

A Conversation with **Stanislav Grof**

By David Jay Brown

David: How can LSD psychotherapy be helpful for someone facing a terminal illness?

Stan: Psychedelic therapy revealed a wide array of previously unknown therapeutic mechanisms, but the most profound positive changes happened in connection with mystical experiences. We were very impressed with what you could do with very difficult conditions, like chronic alcoholism and narcotic drug abuse. But the most interesting and the most moving study that we did at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center was the one that involved terminal cancer patients. We found out that if these patients had powerful experiences of psychospiritual death/rebirth and cosmic unity, it profoundly changed their emotional condition and it took away the fear of death. It made it possible for them to spend the rest of their lives living one day at a time. We also found out that in many patients LSD had very profound effect on pain, even pain that didn't respond to narcotics.

David: What do you personally think happens to consciousness after death?

Stan: I have had experiences in my psychedelic sessions—quite a few of them—when I was sure I was in the same territory that we enter after death. In several of my sessions, I was absolutely certain that it had already happened and I was surprised when I came back, when I ended up in the situation where I took the substance. So the experience of being in a bardo in these experiences is extremely

convincing. We now also have many clinical observations suggesting that consciousness can operate independently of the brain, the prime example being out-of-body experiences in near-death situations.

Some out-of-body experiences can happen to people not only when they are in a state of cardiac death, but also when they are brain dead. Cardiologist Michael Sabom described a patient he calls Pam, who had a major aneurysm on the basilar artery and had to undergo a risky operation. In order to operate on her, they had to basically freeze her brain to the point that she stopped producing brain waves. And, at the same time, she had one of the most powerful out-of-body experiences ever observed, with accurate perception of the environment; following her operation, she was able to give an accurate description of the operation and to draw the instruments they were using.

So what these observations suggest is that consciousness can operate independently of our body when we are alive, which makes it fairly plausible that something like that is possible after our body is dead. So both the experiential evidence from my own sessions, and what you find in the thanatological literature, certainly suggest that survival of consciousness after death is a very real possibility. •

...what these observations suggest is that consciousness can operate independently of our body when we are alive, which makes it fairly plausible that something like that is possible after our body is dead.

