

# **Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness and the Transpersonal Journey**

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## **Introduction**

Non-ordinary states of consciousness (NOSCs) have played an important role in shaping the cultural and spiritual life of our species. Techniques of expanding consciousness such as shamanism, meditation and the use of psychedelics or sacred medicine have been with us for thousands of years. The insights derived from these states of mind have been valued by all cultures except our own western scientific culture. Perhaps we have been too quick to dismiss the value of non-ordinary states, which could give access to parts of the psyche less governed by rational Newtonian thought and more related to symbol, significance and numinous experience. Perhaps consciousness is bigger and more complex than our current paradigm allows.

In recent years, modern psycho-spiritual technologies have been developed which can readily induce non-ordinary states. This allows their insights to become available to more than just the privileged few for whom they happen spontaneously, or after years of rigorous practice. This does not imply instant enlightenment but a taste of higher levels of consciousness that can become ingrained and developed through repeated immersion and regular spiritual practice.

Interested readers who would like to have a taste of these techniques should have no difficulty in accessing safe, capable organisations to help them develop their inner journey. Try these websites:

[www.rogerwoolger.com](http://www.rogerwoolger.com)

[www.holotropic.com](http://www.holotropic.com)

[www.sacredtrust.com](http://www.sacredtrust.com)

[www.monroeinstitute.com](http://www.monroeinstitute.com)

## **The work of Dr. Roger Woolger**

My first wakeful experience (as opposed to a dream) of a non-ordinary state of consciousness was a 'past life regression', now known as deep memory process (DMP). I had read Roger Woolger's wonderful book 'Other Lives, Other Selves' and wanted to have such an experience. My motivation was twofold. Firstly as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist, I was interested in any powerful psychological tools to access and work with material from the deep psyche. Secondly, I was interested in the great question of death, and to explore the possibility of a hidden part of the human life cycle after death. I was a little apprehensive that my worldview might be changed – for it is always easier to stay with the apparent certainties of the accepted western scientific paradigm. But that would be much less interesting.

## **The man on the mat and the monk with a mission**

Deep memory process had a number of new elements for me. The first was the use of active imagination. I was lying down on a mattress in

someone's living room. I felt rather foolish but I had come a long way for this experience and wanted it to be productive (I learned later that a positive intention is essential). After some relaxation exercises I was asked to imagine myself walking through a cave and emerging from the back of it. Who was I, what was I feeling in my body, what was I wearing, where was I going, what was I going to do, what was my mood and what was in my mind?

This was very challenging for me, as I tried to answer some of these questions. I was a rather embarrassed man on a mat. This had little to do with the MRCPsych curriculum! But some answers came to me as I emerged from the back of the cave, experiencing myself as a man in a monk's habit. A great big bear of man, walking slowly and with purpose. I felt very angry, righteous anger and I was going to kill someone. Before very long, the part of my consciousness that belonged with this monkish figure felt more real to me, as I lived through the events of his life and of his death, than the part of my consciousness that stayed with the man on the mat. This was an intense experience. I seemed to experience the key emotional moments of his life, the love of battle, the pain of rejection, the ache of loss and the closing off of these feelings in a monastic life. I felt it emotionally and I felt it physically as I lived and died to that life.

### **Learning points from my first Non-ordinary state of consciousness**

- Surrender to the process, you have to cooperate with it and this is more difficult than you sometimes think, as it can challenge and threaten your current way of understanding yourself and the world you live in.
- Use imagination to give yourself a start. Does this take you to a deeper imagination or beyond imagination to a separate reality?
- This seemed more 'real' than a dream.
- The experience had a clear narrative and left a vivid memory.
- Prepare to be surprised.
- I was encouraged to 'live' it, experience it and feel with the body. This was very different to traditional psychotherapy, which is a more intellectual and emotional exercise.
- The involvement of the body seemed a valuable method of getting beyond the intellectual and towards a more transpersonal realm.

### **Trying to make sense of it.**

There are three main explanatory models for this type experiences:

- **Reincarnation** – Fascinating literature, some evidence (See Ian Stevenson).
- **A highly condensed dream.** But a remarkable dream with clear narrative, high condensation and intensity of meaning and leaving a vivid and enduring memory. There must be ways in which this can be used in psychotherapy.
- **A download from the collective unconscious.** This moves beyond the more personal 'ownership' of these past life experiences represented by the reincarnation hypothesis. Perhaps it is possible to

access a life that someone else has lived which has a particular and magnetic resonance of meaning with your own emotional experience.

### **Productive and transmissive models of Consciousness**

The 'productive theory' proposes that consciousness is a product of neural process and cannot persist independently of brain. It may be more complicated than that. A neurosurgeon describes an operation on a woman with an aneurysm in the brainstem. Her brain was super-cooled to prevent blood loss. After the operation she was able to accurately describe some events that had happened in the theatre during her operation. She'd had an out of body experience (OBE). But there was no way of accounting for this, said the surgeon, according to our existing models of consciousness, as she had been effectively brain-dead. While her brain was cooled, there was no electrical activity.

The 'transmissive theory' posits that consciousness is inherent in the cosmos and is independent of our physical senses, although it is mediated by them in everyday life. Thus the brain and psyche may act as a lens through which consciousness is focussed and experienced. The transpersonal perspective finds that the productive model cannot account for many observed phenomena and that consciousness is more than the mind and ego locked within the bony confines of the skull.

Carl Jung and Aldous Huxley were two prominent pioneers of the transmissive theory. Most of Jung's major insights were developed during his period of spiritual emergency, which roughly corresponded to the dates of the First World War. He had powerful and mutative communications from two 'spirit guides', Philemon and Basilides. Were these discarnate spirits or did they come from Jung's own unconscious? Philemon commented that it was strange that Jung considered that thoughts were created by himself, whereas they are natural and independent phenomena like animals in the forest, birds in the sky, people in the room.

Huxley noted that in the psychedelic state, there is a particular intensity of meaning and the practicalities of everyday life seem much less important. He proposed that the nervous system acts as a filter or a reducing valve to focus our attention on the aspects of the universe that have immediate relevance for the tasks that we need to perform. These tasks are primarily concerned with survival. This prevents us from being overwhelmed and our senses overloaded by the greater range of frequencies and stimuli impacting upon us.

### **The insights from quantum physics**

If some of these psychological theories don't seem rational, we can use a parallel from the development of modern physics, which from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, made a series of observations that were based on hard science and which could not be explained by classical ideas. The result has been the growth of systems of knowledge very far from common sense and thus requires explanations that appear to contradict common sense.

Modern science informs us that the physical universe is a sea of energy. Solid matter, for example is not really solid. An atom is mostly space.

Electrons have a waveform that can collapse into matter dependant on circumstance and how they are observed. Mass is energy. All physical matter at its most fundamental level is a collection of electrical charges interacting with the background matrix of electromagnetic and other energetic charges. So matter is essentially an illusion.

The physical waking reality that we live in is understood by means of information collected by our senses, our organs of perception and the interpretations of these sensory inputs by our brains. The brain generates its own version of reality and the perception of energy depends on how it is perceived by the sensory organs available. Our experience of the world really is 'all in the mind'.

### **From Plato to Bohm**

It is difficult for us to conceptualise a reality that isn't mediated through the senses. Plato used the analogy of a cave with prisoners chained and unable to turn their heads. All they can see is the wall of the cave. The sun casts shadows on the wall of the cave and to the men these shadows are reality. They would know nothing of the real causes of the shadows. They would know nothing of the light of the sun and the great wide world in all its wonder just outside.

The physicist and Nobel Prize winner David Bohm called the underlying reality 'the implicate order' and suggested that it had holographic properties, in that accessing a part of it allows access to the whole. Internet analogies come to mind, - once on-line, the whole Internet becomes available. The 'implicate order' can be unfolded into the 'explicate order', or our experience of reality. Bohm suggests that the implicate order is a unity and is not understandable according to the rules of space-time. He raises the idea that meaning is a primary organising structure of the implicate order. Thus matter and meaning are inseparable and Bohm used the term *soma significance* to emphasize the unity between consciousness and matter.

An emerging model of the universe has three basic elements, soma, energy and significance. Soma is the every day world as shown to us by our perceptual apparatus. It is governed by the forward march of time, the laws of cause and effect and Newtonian physics. The second element is the quantum world of information and energy; everything is connected with a constant interchange between the clusters of energy. It is like a web and everything in the physical world, including ourselves, are clusters of energy in this web. The third element may be pure consciousness functioning as the organising principle, which collapses the web of energy at the quantum level into the entities of our knowable world. Thus our everyday reality is the precipitate of consciousness organising the web of quantum energy. The nature of the organising principle may have something to do with meaning.

Maybe the universe is more like a great thought than a great machine.

### **The psyche as a sense organ**

The psyche could be seen as a sixth sense organ. Its purpose is to bind and organise consciousness around feeling states and meaning. It seems a reasonable hypothesis that in the same way there are scales that the

eye cannot see and frequencies that we cannot hear, that there are meanings and ranges of meaning that we cannot usually gather. It may be that meaning and significance could be infinitely extended to ever-greater levels of subtlety and complexity. The brain being a finite structure would not be able to grasp the more subtle levels of significance, but there may be levels of consciousness, which are not dependent on the brain, which may take us further. Is it possible to access this sort of reality? This is traditionally the stuff of mysticism, but the point of non-ordinary states of consciousness is that they purport to gain some sort of access, with varying degrees of success, to these higher levels of reality.

### **The quantum vacuum**

More recent writers (Laszlo, McTaggart) have focused on the zero point field (ZPF) or quantum vacuum as the location of the 'implicate order' or 'collective unconscious'. The zero point field is the 'empty space' that carries energies that are present at absolute zero, where classical forms of energy vanish. This is a physical field with real physical effects. For example, the photons emitted by electrons' shifting orbits exchange energy with the ZPF; this keeps atoms stable and prevents the electrons collapsing into the atomic nuclei.

As well as transmitting light, pressure, energy and sound it could also carry information. Ervin Laszlo writes about the 'rediscovery of the Akashic Field'. The Akasha is described in ancient Hindu philosophy as the medium underlying the physical universe, out of which everything evolves and to which everything returns. It is said to hold the memory of everything.

The quantum vacuum is conceived of as a frictionless medium so that waves of energy move without resistance and thus do not become extinguished. Laszlo refers to the torsion wave theory, where the excitation of the ground state of the vacuum by charged particles cause torsion waves with magnetic impulses, which store information in the quantum vacuum much as magnetic impulses do on our computer disc.

This leads to the emerging paradigm of a physical substrate for the collective unconscious, where there is a high-energy field that contains information encoded in a holographic way. This field may be the substrate for Bohm's implicate order and could be recognised as a universal field of nature like the gravitational field or the electromagnetic field. This field has real physical effects and could account for evidence of psychokinesis (Jahn & Dunne) and other so-called 'Psi' phenomena

### **The quantum brain**

Is it possible that quantum effects can happen in large structures such as the body, the brain, the neurone and structures within the cell? The theory of 'quantum consciousness' suggests that microtubules act as the conduit for coherent photons (Hameroff). According to this controversial theory, the microtubules and the dendrites act as the internet of the body, consciousness at its most basic is coherent light and consciousness is a global phenomenon occurring not just in the brain but throughout the body.

This also raises the possibility that the brain is not just the storage of memory but could also be a read-out and retrieval engine for the information stored in the ZPF. If we can take the step of transcending some of the limitations of the skin encapsulated ego and take a more transpersonal perspective, then the human capacity for knowledge and information may be far greater than we think. Maybe consciousness has its particulate (egoic) nature but also a wave form where it can interact with a much wider form of consciousness, potentially everything that is, has been and will be – and that this is the basis of the transpersonal model of consciousness.

### **Stanislav Grof**

Grof was brought up in Czechoslovakia under the Nazi occupation and the post war Communist regime. He trained as a doctor after discovering Freud and intended to become a psychoanalyst. As a research psychiatrist working with thioridazine, he was offered a supply of LSD (Lysergic Diethylamide) by Sandoz, who had discovered this potent psychedelic drug for which there was no obvious use. This led to the era of LSD-assisted psychotherapy. Grof volunteered to be a research subject in 1956, had some powerful and numinous experiences and enjoys the irony that he found 'spirit' in a scientific experiment in a communist country.

Grof moved to the USA in the mid-sixties, working in Baltimore and then becoming scholar in residence at Esalen. His first book, 'Realms of the Human Unconscious' was published in 1973. His major theories are in that book and he will be remembered for his work on the 'perinatal' layer of the psyche as well as his transpersonal work, showing that the range of experience available to our consciousness is much larger than previous models allowed.

Since the use of LSD for research and therapeutic use became illegal, Grof and Christina, his wife, developed a method, which they called 'holotropic breathwork'. This is a method for the induction of a non-ordinary state of consciousness (NOSC). It offers a similar experience to LSD, accessing essentially the same territory, namely the deeper parts of the psyche that would be otherwise inaccessible. Holotropic derives from Greek and means 'moving towards wholeness'. It is implicit that the journey is never complete.

### **Holotropic breathwork**

The key components of Holotropic Breathwork are hyperventilation, powerful, evocative music and focussed bodywork where appropriate. This must be in the context of a highly supportive setting, which prepares, intensifies and attempts to integrate the experience. (Weir and Perry first described the method and its applications at a meeting of the Spirituality Special Interest Group in 2002).

Grof Transpersonal Training offers training programmes in USA, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, Denmark, Spain, Switzerland and Ireland. The programme consists of week-long modules. It is not required to be enrolled in the training to take part in a module.

In a breathwork workshop, you are paired with a partner. One person is the 'breather' and the other is the 'sitter', whose role is to look after the

breather. The breather lies on a mat, usually blindfolded to avoid distraction. The breather is taken through a relaxation exercise and encouraged to have 'beginners mind' - not to have expectations but allow oneself to be open to whatever experience comes up from the deep psyche. The breathers are told to breathe faster and deeper and the music starts. The loud, evocative, pulsing set of music is carefully designed to provide some shape to the process. The journey begins.

My first module combined holotropic breathwork and Vipassana meditation led by Grof and Kornfield. The two methods seemed to complement each other; Kornfield likens breathwork to aerobic Vipassana. There were 150 people on that module. I learnt a lot from my own experience and from hearing other people's experiences in the group work following the breathwork sessions. I was impressed and moved by the power of the method, the transformational opportunity provided, the quality of the staff and the setting they provided.

The holotropic breathwork technique is very different to a drug enabled NOSC in that the depth of the experience is largely under conscious control and can be lightened or terminated at any time. The setting is a crucial determinant of outcome. A highly supportive and uncritical environment with a focus on intensifying and integrating the experience is crucial. An advantage of the week-long module is immersion in a setting where the practicalities of everyday life can be ignored for a while to allow the deep psyche to be heard. It is not enough to just have peak experiences. The aim is to integrate the experience so that it enriches everyday conscious experience. Group work, and non-verbal means such as artwork and careful attention to dreams may help. The emphasis is on opening up to higher aspects of the self (the vertical) and examination of interpersonal issues (the horizontal) is discouraged.

### **Robert Monroe**

Monroe has an appealing down to earth quality. He was a successful businessman in Virginia who started having spontaneous out-of-body experiences (OBE's) in the 1950s. He initially thought he was ill. Then he learned to induce OBEs at will. He came from a practical background. Unlike most of the other transpersonal pioneers, he wasn't interested in eastern mysticism, meditation or psychedelic drugs. His three books, written over three decades, give an account of his experiences with OBEs, the development of his journey and the lessons he learnt from it. His early OBEs were fairly simple, in that he would look down from his body from above and explore the local area. His experiences became more complex and he claims to have travelled progressively through non-physical worlds meeting non-physical life forms.

One of the fascinating aspects of Monroe's books is the gradual unfolding of his development, from his egoic self to a much larger transpersonal self where he has accessed and integrated a much larger version of his personality. He believes that repeated immersion in these states changes the baseline level of consciousness and opens up new levels of reality.

### **'Hemisynch' and affirmation**

Monroe developed a research centre, the Monroe Institute, and a method for inducing similar states in other people. He called this method 'Hemisynch', short for hemispheric synchronisation. The technique uses sound as different tones in each ear (binaural stimulation) to induce brain wave patterns on the EEG similar to those found in experienced meditators – mostly theta with occasional slowed alpha (Atwater 1997). Monroe developed his methods with his 'explorers' - people who had a particular aptitude and interest in OBEs. The explorers were blind to each other and he found they seemed to have similar and repeatable experiences. Different frequencies can produce different brain states which in turn produce different qualities of experience, which Monroe called 'focus' levels, representing a progressive moving away from the physical body to the energetic and the non-physical which he termed the 'M field'.

Again the set and setting are the crucial determinants of the Hemisynch experience. The absence of sensory stimulation and use of an isolation chamber seemed important for early explorations. Monroe developed an 'affirmation', which is repeated silently at the start of every Hemisynch exercise. He considered this as a way of giving the brain permission to open to an expanded consciousness.

The affirmation is as follows: 'I am more than my physical body. Because I am more than physical matter, I deeply desire to experience, understand and use such greater energies and energy systems that may be beneficial and constructive to me and those close to me. Also I deeply desire the help and cooperation of those individuals whose wisdom and experiences is equal or greater than my own'. Monroe took care to emphasise that no belief systems are involved, just the willingness to be open to the 'possibility' of being more than just a physical body.

### **Interlife**

One attraction of Monroe for me was that it seemed to offer the possibility of an exploration of an afterlife. Does it exist, is it real, what does it look like? Could Monroe address the primary question as to whether 'it all finishes' when we die, or whether an aspect of consciousness continues. Monroe communicated a map of the after-death dimension during his 40 years of exploration in out-of-body experiences, which he considered to represent the hidden part of our natural life cycle. Rather like Swedenberg's model before him, Monroe describes the interlife zone as a psycho-plastic environment created in accordance with the way in which people's consciousness was expressed and focused when they were alive.

Monroe found during his OBEs that after death people, will usually go to a level that corresponds to the level of consciousness attained in life, although some factors, like a sudden or traumatic death may cause them to get stuck at a lower level. In the lower levels of the afterlife state, the egoic personality belonging to the previous lifetime is maintained as the working identity. But in the higher levels, the beings Monroe describes are increasingly complex and 'larger' in that they are the conscious integrations of many different experiences of being human. As occurs in life, there are opportunities that can take their development upwards. Monroe says that one of the things

that people discover in the post-mortem state is that reality is richer than they thought, so that that when they die they not only encounter their expectations but are always being invited to outgrow them by becoming more aware.

### **Gateway Course and the focus levels.**

*'I'm not interested in the details of your inner journey but I'm giving you the tools to make your own journey and training you to use them safely'*  
Monroe

The week long Gateway Course is an introduction to the work of Monroe and Hemisynch and allows subsequent entry to the more advanced courses at the Monroe institute in Virginia. I did the Gateway Course in Spain with fifteen other people. It was a gradual immersion into a different type of NOSC without the narrative of the past life regression and without the emotional intensity of holotropic breathwork. Much of the day was spent lying on a mat wearing radio headphones. We did 6 or 7 Hemisynch exercises a day, getting to progressively deeper levels of consciousness. It was harder work than it sounds and enormously interesting.

There was the usual careful attention to the setting, an emphasis on the 'vertical and the importance of 'opening up to the higher self''. Again, the biggest difficulty is to move attention away from everyday concerns and away from the chattering mind. People with a regular meditation or spiritual practice seem to find it easier.

We became familiar and comfortable with the first four focus levels. 2 or 3 people had brief OBEs. Some other surprising things happened. Briefly the focus levels are as follows:

- Focus 10 - The mind is awake and alert with the body asleep. A state of deep relaxation.
- Focus 12 – Loosely defined as a state of clear and expanded consciousness.
- Focus 15 – A smaller proportion of attention in physical matter. Time as a construct is left behind.
- Focus 21 – Deep sleep with the mind alert. This is the bridge to non-physical worlds.

### **More questions than answers**

The gateway course showed me again that it's important to feel comfortable with 'not knowing'. This is a position very different to the medical model where there is pressure 'to know'. The wave and particle analogy again springs to mind. The wave form of consciousness bears potential and thoughts seem to be a precipitate where something crystallises and something is lost. Holding the position of not knowing, staying with and exploring the mystery seems a more creative and interesting position. If this then condenses into beliefs or belief systems there can be a fossilising effect.

The big questions after my Monroe gateway course were:

- To what extent are these experiences dependent on the setting?
- Do progressive exercises with Hemisynch lead to a deepening and enriching of conscious experience?
- Can they give repeatable information about non-physical worlds?
- Does the afterlife explored and described by Monroe have ontological reality; is it more like a dream or does it have features of both?
- What happens in OBEs?
- Is there an energy body or subtle body that can separate from the physical body?

### **Keeping it safe**

These modern psycho-spiritual technologies provide powerful experiences. The problem is that it can put a person in a very vulnerable state, which needs careful handling. The Grof's termed this transformational crisis 'spiritual emergency' and recommend support throughout it, to allow an emergence rather than suppression. Jung's creative illness that provided the foundation for his insights and wisdom was a spiritual emergency that threatened to overwhelm him. The support of people who have knowledge of the territory is crucial to optimise outcome. The schools of meditation have emphasised the importance of a community to support the process and the same is true of other methods of deep inner exploration.

To support the journey, the organisation needs to provide a safe technique and a setting that supports, amplifies and helps integrate the experience. The organisation needs to be coherent, functional and well organised. There needs to be an atmosphere of altruism and an absence of narcissism. Avoid any organisation with administrative chaos, guru-like leaders, and abuse of power, money or sex. The emphasis has to be on facilitating the productive journey of the individual rather than the glorification of the organisation or the guru.

William James warned that mystical experience and psychosis come from the same 'mental level'. He warned, with regard to mystical experiences, that 'to come from thence is no infallible credential. What comes must be shifted and tested and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience'. If the internal vision or experience is taken too literally and extrapolated onto the external world, there can be a 'confusion of levels', which can develop into delusional disorder.

So perhaps the answer is to treat experiences seriously but lightly, like a big dream. Use the Vipassana model – experience it and let it go. Treasure it, make it precious, learn from it, allow it to ferment and germinate. Turn it into an internal object and relate to it – but also let it go. It's just an experience.

### **Joseph Campbell and the hero's journey**

The world's greatest expert on mythology describes the transpersonal journey as following a basic pattern in cultures throughout history. The hero (or heroine) is someone who hears a call and follows it. Usually the person is reasonably well adjusted but has a yearning for something different from the everyday realities of life. The call can take many forms, and ranges in intensity from subtle to strident but usually has a numinous flavour. It can't be ignored

and is either acted on or squashed. Acting on the call means upsetting the status quo and precipitating a set of changes or a crisis. The structures of a life such as family, income or mortgage have to be addressed before the journey begins. The hero gets help through his journey of transformation, often with mystery and synchronicity. There is a confrontation, a death of the old self and a birth of the new as the hero returns enriched and reborn. It is always a struggle.

### **Jack's magical beans**

The myth of Jack and the beanstalk is one of many examples of this story. The house of Jack has a crisis, desperate measures are needed and Jack has to sell the last item he has of value – the cow. He encounters the trickster and makes the choice between money and the turning away of material things into something magical. He goes home with his beans to face the wrath and ridicule of his mother. He faces the long dark night of the soul. But something sprouts out of that night and the hero chooses to climb up into the unknown. He visits a higher world. He has a sense of being lost and in mortal danger – but help comes from an unexpected source. Eventually he slays the giant and in doing so overcomes something that had previously been too big and frightening for him. Then he returns home with a renewable source of treasure, the goose that lays the golden eggs. And so he is enriched for ever by something that comes from within.

### **A last word from the poet – Rumi**

*‘There is one thing that must never be forgotten. If you were to forget everything else, but remember this, there is no cause to worry. While if you remember and attend to everything else but forget this one thing, you have in fact achieved nothing. It is if a king had sent you to a country to carry out one special specific task. You go to the country and do many things, good things but if you don't carry out the task which you were sent for, it is as if you have achieved nothing at all. So man has come into the world for a particular task, and that is his purpose. If he doesn't perform this he will have done nothing.*

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