



On Consensus Trance and Waking Up: A Conversation with CHARLES TART

Interviewer: When did you first come in touch with the idea of consensus trance?

CT: Probably around 1963, when I read Ouspensky's book, *In Search of the Miraculous*. I found it an incredibly stimulating book, and realized that his basic idea—that we are in a kind of waking trance, instead of really awake—was quite correct. I followed his directions for waking up, and woke up for a moment. Three months later I realized that that moment had lasted for three seconds, and that I'd fallen asleep and daydreamed about it for three months thereafter!

MT: Do you think that's a common experience for most of us?

CT: It's a very common occurrence. We all have moments when we at least partially wake up to being present in reality; but the automatic process of fantasy sweeps in very fast, and takes us back into our ongoing daydream.

MT: So after your few seconds of waking up, where did you take it from there?

CT: For a long time, that was about all I did with it. I read a lot of material;

intellectually, it made sense to me. It helped put a lot of my research observations on altered states of consciousness into a coherent framework. But I didn't know what to do with it personally; I'd gotten the intellectual framework without being able to apply it. Then I came into contact with some people who were doing work with the ideas of Gurdjieff,* and their stimulation reminded me that this was not just a set of ideas to play with; this was a very practical technique to apply in my life. I realized there are ways of being more present, more sane in the way our consciousness functions.

MT: Why is consensus trance significant?

CT: When we think of trance, we usually think of hypnosis, of someone's will being taken over while they're in a dull, less than alive state. We think of hypnosis as a powerful, weird, unusual state that influences people—a state that is nothing like ordinary consciousness. But in fact, what was done to us to create our ordinary state, and make it last, was far more intense than anything that's ever done with a hypnotist.

One of the most interesting things to me in writing my recent book, *Waking Up*, was comparing the induction of ordinary consciousness with the induction of hypnosis. The powers [in our upbringing] brought to bear to induce

*George Gurdjieff was a Russian mystic who taught and wrote during the early 1900's and developed teachings known as the Fourth Way.

ordinary consciousness are far stronger than in hypnosis. And the trance state which results—the limitations on our vitality, the distortions of our perception—are far more powerful than hypnosis. And because our distortions are very similar from person to person in our culture, we think it's "normal."

MT: So consensus trance is one that is reinforced by the fabric of mainstream society?

CT: Yes, very much so. You can't really see the truth of it until you've begun to make some efforts at waking up and have had moments when you're not so deeply in consensus trance. As you begin to get glimpses of that, then the idea of being in the trance becomes very real, and very horrifying.

MT: What are some of the results of a society in consensus trance?

CT: The world we live in, unfortunately. Although we have intentions to make the world a better place, only parts of our minds have these intentions; other parts have opposite intentions or aren't interested whatsoever, so our actions get undermined. And so we have peace campaigns that lead to war, to give an example. But as individuals get a little more awake, a little more in touch, it affects the people around them, and that helps build one of the foundations we need for peace.

Cont'd. p. 10

TART, *cont'd. from p. 6*

MT: What things can make us realize we're in a trance, so that we can take steps to move out of it?

CT: It can happen in various ways, accidentally or deliberately. For example, when someone says something that "blows your mind," to use an old-fashioned expression. Or, when a tragedy happens and it totally throws our conditioned habits off balance. These kinds of things can temporarily shock us out of consensus trance.

Another example is psychedelic drugs; they momentarily wake people up, albeit in a very confused way, because they interfere with the functioning of the mind. I've thought about this in connection with LSD; what I think it does is, it throws monkey wrenches into the mind's machinery. Instead of operating smoothly, all our habits of thinking, perceiving and feeling begin to cut in and out irregularly. This gives us glimpses of what it would be like to be awake.

MT: What about self-observation?

CT: It's absolutely essential. We don't understand our personalities or our habits of perception and emotion, so we have to work on being a neutral observer. What we have to develop is a "neutral witness," an ability to simply say, "I'm going to study myself." I think it's very sensible, in any line of development, to try to understand ourselves before trying to make changes.

MT: So the point is to start asking myself the question: "What am I doing now?"

CT: Yes. Let me give you the analogy of the "automated airliner." For over 30 years, we've had the technology to completely automate an airliner. It could do everything, without a pilot. But no one would want to buy a ticket for such a flight.

Well, our minds are like an automated airliner. We have developed automatic reactions to everything, so that real consciousness is not necessary. We are swept along by the course of events. But, just like riding in an automatic airliner, if something does go wrong . . . it's a long way down!

We don't seem to realize that in life. We rely on our automatic reactions, which are not very sensitive, and every once in awhile we have a big crash because we've misperceived situations. We need to develop the ability to create a pilot for our own mind—a quality of consciousness that's not lost in the activity of our delusions, that can pilot us toward a higher destination.

VAUGHAN, *cont'd. from p. 7*

Carl Rogers, when he gathered politicians from many different countries for the purpose of exploring conflict resolution methods. It was clear to me that if you can cut through the ideological differences, and get to the person underneath, you can find a common ground. In every ideology, the basic ideals are amazingly similar.

MT: It keeps going back to recognizing the connection that we have with others. . . .

FV: It's the human connection, yes. We're not alone; we really exist in a community, a planetary community. It's becoming obvious that unless we think of ourselves as a whole, we're going to continue to be in trouble. We need to find solutions that are not just for women, or for men, or for Americans or Russians—but human solutions.

MT: What you're saying is that there will need to be some radical shifts in the way we function in the world—that a lot of boundaries will have to drop away in order for us to actualize what you're talking about.

FV: Well, we all do have boundaries that we seem to need, but I think that rather than telling people they have to change their lives, it's more productive for us to begin to examine our beliefs and attitudes, and to see what we believe is possible and what direction we would like to go.

Where do we want to put our particular focus? Who decides what our life is about? Who decides what work we will do? Are we really making our own decisions? That may be the first question we need to ask ourselves. I think that becoming aware of choice in our lives is one of the most essential elements. That's what enables us to feel we have the capacity to make a difference. Then we begin to see that, although anything we do may seem insignificant, it does make a difference—in our own lives, in others' lives, and ultimately, in the world.

MT: It was Ghandi who said that it doesn't matter how small a thing you do, it matters that you do it.

FV: Yes, I think that's true. And where the spiritual quest is concerned, I think it's important to recognize that the sense of feeling you have a contribution to make, that your life has a purpose—and the discovery of your own identity as a soul as well as an ego—is very important for the experience of being a free agent in your life. You really can choose how you want to be in the world. We're fortunate to be living in a society where we have a wide range of choices. How we respond to the circumstances we find ourselves in is up to us.

The preceding interviews were adapted from taped conversations conducted by Michael Toms of New Dimensions Radio, a division of New Dimensions Foundation, P.O. Box 410510, San Francisco, CA 94141. The entire interviews can be ordered by mail or by calling (415) 563-8899.