his difficult symptoms to such an extent that he could again function in life.*

Right, it is time to leave the Psychiatric ward and move on to the next fascinating theoretical concept of Grof’s cartography, namely...

## The Perinatal Domain

It was Grof’s consistent observation that any COEX system that starts manifesting itself in the process of holotropic therapy (or psychedelic therapy, or potentially any other form of experiential therapy capable of reaching pre-biographical content) will sooner or later begin to reveal its roots as embedded in the perinatal domain. It is at this time that the healing process really starts to take off.

## Psychospiritual Death and Rebirth

We have already briefly mentioned that, as we extend our exploration into the perinatal realm, we are setting ourselves up to undergo a process perhaps best described as *psychospiritual death and rebirth*. Sometimes we may also encounter the term *ego death*.<sup>[13]</sup> When we search for these terms online, we usually get lofty descriptions e.g. “complete loss of subjective self-identity”, or “an imageless experience in which there is no sense of personal identity”, or even something like “the obliteration of the Self”, etc. Often, confusion between the concepts of ego death and enlightenment is also encountered. In any case, there seems to be no shortage of people who feel compelled to describe this process, explain it or otherwise comment on it, which only shows how fundamental and universally important it is to a human being’s life.

What we see in the practice of Holotropic Breathwork is that people usually don’t encounter ego death as a single, distinct, definite event, but rather experience it

multiple times, getting an opportunity to see and appreciate it through different optics and from different angles, at various levels of depth of insight. This often happens over the course of many years. It may occur in a single person's life on one occasion as a series of subtle intimations hinting at various aspects of the life-death dyad. At another time, it may seem as if the process of dying and being born is constantly manifested in everything around them. On yet another occasion, that same person may undergo a radical, once-in-a-lifetime, full-blown experience of a total ego dissolution. This may occur e.g. during a high-dose psychedelic session, with full awareness of the dying process and the subsequently resulting clear memory of the moment of the ultimate “letting go”. But these are mere examples. In practice, there really is no limit to the ways one may experience the universal Mystery of Death and Rebirth. So, it is pretty much up to each of us to decide whether we wish to include in our understanding of the ego death the sum of all its possible manifestations, in their many nuances, occurring on various levels and in diverse areas of our lived experience, or if we wish to reserve the term only for a single, perhaps exceptionally powerful instance of it.

### **Basic Perinatal Matrices – BPM I-IV**

Now, for the thoughtful holotropic practitioner, it will be a good idea to further break down the perinatal domain into its subcategories, as the knowledge of these may help to stabilize and integrate the process of self-exploration later on, in its more advanced stages.

Grof recognized a distinctive pattern in how the perinatal content tends to reveal itself in the holotropic process. There are four qualitatively distinct subdomains in Grof's model of the perinatal. Grof calls these four sub-domains *Basic Perinatal Matrices* (or BPM). These matrices form a sequence of experiential content that occurs over the course of our intrauterine development (or, in other words, pregnancy). This nine-month-long period happens to be of cardinal importance in shaping the character of the entire subsequent life of every individual. Once we

#### 14. Roman

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Amnion is the innermost membrane that encloses the embryo of a mammal, bird, or reptile.

#### 15. Roman

4 April 2020 18:14:00

Citation from Stanislav Grof - Psychology Of The Future: Lessons From Modern Consciousness Research (2000)

succeed in directly contacting this early period of our development, we will begin to intuitively understand how it vitally informs every aspect of our postnatal life.

Let's take them one after the other...

### **BPM I**

The whole process of psychospiritual death and rebirth, as we undergo it during the very early stages of our biological life, begins in the first basic perinatal matrix. This is the experiential world of the intrauterine life, of what Grof sometimes <sup>[14]</sup> called the *amniotic universe*.<sup>[14]</sup> The fetus is unaware of any boundaries whatsoever, does not differentiate between inner and outer, its own organism and the maternal organism. There is a genuine unity of the fetus and its surrounding environment.

If everything goes well and undisturbed during this early period, then people who re-enter this experiential realm later in the holotropic process often describe experiences of *"vast regions with no boundaries or limits, [...] identify with galaxies, interstellar space, or the entire cosmos. A related experience is that of floating in the sea, identifying with various aquatic animals, such as fish, jellyfish, dolphins, or whales, or even becoming the ocean. This seems to reflect the fact that the fetus is essentially an aquatic creature. Positive intrauterine experiences can also be associated with archetypal visions of Mother Nature, safe, beautiful, and unconditionally nourishing like a "good womb". We can envision fruit-bearing orchards, fields of ripe corn, agricultural terraces in the Andes, or unspoiled Polynesian islands. Mythological images from the collective unconscious that often appear in this context portray various celestial realms and paradises as they are described in mythologies of different cultures."*<sup>[15]</sup>

## 16. Roman

4 April 2020 18:14:00

Citation from Stanislav Grof -  
Psychology Of The Future:  
Lessons From Modern  
Consciousness Research (2000)



The amniotic universe of BPM I

Sometimes, however, even intrauterine life does not progress ideally, with all kinds of disturbances occurring. This would include various instances of accidents, illnesses of the mother, an autoimmune reaction of the maternal organism, drug abuse, emotional distress, etc. When we are reliving these experiences of what could be called the “bad womb”, we *“have a sense of dark and ominous threat and often feel that we are being poisoned. We might see images that portray polluted waters and toxic dumps. This reflects the fact that many prenatal disturbances are caused by toxic changes in the body of the pregnant mother. Sequences of this kind can be associated with archetypal visions of frightening demonic entities or with a sense of insidious all-pervading evil. Those of us who relive episodes of more violent interference with prenatal existence, such as an imminent miscarriage or attempted abortion, usually experience some form of universal threat or bloody apocalyptic visions of the end of the world.”*<sup>[16]</sup>

As soon as the first contractions occur, the fetus moves into the next stage...

## BPM II

The second basic perinatal matrix is where things start getting serious. The fetus, until now experiencing itself as one with the maternal organism, suddenly finds itself being seriously threatened by the beginning contractions. Its entire environment, indeed the whole cosmos, turns hostile and the situation is now getting progressively worse. The mechanical pressures are increasingly terrifying, and, worse still, the fetus begins to experience periodically returning states of suffocation, as the flow of oxygenized blood through the vascular tissue of the placenta becomes obstructed during the contractions. The entire “known universe” collapses on the fetus, unleashing actual Hell. The cervix has not yet opened, the pressures are increasingly unbearable, the situation seems fatal.



The Maelström of BPM II

Grof observes that, when we are reliving these experiences in holotropic (or psychedelic) therapy, *“we typically feel that we are being sucked into a gigantic whirlpool or swallowed by some mythic beast. We might also experience that the*

## 17. Roman

4 April 2020 18:14:00

Citation from Stanislav Grof -  
Psychology Of The Future:  
Lessons From Modern  
Consciousness Research (2000)

*entire world or cosmos is being engulfed. This can be associated with images of devouring or entangling archetypal monsters, such as leviathans, dragons, whales, giant snakes, tarantulas, or octopuses. The sense of overwhelming vital threat can lead to intense anxiety and general mistrust bordering on paranoia. Another experiential variety of the [...] second matrix is the theme of descending into the depths of the underworld, the realm of death, or hell. ...*

*... It is only natural that someone facing this aspect of the psyche would feel a great reluctance to confront it. Going deeper into this experience seems like meeting eternal damnation. Yet, the fastest way of terminating this unbearable state is surrendering to it completely and accepting it. [...] It is an important stage of spiritual opening that can have an immensely purging and liberating effect.*<sup>[17]</sup>

### **BPM III**

When the claustrophobic hell of BPM II reaches its full manifestation and we finally surrender to it, the process reaches a turning point. The cervix opens and that constitutes a decisive shift in the situation. Although the severity of the mechanical pressures of the contractions continues, or even keeps increasing and the threat of annihilation is still imminent, there nonetheless is an important qualitative change – the situation is not hopeless anymore, because there is now a way out. It is a transition from Hell, to “Hell with a perspective”. The third matrix is a fight for life. It involves hurting and being hurt, both as a result of the desperate struggle to be born. It is marked by a peculiar, highly emotionally charged mixture of huge violent impulses directed both towards the environment as well as ourselves, intense anxiety and a surreal blend of bizarre imagery and sexual excitement.

BPM III “is an extremely rich and complex experiential pattern. Besides the actual realistic reliving of different aspects of the struggle in the birth canal, it involves a wide variety of imagery drawn from history, nature, and archetypal



## 18. Roman

4 April 2020 18:14:00

Citation from Stanislav Grof -  
Psychology Of The Future:  
Lessons From Modern  
Consciousness Research (2000)



A phantasmagoric ride through BPM III

*realms. The most important of these are the atmosphere of titanic fight, aggressive and sadomasochistic sequences, experiences of deviant sexuality, demonic episodes, scatological involvement, and encounter with fire. ...*

*... The **Titanic aspect** of BPM III is quite understandable in view of the enormity of the forces operating in the final stage of childbirth. When we encounter this facet of the third matrix, we experience streams of energy of overwhelming intensity, rushing through the body and building up to explosive discharges. ...*

*... **Aggressive and sadomasochistic aspects** of this matrix reflect the biological fury of the organism whose survival is threatened by suffocation, as well as the introjected destructive onslaught of the uterine contractions. ...*

*... **Sexual experiences** that occur in the context of BPM III are characterized by enormous intensity of the sexual drive, by their mechanical and unselective quality, and their exploitative, pornographic, or deviant nature. They depict scenes from red-light districts and from the sexual underground, extravagant erotic practices, and sadomasochistic sequences. ...<sup>[18]</sup>*

## 19. Roman

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In real life, however, many partial deviations occur from this general, ideal structure. A 24-hour-long delivery with the use of anesthetics will have a different impact on the psychological formation of the fetus than a spontaneous and uncomplicated delivery, or e.g. a delivery via Cesarean section.



BPM IV - Transcendence

As the flaming agony of the final stages of BPM III runs its course, our mind finally opens to the great experiential resolution of the whole death and rebirth process: we become a newborn. Dying and being born, fear and ecstasy, defeat and victory, confusion and order, futility and purpose – they are all now parts of one

19 perfect whole.19

## **BPM IV**

The fourth matrix is the matrix of reunion with the maternal organism. It is the final destination, reached after a long and hard struggle. It is the Home to which we have returned after a difficult and dangerous adventure. It is the same Home from which we earlier embarked on our journey, yet, we ourselves are not the same anymore. Everything old and corrupt has been burned in the fierce blaze of the final stages of BPM III, and here we are – a genuinely new entity, a self-aware

individual with a unique creative potential, full of divine light, born into an entirely new world. This is transcendence!

Let us conclude this section on Basic Perinatal Matrices with one last excerpt from Grof's *Psychology of the Future*:

*“The ‘dying’ and the agony during the struggle for rebirth reflect the actual pain and vital threat of the biological birth process. However, the ego death that precedes rebirth is the death of our old concepts of who we are and what the world is like, which were forged by the traumatic imprint of birth and are maintained by the memory of this situation that stays alive in our unconscious.*

*As we are clearing these old programs by letting them emerge into consciousness, they are losing their emotional charge and are, in a sense, dying. But we are so identified with them that approaching the moment of the ego death feels like the end of our existence, or even like the end of the world. As frightening as this process is, it is actually very healing and transforming. ...*

*... What is actually dying in this process is the false ego that, up to this point in our life, we have mistaken for our true self.”*

## **Beyond the Perinatal**

As has already been said, there exists yet another realm in the unconscious psyche, which extends even beyond the perinatal domain, namely the *transpersonal*. The transpersonal territory is so vast that it is completely beyond the scope of this article (or any article, for that matter) to deal with it in any comprehensive manner. It's been mainly the great spiritual and philosophical traditions that have provided scholarly descriptions, artistic interpretations and other kinds of maps of the transpersonal universe, collecting pieces of information about the world “on the other side”, carefully fitting them together, through the bold and patient exploratory work of shamans, monks, mystics and yogis, but also

that of scholars, theorists and systematists. Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism and Hinduism — to name just a few of the many authentic spiritual traditions of the world — all have contributed their extensive cosmographies. Mythologies of all cultures and historical periods have been faithfully mirroring the transpersonal universe for millennia, exposing their awesome pantheons of gods and goddesses - some wrathful, others benevolent; depicting heroes and their adventurous quests, dragons and leviathans, demons, devas and endless further manifestations of the eternal cosmic battle of Good and Evil. Be it the Egyptian, Greek, Maya, Hindu, or any other mythology of the world, they all are reflections of the transpersonal realm in its inexhaustible richness and diversity. Modern Western Psychology has also contributed to this picture, offering its own unique maps and perspectives, perhaps most notably in the work of Jung, Grof, Wilber, Richard Tarnas and, more recently, Elias Capriles — again, to name only a few.

### **The World of Archetypes**

Nevertheless, one particular class of experiences belonging to the transpersonal domain deserves a mention, even in the context of the limited space of this article, i.e. a direct encounter with an *archetype*, or *archetypal being*. Archetypes are primordial organizing principles that universally inform the way we perceive ourselves and the world, and the way we make sense of ourselves and the world. They provide context and meaning of everything we do in life. Archetypes manifest themselves in the external world (Cosmos), as well as in the internal world (Psyche). Archetypes originate deep in the transpersonal domain of the unconscious and shine through into our conscious mind. Indeed, their universal presence is so powerful that, whatever we look at in the outside world around us, we see the archetypal principles existing in it.

During the early times of human development, the archaic man lived in a *magical, animistic* world, where he saw everything around him as imbued with a living soul – trees, mountains, the sun, even weather patterns – they all were living beings, just like him. When there was a storm, it was there for a reason relevant to the

person experiencing it, it had will and personality, perhaps it was angry at the person for something they had done wrong earlier that day. A raging thunderstorm – something huge, of immense power, capable of completely overwhelming him. Or maybe the magnificent display of a clear night sky, magically revealing itself just after the storm was over, full of stars, breathtaking, awe-inspiring – something *beyond his capacity to understand*. So what do *we* see, when we, resembling our awestruck ancestor gazing up at the starry sky, encounter something of such superior power, something so vast, deep and complex, that we realize it extends beyond our capacity to fathom, yet feel profoundly fascinated by it, perhaps for its immense, endlessly refined beauty or precisely for that unfathomable depth of meaning? Well, chances are we'll see a *god* or a *goddess*.

As we progressed as human beings and learned to understand our environment and its internal processes, gods and goddesses gradually faded away from our surrounding world. The more we understood the diverse natural processes and learned to master them, to predict and control them, to bend them according to our will, the less space there was left in them for the gods. It was now more as if we had become that, what previously had seemed to be the gods. Eventually we even managed to fly to outer space, towards the stars, where the gods themselves have been at home from the beginning of ages.

So the gods are gone, you think, more or less. Not much space left for them in the modern Western soul, casually devoted to the Newtonian-Cartesian, techno-scientific paradigm. But make no mistake, the gods are not gone. Far from it! In a sense, they are closer than they've ever been. As the Western mind matures, and the critical shortcomings of our current dominant worldview are becoming increasingly evident, we are beginning to take note of the irresistible call to turn

our attention inward, and to explore, and extend our understanding into the mysterious depths of our own psyche. And that's where the gods, the *archetypal beings*, have resided all the while, remember? It may well be that we are only now getting ready for a personal, one-on-one interview. Or should we rather say, one-in-one?



### **The “Inner Radar” Operating in Holotropic States**

So, now we have somewhat of an overarching idea about the enormous territory of our unconscious psyche. The possibility of getting to explore it firsthand, subjectively, through an actual lived experience, and not only by reading descriptions in books, seems without a doubt exciting and of the utmost interest. This is not to mention the benefits of the activation of the healing and growth potential that we see lying dormant for each of us down the path into the inner realms. But how on Earth do we navigate such a vast experiential field? How do we know where to start our exploration, and where to go next? What if we get lost in the endless potentiality of the inner realities?

It turns out that the answer is quite simple. When we enter the holotropic state, a remarkable and extraordinary function of our mind becomes activated. It is an innate ability to navigate the territory of the psyche as if in “autopilot” mode,

## 20. Roman

4 April 2020 18:14:00

Citation from Stanislav Grof - Psychology Of The Future: Lessons From Modern Consciousness Research (2000)

## 21. Roman

4 April 2020 18:14:00

Subtle energy is a concept of a natural force currently not recognized by Western science. It was, however, widely adopted across multiple spiritual and medicinal systems all over the world. Among the most well known systems utilizing this concept are Taoism and Yoga, where subtle energy is regarded as “Chi” or “Prana”, respectively. In Sanskrit, Prana essentially means breath, “life force”, or “vital principle”.

## 22. Roman

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Holotropic Breathwork practitioners oftentimes regard this navigating function as “the inner healer”, or “the inner healing intelligence”, especially in the GTT community. However, the concept of an innate ability of humans to progress towards greater levels of inner integrity, health and completeness (under the presupposition that obstructions to this process are removed, or at least temporarily kept at bay), is not unique to the holotropic conceptual framework. There is, for instance, a corresponding concept to be found in Hindu philosophy, although it’s framed quite differently. It is the concept of Ishvara. Ishvara can be understood as the Supreme Being, a personal god/Self of every individual, who chooses each instant of a devotee’s life, selecting experiences moment by moment from the individual’s “karmic storehouse”, with regard to the devotee’s optimal spiritual development.

simply by allowing the process to unfold of itself. Grof observed and subsequently described that whatever experiential contents there are present in the unconscious mind of an individual that carry “*the strongest emotional charge, are most psychodynamically relevant at the time, and most readily available for conscious*

<sup>[20]</sup> *processing*”,<sup>[20]</sup> automatically enter the experiential field of the subject. As soon as the emergent material is allowed to manifest itself in the conscious mind and body, *while being attended to fully and with authenticity*, the associated <sup>[21]</sup> emotional and subtle-energetic<sup>[21]</sup> load discharges through this process, and the experience will freely move on to whatever content there is ready to be processed next.

<sup>[22]</sup> It is this explicit reliance on the “inner radar”<sup>[22]</sup> that distinguishes holotropic therapy from many other, non-holotropic approaches, in that it places the navigation of the therapeutic process in the hands of the client him or herself, rather than requiring this to be the responsibility of the therapist. This then defines the roles during the Holotropic Breathwork workshop as complementary — participants being the ones who *allow* the healing to happen within themselves, and facilitators the ones who create and sustain a *protective and supportive environment*, in order to maximize the efficiency and safety of the process. It is precisely the willingness to follow this inner intuition (while supported by qualified facilitators) that will lead us to the perinatal and transpersonal realms of the unconscious, possibly even sparking the aspiration in us to try eventually to extend our adventurous odyssey beyond even those categories. There is no shortage of the most brilliant maps of the Spirit landscape available from the great spiritual traditions of the world, and the main paths leading to the ultimate destination are well marked in them. If the seeker is apt, determined and well discerning, then there is every reason to believe he or she may realize the deepest and most secret truths of the great Cosmic Game. It is all in our hands.

## Frequently Asked Questions

Whenever it comes to discussing Holotropic Breathwork, people who are new to the topic usually have many urgent questions about the “whys” and “hows” of the practice. Some of these questions keep being asked over and over again, so they appear to be of particular relevance to the curious newbie.

Analogously to these recurring questions, are also certain answers that have been offered again and again by teachers and seasoned practitioners. Let's take a look at 12 of these questions, as they are answered in the spirit of this tradition.

- 1 I heard that Holotropic Breathwork can be dangerous. Is it true?
- 2 Can I do Holotropic Breathwork on my own?
- 3 Are there different kinds of Holotropic Breathwork?
- 4 Can Holotropic Breathwork bring about lasting changes in one's life?
- 5 I am kind of shy. Do I have to do Holotropic Breathwork in a group, or can I also have an individual session?
- 6 What if I don't want anybody to touch me? Is bodywork obligatory during Holotropic Breathwork?
- 7 I am not entirely healthy. Is Holotropic Breathwork only for physically and mentally fit people?
- 8 I've been depressed/anxious/suffering from panic attacks for some time. Is Holotropic Breathwork for me?
- 9 Can Holotropic Breathwork help with healing physical illness?
- 10 Is the Holotropic Breathwork experience similar to an LSD trip?



- 11 A friend tried LSD/Magic Mushrooms/Ayahuasca/DMT/Bufo Alvarius/Mescaline/Ibogaine, and had a bad trip. From then on, he/she hasn't felt good. Can Holotropic Breathwork help?
- 12 Can Holotropic Breathwork help to overcome substance addictions?

Q: I heard that Holotropic Breathwork can be dangerous. Is it true?

A: Holotropic Breathwork is an entirely safe method, provided that certain standards and conditions are met (this includes ruling out medical contraindications). The easiest, safest and recommended way of ensuring that the required conditions are met is by choosing a facilitator (facilitators) who has completed the Grof Transpersonal Training program, and who subsequently has been granted a GTT certificate. Beginning from 2017, the Grof Transpersonal Training organization requires its graduates in addition to complete a certain amount of personal psychological and spiritual work every year (including two Holotropic Breathwork experiential sessions), plus every three years to participate in a core GTT event, led by GTT principal staff, in order to check in with their senior teachers and realign their practice with the community standards. This is called the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) program at GTT. You are actively encouraged to check a facilitator's CPD status and certification, before you attend a Holotropic Breathwork session with him/her/them.

A continually updated, complete and searchable list of all GTT certified facilitators can be found on the Grof Transpersonal Training website - [www.holotropic.com](http://www.holotropic.com).

Holotropic Breathwork was developed during the '70s and '80s at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. Subsequently, in 1989, Grof Transpersonal Training was founded. During the approx. 40 years of its existence, many thousands, indeed tens of thousands of people, have undergone the experience of Holotropic Breathwork, in the form that it is being taught at GTT. Many practitioners have participated in 50 or more sessions during

## 1. Roman

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A long-term study with 11 000 participants was completed by James Eyerman at the Stress Center of Hyland Behavioral Health, Saint Anthony's Medical Center in Saint Louis, Missouri, in 2001 (starting in 1989). The study was concluded with the following: "Among the 11 000 inpatients, the experience was well tolerated. There were no reports of problems at the end of the sessions. Nursing staff reported no untoward sequelae or complaints following the breathwork during this 12-year period."

<https://www.academia.edu/3849159/>

A\_Clinical\_Report\_on\_Holotropic\_Breathwork\_in\_11\_000\_Psychiatric\_Inpatients\_in\_a\_Community\_Hospital\_Setting

their lifetimes. To the present day, there are no known casualties associated with the practice of Holotropic Breathwork.<sup>[1]</sup>

Q: Can I do Holotropic Breathwork on my own?

A: This is a super common question, and whenever there is a group of newbies to Holotropic Breathwork, you can be certain somebody will come up with it. The answer is: No, you can't do Holotropic Breathwork on your own. Here's why:

Holotropic Breathwork is a composite technique. This means that, in order for Holotropic Breathwork actually to occur, a number of specific conditions have to be met, and a number of components have to come together functionally. So, for example, in Holotropic Breathwork we have the element of sitters and breathers working together, or the element of the sharing circle, where people share their experience while others listen, and vice versa. Another crucial element of the technique is a protected, supportive and caring environment, which has to be actively sustained during the entire workshop by trained facilitators.

Then there is the theoretical element of the workshop, which takes the form of a lecture and/or a discussion session, where we learn about new ways to conceptualize our holotropic processes and to integrate them into our daily lives. Another vital component of Holotropic Breathwork is bodywork, or, more precisely, "focused energy release work", which is something participants can only do together with trained facilitators. At other times, we may find ourselves in a difficult place during our holotropic experience, and the mere presence of, or a word of reassurance and/or encouragement from an experienced facilitator can often work wonders to assist us to overcome the challenge successfully. And the list goes on ...

So, as you can see, there are plenty of reasons why trying to do Holotropic Breathwork at home alone can never produce the same results as doing it in its proper context and with trained facilitators.

Q: Are there different kinds of Holotropic Breathwork?

A: No, there is only one Holotropic Breathwork.

There are, however, different kinds of *breathwork*. You may have heard of Integrative Breathwork, Maitri Breathwork, Transformational Breathwork, Shamanic Breathwork, Rebirthing Breathwork, Wim Hof Breathwork, Clarity Breathwork, Biodynamic Breathwork, Neurodynamic Breathwork, etc. – you name it ...

Breathwork can potentially have a non-trivial impact on your mental and physical wellbeing. So if you intend to engage in some form of it, it is important to realize that different kinds of breathwork may yield significantly different results. This is why you always want to know *exactly* what kind of breathwork you are dealing with, and what the results are that you may expect if you choose to engage in the practice of it.

“Holotropic Breathwork” is an internationally registered trademark. Only certified graduates of Grof Transpersonal Training are authorized to use it for their practice. The history, technique, and benefits of the method are well documented. If you wish to learn more about Holotropic Breathwork, then this website will make a good starting point.

Q: Can Holotropic Breathwork bring about lasting changes in one’s life?

A: Yes, Holotropic Breathwork can produce real and lasting changes in one’s life.

Naturally, the results will tend to be different for someone who is engaging in the practice systematically over a prolonged period of time, and for someone who only tries the method once or twice.

Holotropic Breathwork enables people to open up experientially to aspects of themselves that are normally hidden in their unconscious mind. If this is

## 2. Roman

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For the interested reader, several academic papers elaborating on the topic can be mentioned:

Laurel Watjen: An Argument for the use of Holotropic Breathwork as an Adjunct to Psychotherapy

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270454185\\_An\\_Argument\\_for\\_the\\_use\\_of\\_Holotropic\\_Breathwork\\_as\\_an\\_Adjunct\\_to\\_Psychotherapy](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270454185_An_Argument_for_the_use_of_Holotropic_Breathwork_as_an_Adjunct_to_Psychotherapy)

Sarah W. Holmes, Robin Morris, Pauline Rose Clance, R. Thompson Putney: Holotropic breathwork: An experiential approach to psychotherapy

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232555956\\_Holotropic\\_breathwork\\_An\\_experiential\\_approach\\_to\\_psychotherapy](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232555956_Holotropic_breathwork_An_experiential_approach_to_psychotherapy)

Tanja Miller, Laila Nielsen: Measure of Significance of Holotropic Breathwork in the Development of Self-Awareness

<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/acm.2014.0297>

done with adequate care and occurs within the right context, extraordinarily wholesome results can be attained. In Depth Psychology, it is well understood that bringing these hidden aspects of our psyche to conscious awareness, while subsequently carefully integrating them into our conscious self-identity, results in healing and functional expansion. The more comprehensive and well-integrated our self becomes, the richer, healthier and more fulfilling a life we may enjoy.<sup>[2]</sup>

Q: I am kind of shy. Do I have to do Holotropic Breathwork in a group, or can I also have an individual session?

A: Individual sessions are possible, and although they are quite rare, in certain cases there may be good reasons to do Holotropic Breathwork in an individual setting.

It is natural to feel a little shy, especially before having one's first experience with Holotropic Breathwork in a group setting. After all, entering a non-ordinary state of consciousness involves letting go of control to a substantial degree, and that means we are going to render ourselves potentially vulnerable. Therefore, a certain degree of shyness and caution is quite appropriate. It is also true, however, that those who initially express hesitation to participate in a group setting, and subsequently do so, are practically without exception relieved and pleasantly surprised by the experience.

Do you know that there are many wonderful things to enjoy in a group setting? In a group, you get the opportunity to experience both the roles of the *breather*, and the *sitter*. This is very valuable, as the experience of "sitting" for another person powerfully enhances the holotropic process. The workshop is a social event as well. Mutual interaction with others has a great potential to enrich our experience in many important ways. In a larger sharing circle, we get plenty of opportunity for insight into the nature of the transformative

### 3. Roman

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This particular principle is understood to be of prime importance, specifically under the ethos of the Grof Transpersonal Training school. In other types of breathwork, or with practitioners who decided to diverge in their practice from the GTT methodology, you may sometimes encounter facilitation practices where the facilitator enters physical interaction with the participant on a more autonomous basis. Whether this is for the benefit of the participants or not is subject to ongoing debate, but at GTT (and Holotropic Bohemia), we, as facilitators, always err on the side of self-restraint.

process, simply by listening to others. We may get valuable feedback and perhaps even form new, authentic friendships.

Moreover, and perhaps a little counterintuitively, even for the naturally shy person, the group setting turns out to be mostly more favorable than an individual session would be. This is because when everyone in the group goes into the expanded state together, it usually makes one less self-conscious than being alone, with only one, or two other people present in the room, who, at that, are in their normal, waking state.

So, at GTT, we generally wholeheartedly recommend doing Holotropic Breathwork in a group setting. If there's a specific reason not to, an individual session can be arranged.

Q: What if I don't want anybody to touch me? Is bodywork mandatory during Holotropic Breathwork?

A: No, bodywork or any other kind of physical contact is not mandatory during Holotropic Breathwork.

At a Holotropic Breathwork workshop, everything is based on informed consent and mutual agreement.<sup>[3]</sup> Bodywork in the context of Holotropic Breathwork (focused energy-release work), follows two basic principles: 1) it is initiated by the breather, and 2) it is done by the breather and facilitator *together*. In focused energy-release work, *the breather is the leader*, always.

Every Holotropic Breathwork workshop includes a theoretical lecture, preceding the experiential part. During that lecture, the basic principles and potential benefits of bodywork will be explained in detail while accompanied by practical examples. There will always be space for questions that may arise during the lecture, or at any other suitable time during the workshop.

Based on their personal experience and theoretical understanding, every participant decides whether or not he/she wishes to make use of bodywork on a particular occasion.

#### 4. Roman

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This may include not only Holotropic Breathwork, but also Psychedelic Therapy, certain types of shamanic healing approaches e.g. the “Yagé” ceremonies of the South American indigenous people, or any other kind of therapy based on the holotropic principles, as described by Transpersonal Psychology.

Q: I am not entirely healthy. Is Holotropic Breathwork only for physically and mentally fit people?

A: Holotropic Breathwork can be beneficial to many people who don't feel entirely physically or mentally fit. That being said, it is also true that Holotropic Breathwork is not for everyone.

If you know that you have a physical or mental condition, and you would like to give Holotropic Breathwork a try, don't hesitate to seek out a qualified facilitator, and ask him or her for a consultation. Professional Holotropic Breathwork facilitators are trained to determine whether the method is suitable for you, and they have a number of tools available to that end. In some cases, a cross-consultation with your physician or psychotherapist may be requested.

Q: I've been depressed/anxious/suffering from panic attacks for some time. Is Holotropic Breathwork for me?

A: It may be, depending on your temperament, and the origin of your condition.

<sup>4</sup> In holotropic therapy,<sup>[4]</sup> healing occurs as a result of a process that starts with allowing ourselves to dive into parts of our psyche that are normally

## 5. Roman

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When searching for a psychotherapist for this particular kind of combination, it is important to bear in mind that not every psychotherapeutic approach will work well here. It is important to find a therapist who has integrated the transpersonal approach into his or her conceptual framework.

## 6. Roman

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Having a psychological origin or cause rather than a physical one.

unconscious. When we do that – with the help of a safe and effective technique like Holotropic Breathwork – sooner or later we have the opportunity to get in touch with the root causes of our problematic psychological states, including depression, anxiety, phobias and panic attacks. Naturally, this will be challenging to some degree, but so is living with the symptoms on a long-term basis. Besides, merely withstanding these symptoms long-term will rarely lead to overcoming them. By bringing these hidden, even if difficult contents to conscious awareness in the holotropic process, while subsequently properly integrating them, we can gradually transform ourselves, so that they no longer cause difficulties in our daily life. It is advisable to work simultaneously with a Psychotherapist, as this can powerfully enhance the very important integration process. There are few approaches as effective as systematically combining experiential Depth Therapy (like Holotropic Breathwork) with verbal, analytic Psychotherapy.<sup>[5]</sup>

If you are taking prescription medication to help with your symptoms of depression, anxiety, phobia or panic attacks, you must inform your facilitator about this fact.

Q: Can Holotropic Breathwork help with healing physical illness?

A: Yes and no. Holotropic Breathwork should not be seen as a primary remedy for physical disease. It is advisable always to treat physical disease primarily in the context of a dedicated medical system.

That said, it is not uncommon for Holotropic Breathwork to result in overcoming psychogenic<sup>[6]</sup> illness or chronic pain. Sometimes this can also be the case in situations where a conventional medical approach has persistently failed to yield satisfactory results.

Always work together with a qualified facilitator and your physician when attempting to determine if Holotropic Breathwork could be helpful in overcoming a physical condition.

Q: Is the Holotropic Breathwork experience similar to an LSD trip?

A: It is similar in some aspects. Both LSD and Holotropic Breathwork enable us to become consciously aware of the contents of our psyche that are normally not available to be experienced directly. LSD, however, can have potentially much more powerful effects – the experience typically lasts about 3-4 times as long, and with high (psychedelic) doses, can result in *very* radical effects. In this respect, Holotropic Breathwork is usually seen as a more gentle and practical approach, as the effects are generally not as overwhelming, and the integration process smoother and well manageable.

Another important difference lies in the fact that in Holotropic Breathwork, one can regulate the progression of the experience simply by increasing/ decreasing the intensity of breathing. With a psychedelic substance like LSD, the intensity of the experience will primarily be determined by the dose taken, since regulating it afterwards is not all that easy. Once you've ingested your dose, you'll have to find your way through the entire experience somehow, even if it gets too much for you at some point.

Holotropic Breathwork also commonly gets quite physical – a lot of bodily movement and vigorous physical action is often involved. Changes in visual perception do not occur as often or are not as marked as with LSD. Emotions, on the other hand, can be manifested very powerfully during Holotropic Breathwork.



Q: A friend tried LSD/Magic Mushrooms/Ayahuasca/DMT/Bufo Alvarius/Mescaline/Ibogaine, and had a bad trip. From then on, he/she hasn't felt good. Can Holotropic Breathwork help?

A: Yes, Holotropic Breathwork can often help in this situation.

When we go through a difficult psychedelic experience, especially one that has caught us by surprise, it can be quite a shock. After struggling our way through such an experience, sometimes we can remain stuck with negative symptoms, such as emotional flashbacks occurring at random times during the day, nightmares or difficulty in falling asleep, heightened anxiety, mood disturbances, obsessive thoughts, or even physical pain, muscle tensions or tremors, digestive problems, or other, more or less serious problems.

It is understandable that, under such circumstances, usually the last thing we would wish for is to go through that experience once again. However, it may be necessary to go back to the non-ordinary state of consciousness, in order to effectively resolve the cause of the persisting symptoms.

When in this situation, it is crucial to understand what happened, why the symptoms are not fading away, and what can be done to resolve the problems that result from the traumatic psychedelic experience. Holotropic Breathwork is usually a viable choice when trying to deal with this type of difficulty. So, if you need help, seek out a certified facilitator and request a consultation.

Q: Can Holotropic Breathwork help to overcome substance addictions?

A: Yes, it can. Holotropic Breathwork has helped many people who were trying to overcome their dependence on alcohol and/or other addictive drugs.

That said, it is important to realize that substance addictions are a rather hard nut to crack. To uproot an active addiction to drugs the likes of alcohol,

cocaine, methamphetamine or heroin, extraordinary efforts and determination on the side of the addicted person are required. Holotropic Breathwork alone, even if done systematically, will not be sufficient. In fact, a drug addiction in its active stage is contraindicated for Holotropic Breathwork, as the effects of these substances directly clash with the healing mechanisms involved in the method.

For serious addictions, the best bet is probably to undergo systematic, specialized treatment. Once the therapy proceeds to the stage where the person is not actively using the substance anymore, Holotropic Breathwork may be introduced as an additional means of undercutting any remaining ties to the old, self-destructive habits, and to help establish new meaning and purpose in the life of the recovering person.