

## The Experience of Death and Dying:

Psychological, Philosophical, and Spiritual Aspects

By Stanislav Grof, M.D., Ph.D.



Stanislav Grof, M.D., Ph.D.  
stang@infoasis.com

**Czech-American psychiatric researcher Stanislav Grof, M.D., Ph.D.** is one of the founders of the field of transpersonal psychology, the co-developer of Holotropic Breathwork™ therapy, and has been a pioneering researcher into the use of non-ordinary states of consciousness for over fifty years.

Grof is also one of the world's experts on LSD psychotherapy, and has supervised more legal LSD sessions than anyone else on the planet. Grof's near-legendary work at the Spring Grove Hospital in Maryland—treating alcoholics and terminally ill cancer patients with LSD—is some of the most important psychedelic drug research of all time.

Grof is also the author or coauthor of over twenty books, including *LSD Psychotherapy* and *The Ultimate Journey*, which were both published by MAPS. For more information about Grof's work see: [www.holotropic.com](http://www.holotropic.com) and [www.stanislaw-grof.com](http://www.stanislaw-grof.com).

To follow are some excerpts from Grof's essay "The Experience of Death and Dying: Psychological, Philosophical, and Spiritual Aspects," and some excerpts from an interview that I did with him.

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**A**ccording to Western neuroscience, consciousness is an epiphenomenon of matter, a product of the physiological processes in the brain, and thus critically dependent on the body. The death of the body, particularly of the brain, is then seen as the absolute end of any form of conscious activity. Belief in the posthumous journey of the soul, afterlife, or reincarnation is usually ridiculed as a product of wishful thinking of people who are unable to accept the obvious biological imperative of death, the absolute nature of which has been scientifically proven beyond any reasonable doubt. Very few people, including most scientists, realize that we have absolutely no proof that consciousness is actually produced by the brain and not even a remote notion how something like that could possibly happen. In spite of it, this basic metaphysical assumption remains one of the leading myths of Western materialistic science and has profound influence on our entire society.

This attitude has effectively inhibited scientific interest in the experiences of dying patients and of individuals in near-death situations until the 1970s. The rare reports on this subject received very little attention, whether they came in the form of books for

general public, such as Jess E. Weisse's *The Vestibule* (Weisse 1972) and Jean-Baptiste Delacour's *Glimpses of the Beyond* (Delacour 1974), or scientific research, such as the study of death-bed observations of physicians and nurses conducted by Karlis Osis (Osis 1961). Since the publication of Raymond Moody's international bestseller *Life After Life* in 1975, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, Ken Ring, Michael Sabom, and other pioneers of thanatology have amassed impressive evidence about the amazing characteristics of near-death experiences—from accurate extrasensory perception during out-of-body experiences to profound personality changes following them.

The material from these studies has been widely publicized and used by the media from TV talk shows to Hollywood movies. Yet, these potentially paradigm-shattering observations that could revolutionize our understanding of the nature of consciousness and its relationship to the brain are still dismissed by most professionals as irrelevant hallucinations produced by a biological crisis. They are also not routinely recorded and examined as an important part of the patient's medical history, and no specific psychological support is being offered in most of the medical facilities

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that would help to integrate these challenging events.

People dying in Western societies also often lack effective human support that would ease their transition. We try to protect ourselves from the emotional discomfort that death induces. The industrial world tends to remove sick and dying people into hospitals and nursing homes. The emphasis is on life-support systems and mechanical prolongation of life, often beyond any reasonable limits, rather than the quality of the human environment. The family system has disintegrated and children often live far from the parents and grandparents. At the time of medical crisis, the contact is often formal and minimal. In addition, mental health professionals, who have developed specific forms of psychological support and counseling for a large variety of emotional crises, have given close to no attention to the dying. Those facing the most profound of all imaginable crises, one that affects simultaneously the biological, emotional, interpersonal, social, philosophical, and spiritual aspects of the individual remain the only ones for whom meaningful help is not available.

**A**ll this occurs in the much larger context of collective denial of impermanence and mortality that characterizes Western industrial civilization. Much of our encounter with death comes in a sanitized form, where a team of professionals mitigates its immediate impact. In its extreme expression, it includes postmortem barbers and hairdressers, taylor, make-up experts, and plastic surgeons who make a wide variety of cosmetic adjustments on the corpse before it is shown to relatives and friends. The media help create more distance from death by diluting it into empty statistics reporting in a matter of fact way about the thousands of victims who died in wars, revolutions, and natural catastrophes. Movies and TV shows further trivialize death by capitalizing on violence. They immunize modern audiences against its emotional relevance by exposing them to countless scenes of dying, killing, and murder in the context of entertainment.

In general, the conditions of life existing in modern technologized countries do not offer much ideological or psychological support for people who are facing death. This contrasts very sharply with the situation encountered by those dying in one of the ancient and pre-industrial societies. Their cosmologies, philosophies, mythologies, as well as spiritual and ritual life, contain a clear message that death is not the absolute and irrevocable end of everything, that life

or existence continues in some form after the biological demise. Eschatological mythologies are in general agreement that the soul of the deceased undergoes a complex series of adventures in consciousness. The posthumous journey of the soul is sometimes described as a travel through fantastic landscapes that bear some similarity to those on earth, other times as encounters with various archetypal beings, or as moving through a sequence of non-ordinary states of consciousness (NOSC). In some cultures the soul reaches a temporary realm in the Beyond, such as the Christian purgatory or the lokas of Tibetan Buddhism, in others an eternal abode—Heaven, Hell, Paradise, or the Sun Realm.

**P**re-industrial societies thus seemed to agree that death was not the ultimate defeat and end of everything, but an important transition. The experiences associated with death were seen as visits to important dimensions of reality that deserved to be experienced, studied, and carefully mapped. The dying were familiar with the eschatological cartographies of their cultures, whether these were shamanic maps of the funeral landscapes or sophisticated descriptions of the Eastern spiritual systems, such as those found in the Tibetan *Bardo Thödol*. This important text of Tibetan Buddhism represents an interesting counterpoint to the exclusive pragmatic emphasis on productive life and denial of death characterizing the Western civilization. It describes the time of death as a unique opportunity for spiritual liberation from the cycles of death and rebirth and a period that determines our next incarnation, if we do not achieve liberation. In this context, it is possible to see the intermediate state between lives (bardo) as being in a way more important than incarnate existence. It is then essential to prepare for this time by systematic practice during our lifetime.

Another characteristic aspect of ancient and pre-industrial cultures that colors the experience of dying is their acceptance of death as an integral part of life. Throughout their life, people living in these cultures get used to spending time around dying people, handling corpses, observing cremation, and living with their remnants. For a Westerner, a visit to a place like Benares where this attitude is expressed in its extreme form can be a profoundly shattering experience. In addition, dying people in pre-industrial cultures typically die in the context of an extended family, clan, or tribe. They thus can receive meaningful emotional support from people whom they intimately know. It is also important to mention powerful rituals conducted at the time of death designed to assist individuals facing the

ultimate transition, or even specific guidance of the dying, such as the approach described in the *Bardo Thödol*.

An extremely important factor influencing the attitude toward death and the experience of dying has been the existence of various forms of experiential training for dying involving NOSC. The oldest among them is the practice of shamanism, the most ancient religion and healing art of humanity, the roots of which reach far back into the Paleolithic era. Among the beautiful images of primeval animals painted and carved on the walls of the great caves in Southern France and northern Spain, such as Lascaux, Font de Gaume, Les Trois Frères, Altamira, and others, are figures that undoubtedly represent ancient shamans. In some of the caves, the discoverers also found footprints in circular arrangements suggesting that their inhabitants conducted dances, similar to those still performed by some aboriginal cultures for the induction of NOSC. Shamanism is not only ancient, but also universal; it can be found in North and South America, in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, and Polynesia.

**S**hamanism is intimately connected with NOSC, as well as with death and dying. The career of many shamans begins with the “shamanic illness,” a spontaneous initiatory crisis conducive to profound healing and psychospiritual transformation. It is a visionary journey involving the visit to the underworld, painful and frightening ordeals, and an experience of psychological death and rebirth followed by ascent into supernal realms. In this experience, the novice shaman connects to the forces of nature and to the animal realm and learns how to diagnose and heal diseases. The knowledge of the realm of death acquired during this transformation makes it possible for the shaman to move freely back and forth and mediate these journeys for other people.

The anthropologists have also described rites of passage, elaborate rituals conducted by various aboriginal cultures at the time of important biological and social transitions, such as birth, circumcision, puberty, marriage, dying, and others. They employ powerful mind-altering technologies and the experiences induced by them revolve around the triad birth-sex-death. Their symbolism involves different combinations of perinatal and transpersonal elements. Clinical work with psychedelics and various non-drug experiential approaches (such as Holotropic Breathwork) have helped us understand these events and appreciate their importance for individuals and human groups.

Closely related to the rites of passage were

the ancient mysteries of death and rebirth, complex sacred and secret procedures that were also using powerful mind-altering techniques. They were particularly prevalent in the Mediterranean area, as exemplified by the Babylonian ceremonies of Inanna and Tammuz, the Egyptian mysteries of Isis and Osiris, the Orphic Cult, the Bacchanalia, the Eleusinian mysteries, the Corybantic rites, and the mysteries of Attis and Adonis. The mysteries were based on mythological stories of deities that symbolize death and rebirth. The most famous of them were the Eleusinian mysteries that were conducted near Athens every five years without interruption for a period of almost 2,000 years. According to a 1978 study by Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck, the ritual potion (“kykeon”) used in these mysteries contained ergot preparations related closely to LSD.

**O**f particular interest for transpersonally oriented researchers is the sacred literature of the various mystical traditions and the great spiritual philosophies of the East. Here belong the various systems of yoga, the theory and practice of Buddhism, Taoism, the Tibetan Vajrayana, Sufism, Christian mysticism, the Kabbalah, and many others. These systems developed effective forms of prayers, meditations, movement meditations, breathing exercises, and other powerful techniques for inducing NOSC with profoundly spiritual components. Like the experiences of the shamans, initiates in the rites of passage, and neophytes in ancient mysteries, these procedures offered the possibility of confronting one’s impermanence and mortality, transcending the fear of death, and radically transforming one’s being in the world.

The description of the resources available to dying people in pre-industrial cultures would not be complete without mentioning the books of the dead, such as the Tibetan *Bardo Thödol*, the Egyptian *Pert em hru*, the Aztec *Codex Borgia*, or the European *Ars moriendi*. When the ancient books of the dead first came to the attention of Western scholars, they were considered to be fictitious descriptions of the posthumous journey of the soul, and as such wishful fabrications of people who were unable to accept the grim reality of death. They were put in the same category as fairy tales- imaginary creations of human fantasy that had definite artistic beauty, but no relevance for everyday reality.

**However, a deeper study** of these texts revealed that they had been used as guides in the context of sacred mysteries and of spiritual practice and very likely described the experiences of the initiates and practitioners.

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From this new perspective, presenting the books of the dead as manuals for the dying appeared to be simply a clever disguise invented by the priests to obscure their real function and protect their deeper esoteric meaning and message from the uninitiated. However, the remaining problem was to discover the exact nature of the procedures used by the ancient spiritual systems to induce these states.

Modern research focusing on NOSC brought unexpected new insights into this problem area. Systematic study of the experiences in psychedelic sessions, powerful non-drug forms of psychotherapy, and spontaneously occurring psychospiritual crises showed that in all these situations, people can encounter an entire spectrum of unusual experiences, including sequences of agony and dying, passing through hell, facing divine judgment, being reborn, reaching the celestial realms, and confronting memories from previous incarnations. These states were strikingly similar to those described in the eschatological texts of ancient and pre-industrial cultures.

Another missing piece of the puzzle was provided by thanatology, the new scientific discipline specifically studying death and dying. Thanatological studies of near-death states by people like Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom, Bruce Greyson, and Charles Flynn showed that the experiences associated with life-threatening situations bear a deep resemblance to the descriptions from the ancient books of the dead, as well as those reported by subjects in psychedelic sessions and modern experiential psychotherapy.

It has thus become clear that the ancient eschatological texts are actually maps of the inner territories of the psyche encountered in profound NOSC, including those associated with biological dying. The experiences involved seem to transcend race and culture and originate in the collective unconscious as described by C.G. Jung. It is possible to spend one's entire lifetime without ever experiencing these realms or even without being aware of their existence, until one is catapulted into them at the time of biological death. However, for some people this experiential area becomes available during their lifetime in a variety of situations including psychedelic sessions or some other powerful forms of self-exploration, serious spiritual practice, participation in shamanic rituals, or during spontaneous psychospiritual crises. This opens up for them the possibility of experiential exploration of these territories of the psyche on their own terms so that the encounter with death does not come as a complete surprise when it is imposed on them at the time of biological demise.

The Austrian Augustinian monk Abraham a Sancta Clara, who lived in the seventeenth century, expressed in a succinct way the importance of the experiential practice of dying: "The man who dies before he dies does not die when he dies." This "dying before dying" has two important consequences: it liberates the individual from the fear of death and changes his or her attitude toward it, as well as influences the actual experience of dying at the time of the biological demise. However, this elimination of the fear of death also transforms the individual's way of being in the world. For this reason, there is no fundamental difference between the preparation for death and the practice of dying, on the one hand, and spiritual practice leading to enlightenment, on the other. This is the reason why the ancient books of the dead could be used in both situations.

As we have seen, many aspects of life in pre-industrial cultures made the psychological situation of dying people significantly easier in comparison with the Western technological civilization. Naturally, the question that immediately arises is whether this advantage was to a great extent due to lack of reliable information about the nature of reality and to wishful self-deception. If that were the case, a significant part of our difficulties in facing death would simply be the toll we have to pay for our deeper knowledge of the universal scheme of things and we might prefer to bear the consequences of knowing the truth. However, closer examination of the existing evidence clearly shows that this is not the case.

**The single most important factor** responsible for the most fundamental differences between the worldview of Western industrial cultures and all other human groups throughout history is not the superiority of materialistic science over primitive superstition, but our profound ignorance in regard to NOSC. The only way the Newtonian-Cartesian worldview of Western science can be maintained is by systematic suppression or misinterpretation of all the evidence generated by consciousness studies, whether its source is history, anthropology, comparative religion, or various areas of modern research, such as parapsychology, thanatology, psychedelic therapy, biofeedback, sensory deprivation, experiential psychotherapies, or the work with individuals in psychospiritual crises ("spiritual emergencies").

Systematic practice of various forms of NOSC that characterizes the ritual and spiritual life of ancient and aboriginal cultures inevitably leads to an understanding of the

nature of reality—and of the relationship between consciousness and matter—that is fundamentally different from the belief system of technologized societies. I have yet to meet a single Western academician who has done extensive inner work involving NOSC and continues to subscribe to the current scientific understanding of consciousness, psyche, human nature, and the nature of reality taught in Western universities. This is entirely independent of the educational background, IQ, and specific area of expertise of the individuals involved. The difference in regard to the possibility of consciousness after death thus exactly reflects the differences in the attitude toward NOSC.

**A**ncient and pre-industrial cultures held NOSC in high esteem, practiced them regularly in socially sanctioned contexts, and spent much time and energy developing safe and effective techniques of inducing them. These experiences were the main vehicle for their ritual and spiritual life as a means of direct communication with archetypal domains of deities and demons, forces of nature, the animal realms, and the cosmos. Additional uses of NOSC involved diagnosing

and healing diseases, cultivating intuition and ESP, and obtaining artistic inspiration, as well as practical purposes, such as locating game and finding lost objects and people. According to anthropologist Victor Turner, sharing in groups also contributes to tribal bonding and tends to create a sense of deep connectedness (*communitas*).

Western society pathologized all forms of NOSC (with the exception of dreams that are not recurrent or nightmares), spends much time trying to develop effective ways of suppressing them when they occur spontaneously, and tends to outlaw tools and contexts associated with them. Western psychiatry makes no distinction between a mystical experience and a psychotic experience and sees both as manifestations of mental disease. In its rejection of religion, it does not differentiate between primitive folk beliefs or the fundamentalists' literal interpretations of scriptures, and sophisticated mystical traditions and Eastern spiritual philosophies based on centuries of systematic introspective exploration of the psyche. This approach has pathologized the entire spiritual history of humanity. •

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