

Preface to Christopher Bache's **Dark Night, Early Dawn: Steps to a Deep Ecology of Mind**. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2000.

Stanislav Grof, M.D.

The second half of the twentieth century has seen an extraordinary renaissance of interest in the exploration of human consciousness. Its most dramatic and widely publicized expression were clinical research with psychedelics, conducted during the 1950s and 1960s in many countries of the world, and unsupervised self-experimentation with these remarkable agents. After drastic administrative and legal restrictions terminated scientific experimentation with psychedelics, deep self-exploration has continued in the form of new powerful forms of non-drug experiential psychotherapy, such as various neo-Reichian approaches, hypnosis, primal therapy, rebirthing, and holotropic breathwork.

Laboratory research contributed the methods of sensory deprivation, biofeedback, lucid dreaming, and the use of various electronic entrainment devices. The work with patients dying of terminal diseases and the study of the states of consciousness emerging in near-death situations gave birth to a new scientific discipline – thanatology. Careful systematic investigation of spontaneous past life experiences in children and of past life experiences induced in adults by a variety of methods made it possible to subject to scientific scrutiny the concept of reincarnation and karma. The Zeitgeist of this era also brought great enthusiasm for the study of shamanism, the ritual life of aboriginal cultures, the spiritual philosophies of the East, and the mysticism of all countries and ages.

The empirical interest in consciousness and spirituality characterizing this exciting period has been accompanied by systematic efforts to find expanded theoretical frameworks for the wide range of revolutionary discoveries concerning the nature of the human psyche that this work had produced. These challenging observations inspired transpersonal psychology, a discipline which studies the entire range of human experience, including non-ordinary states of consciousness, and which attempts to bring together the best of spirituality and the best of science.

Christopher Bache – philosopher, religious scholar, and inspired educator - has made important contributions to this endeavor and established himself as one of the most creative and original transpersonal thinkers. In a series of articles, presentations at international transpersonal conferences, and his earlier book *Lifecycles*, he has addressed some of the most important and urgent theoretical issues that have emerged in modern consciousness research. *Dark Night, Early Dawn* represents a culmination and synopsis of years of his explorations and is his most mature work to date.

What makes Bache's contribution invaluable is a rare combination of rigorous spiritual discipline, profound personal experience with non-ordinary states of consciousness, incisive analytical thinking, and impeccable scholarship. All these qualities are absolutely indispensable for the important task he has set for himself - to seek the greatest possible clarity in a highly controversial area that has the potential to change the entire philosophical paradigm of Western science. As Bache himself convincingly demonstrates in the introductory chapter of his book, what is at stake is nothing less than our understanding of consciousness, of our identity, and the nature of reality itself.

It is astonishing that the academic circles in their deep commitment to materialistic philosophy and linear determinism have refused to critically examine the extraordinary and startling observations amassed by several decades of consciousness research and transpersonal psychology. Had that happened, it would have led to an inevitable conclusion – the urgent need for a radical revision of our understanding of human nature and the nature of reality. Bache justly compares the academic community to a culture that in its search for truth has denied itself access to the night sky with its deep secrets and bases its worldview entirely on daytime observations.

A salient example of this deep reluctance to face observations that undermine and challenge the leading paradigm is the repeatedly confirmed fact of out-of-body experiences during which disembodied consciousness, even that of congenitally blind

persons, is capable of perceiving events in the immediate environment and various remote locations. This observation, in and of itself, should be sufficient to elicit serious doubts about our current beliefs concerning the relationship between consciousness and matter. And yet, educators in our universities continue to teach with unshaken authority that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of matter and that it somehow mysteriously emerges out of the complexity of neurophysiological processes in the central nervous system.

Christopher Bache does much more than bring a convincing argument for the critical epistemological and ontological importance of the study of non-ordinary states of consciousness. Using his intimate knowledge of the deepest recesses of the human psyche, he brings extraordinary clarity into theoretically important areas in transpersonal psychology, particularly psychedelic states, near-death experiences, and out-of-body episodes.

Bache often reveals impartially both the strength and the weakness of a particular set of data or theoretical position. In the chapter discussing reincarnation, for example, he clearly indicates the impeccability of Ian Stevenson's research of the past life experiences in children and the defective reasoning of his critics. At the same time, he demonstrates that the very aspects of Stevenson's material that make it compelling also create a bias that tends to prevent us from appreciating the profound implications of reincarnation for our understanding of our true identity.

Bache's search for our deeper identity takes him to psychedelic research where he explores numerous examples of a much more extensive dissolution of personal boundaries than those found in Stevenson's material. Besides the temporal dissolution of boundaries, psychedelic states often involve various degrees of transcendence of spatial limitations. Here Bache focuses on a problem that has intrigued me from the very beginning of my psychedelic research. When the transformational process reaches beyond postnatal biography, the experience typically makes a quantum leap and becomes distinctly transpersonal. Instead of identifying with our body and ego in different stages

of personal development, we become the consciousness of entire human groups or even humanity as a whole.

As Bache graphically demonstrates, using as examples his own experiences, in many instances this involves re-experiencing unimaginable suffering from various periods of human history. The question arises: is it conceivable that suffering of this scope and depth can be seen as being merely part of the healing process of just one individual? Bache convincingly argues that it is not, that at this point, the therapeutic process transcends the boundaries of the individual and begins to affect healing of the field of human consciousness as a whole. The archetypal images of Jesus, whose suffering redeems the sins of humanity, or of a Bodhisattva, who sacrifices his or her own spiritual liberation to help other sentient beings, are very appropriate symbols for this phase of the process.

Applying his expanded understanding of the perinatal level to the field of thanatology, Bache focuses on the enigma of terrifying near-death experiences and extends this discussion to the problem of hell. The early reports of near-death experiences all emphasized the transcendental and heavenly nature of these episodes and the possibility of hellish NDEs was long denied by most thanatologists. Although their existence has now been proven beyond any reasonable doubt, no one before Bache had offered for them a convincing explanation.

Bache argues that the passage to light that is a common part of the near-death experiences represents a condensed and accelerated traversing of what I have called the perinatal realm. Viewed from this perspective, the hellish near-death experience can be seen as an incomplete NDE that did not carry the individual all the way through to the encounter with the divine light. In the same vein, Bache suggests that hell, rather than being the abode of eternal damnation, is an extremely difficult stage of the journey of spiritual opening, a stage of deep and accelerated purification.

Bache then turns to Robert Monroe's soul-centered accounts of his out-of-body experiences and ponders their seeming differences from those encountered in psychedelic sessions which have a much more holistic character. He argues that these differences reflect the different techniques used to induce these experiences, with psychedelic states dissolving the egoic boundaries more aggressively than out-of-body states, thus allowing broader transpersonal patterns of reality to surface in awareness. Accordingly, he emphasized the need for transpersonal theorists to pay greater attention to how one's experiential method influences the shape of transpersonal disclosure.

The conclusions of Bache's critical analysis of selected observations from transpersonal psychology and consciousness research, startling and shocking as they might appear to the mind of an average Western scientist, are fully congruent with the great Eastern spiritual philosophies and mystical traditions of the world, to which Aldous Huxley referred to as the perennial philosophy. They show that human beings do not have a fixed identity and that the temporal as well as spatial boundaries of our individual self are relative and ultimately illusory.

When we transcend all these boundaries in deep experiential self-exploration, we realize that all of existence is a manifestation of one Being that has been known throughout ages by many different names – Atman, the Tao, Buddha, the Great Spirit, Allah, Keter, the Cosmic Christ, and many others. The ultimate identity of each of us with this principle, whom Bache chooses to call the Sacred Mind, is the deepest secret of all great spiritual traditions.

While earlier chapters of the book represent primarily original theoretical contributions to transpersonal psychology, its closing chapters also have important practical implications. By discussing at some length and with practical examples how his inner search influenced the nature and quality of his teaching, Bache reveals the existence of mechanisms that are of great interest for educators. His analysis of the emergence of transpersonal fields in the classroom setting has the potential to revolutionize the educational process.

Even more far-reaching are implications of Bache's reflections on the current global crisis. Many authors have suggested that humanity is approaching an evolutionary crossroads, but Bache goes further to explore the role that the impending eco-crisis may play in this transition and outlines dynamics operating in the collective unconscious that he believes might be responsible for changing the baseline of human consciousness in an unexpectedly short period of life.

Furthermore, if he is right that the transformational work of an individual can generate a therapeutic effect in the field of species consciousness, then each of us has the potential to contribute to a more harmonious future for the planet by complementing our social activism with deep inner work. Considering the consistent failure of all economic, military, political, and diplomatic interventions, such a mass inner transformation might be humanity's only real hope for survival.

Dark Night, Early Dawn, is a unique contribution to transpersonal psychology. It is a product of creative imagination inspired by inner journeys to the farthest frontiers of the psyche and yet a work forged by a rigorous intellect and impeccable scholarship. A fine example of a courageous pioneering venture into rarely traveled territories of the human psyche, it will remain a classic in the transpersonal field.

Stanislav Grof, M.D., Belagio, Italy, May 1999.

