THE HIGH AND THE LOW with COLIN WILSON

JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. I'm Jeffrey Mishlove. Today we're going to be exploring the heights and the depths of consciousness. With me is one of the most prolific writers in the English language, Colin Wilson, author of over seventy books, including seventeen novels and numerous works in criminology, existential philosophy, psychology, religion, the occult, mysticism, wine, and music. Amongst his most well known books are *A Criminal History of Mankind, The Mind Parasites, The Philosopher's Stone, Religion and the Rebel, The Occult, Mysteries*, and of course, his first book, which became a world-wide best-seller in 1956 when he was twenty-four years of age, *The Outsider*. Welcome, Colin. You know, to my surprise, although you've written widely in so many areas and have written so much, you've described yourself as a person who has basically written on one theme your entire life.

COLIN WILSON: Yes, I've written the same book seventy times over.

MISHLOVE: And that is reconciling this issue of the heights of consciousness with the depths of despair.

WILSON: You know, Isaiah Berlin once said that there are two kinds of writers, hedgehogs and foxes. He said the fox knows many things, the hedgehog knows just one thing. So Shakespeare is a typical fox; Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky are typical hedgehogs. Now, I'm a typical hedgehog. I know just one thing, and I repeat it over and over again. I try to approach it from different angles to make it look different, but it's the same thing.

MISHLOVE: Much of your writing has focused on your own working through of states of panic, states of despair, that you've experienced in your own life.

WILSON: Yes, I suppose that first book, *The Outsider*, was almost an autobiography, and of course twenty-five years later, when I produced this book Mysteries, I suddenly had this horrifying series of panic attacks that made me feel I was going insane, due to overwork. I'd been working very, very hard on a series of books about crime. I was supposed to write the introduction to each issue, and so it was pretty hard work. Say the issue was on kidnapping. We would have a big kidnapping case and a big kidnapping trial, and my business was to do the history of kidnapping from the beginning. So I had to read up a lot of stuff to do this. What happened was that the publisher said, "OK, the American publisher says we can go." So off we went, and he said, "Look, I'm afraid we're going to need four articles per week." Well, this was OK; you know, three thousand words each is about twelve pages. And then later he said, "I'm awfully sorry. We're going to need seven articles per week." And then, when I was really working like a madman, he said, "Look, I don't know whether you can manage this, but we need ten articles per week." Now, this is a full-length book every three weeks. I was doing pretty well; I was working away nicely, and one day two bloody Canadian journalists came to interview me. They were bores. They talked and talked and talked and talked, and I was doing pretty well until then, but you know the way you get when someone just talks, you get, uhhhhhhhh, and I did this, and I went to bed the second night when they'd been there, and about four o'clock in the morning I woke up feeling a bit hung over, and began to think about all the work I'd got to do, and quite suddenly my heart began to pound and my face went all hot, and I thought, perhaps I'd better go straight downstairs and get to work immediately. Then I thought, no, no, no, you're going really insane if you do that. And I made a great mistake. I tried to repress it by sheer will power, and this was a mistake, because I could have done it if I'd gone all the way through with it, but it's like pulling back a spring and being terrified suddenly that it'll bound back on you. I let go, and quite suddenly my heart began to pound so fast I thought I was having a heart attack, so I rushed into the lavatory and I just sat there in the cool, trying to calm myself down, as you might try to calm a frightened horse. Then I went back to bed after half an hour, and it just started again, as soon as I got into bed. So I went to the sitting room and put the lights on, and I thought, what's happening? I had once written a book called The Mind Parasites, which was about this idea that parasites can insert themselves into your unconscious mind and just suck your energies dry, and that was supposed to be a parable of what was wrong with human beings -- you know, what you might call original sin. But now I was suddenly experiencing the damn thing. Finally after hours I went back to bed and I managed to stop the panic by just staring at the window frame and refusing to let my mind move an inch in either direction. Finally I fell asleep, but I woke up the next morning a total physical wreck, drained of energy. Now, I managed to get rid of this by actually describing it. I just went downstairs and wrote it down, and this is the opening of my book Mysteries. I just put it straight down on paper, and when I finished that I felt much better. But that night, before I went to bed, I thought, Oh God, I hope it doesn't happen again, and of course there's no more sure way of making sure it does happen again. I woke up in the middle of the night, thought about it -- you know, boom, boom, boom -- and off it all went again. And you get this sort of funny sound in your ears, as if you're swimming under water, and so on. I finally discovered, after three or four nights of this, that I could control it if I woke myself up as fully as I possibly could, and then it was like a schoolmistress coming to a room full of quarreling schoolboys and [clapping] like that -- a sudden deathly silence. I found that I'd discovered the basic trick. It was as if there was a kind of higher Colin Wilson up there, and when he chose to come down and make his presence known, everything was OK. But you know the way you are in the middle of the night -- you wake up and you begin to worry about money and all kinds of things. The lower levels take over in the middle of the night. Well, this is what happened. Now, that experience seemed to me so completely pointless and miserable and rotten that I could see no meaning in it. It seemed to undermine all my life's work. And yet, when at the end of three months I'd sort of struggled with this, what it amounted to was catching my adrenalin before it flooded into my bloodstream. As soon as I became afraid -- you know, you feel that surge of adrenalin, and everything goes hot. It was kind of like catching a fly in the air, before the adrenalin gets into your blood stream, and stopping it dead. I learned this trick after a while, catching the adrenalin. And when finally I overcame the panic attacks, I realized that my wife could drop a plate on the floor and I didn't even flinch. I could stop the adrenalin like that. The interesting thing was, I only realized afterwards that this was the most valuable experience of my whole life -- that it had taught me the real problems that I'd been writing about in The Outsider.

MISHLOVE: Well, much of the history of mystical, shamanistic, psychic training has to do with curing oneself of forms of what we might think of as insanity. It seems that you went almost through a shamanistic initiation here.

WILSON: Well, I don't know. I'd always, you see, even in my early teens, had these problems -- problems of suddenly waking up in the middle of the night and having this horrifying vision that life is completely meaningless. You know -- just thinking about something like the depths of space, and realizing it's got to come to an end somewhere, but apparently it doesn't, and then suddenly getting this terrible feeling that maybe life is a total delusion. G.K. Chesterton once said that in his teens he saw hell, and I really think I did too. I went through extreme depressions, glooms. There was one occasion on which I decided actually to commit suicide. I'd got into this state -- I was working as a lab assistant at the school, and what would happen was that I'd make tremendous efforts to push myself up to a level of optimism. I'd do it in the evenings by reading poetry, thinking, writing in my journals, then I'd go back to the school the next day and blaaahhh, right down to the bottom again. This was the feeling of The Mind Parasites -- there's something that waits until you've got lots of energy and just sucks you dry like a vampire. This sudden feeling that God was making fun of me made me feel one day, "For God's sake, let's not have any more of this nonsense. I'm damned if I'll be played about with like this. Let me kill myself." And immediately I felt this, I felt a curious sense of inner strength. So I went off to night school quite determined that what I was going to do was to take down the bottle of potassium cyanide from the reagent shelves and drink it. I knew that cyanide burns a hole in the bottom of the stomach and kills you within seconds. Well, I went into the classroom quite determined. There was a group gathered around the professor at the desk. I went over to the reagent shelves, I took down the bottle of potassium cyanide, I uncorked it, and as I started raising this to my lips I suddenly had an extremely clear vision of myself in a few seconds' time with an agonizing pain in the pit of my stomach, and at the same time I suddenly turned into two people. I don't mean that literally, but I mean that there was I, and there beside me was this silly, bloody little idiot called Colin Wilson who was in a state of self-pity and about to kill himself, and I didn't give a damn whether the fool killed himself or not. The trouble was, if he killed himself he'd kill me too. And quite suddenly a terrific sense of overwhelming happiness came over me. I corked up the bottle, put it on the shelf, and for the next few days was in total control of my emotions and everything else. I realized suddenly that you can achieve these states of control, provided that you put yourself in a crisis situation. And that's why throughout The Outsider I keep saying the outsider's salvation lies in extremes.

MISHLOVE: You've focused in your writing somewhat on the works of Gurdjieff, who tended to push people into exalted states of consciousness by using a similar method of pushing them to extremes.

WILSON: Yes, well, you see, the basic point about the philosophy of Gurdjieff, and I suppose about my own basic ideas, is this recognition that we have inside us what I call the robot -- a sort of robot valet or servant who does things for you. So you learn something like talking French or driving a car or skiing or whatever, painfully and consciously, step by step. Then the robot takes it over and does it far more quickly and efficiently that you could do it consciously. However, the important thing is not to interfere with the robot once he's learned it, because you completely screw him up if you do. Now, the robot does all these valuable things like talking French and so on for us. The trouble is he also does the things we do not want him to do. We listen to a piece of music; it moves us deeply the first time. We read a poem, we go for a country walk, whatever, and it moves us. But the second or third time you do it, the robot is listening to the music or reading the poetry or doing the country walk for you. I said I've even caught him making love to my wife. And this is our real problem -- that the robot keeps taking us over and doing the things that we would rather do. Now, Gurdjieff recognized this; he talked about the machine. Gurdjieff, of course, would walk into, let's say, the dormitory of his students at midnight, snap his fingers, and everybody had to be out of bed and in some complex position within two seconds flat. Obviously he would keep people at a certain level of tension by doing this. Do you remember that Sartre said that during the war, when he was in the French Resistance and he was likely to be arrested and shot at any moment, he never felt so free. And obviously you would in these circumstances -- you keep your energy so high because of your sense of crisis, that you would feel far more free. Now this is clearly the secret of freedom -- keeping your energy so high that the robot is a bit like the thermostat on the wall which turns on quite automatically when your energies drop below a certain point, and then suddenly, without even noticing it, you're living mechanically, robotically, instead of with the real you. The interesting thing is that it's only a matter of one degree. Therefore, if it's just one degree to turn on to the robot, it's only one degree of effort to turn the robot off.

MISHLOVE: You know, I had an experience several months that threw me into an exalted state, and I realize that it's very similar to one that you've had and written about. I was riding a bicycle and was hit by a truck. Something like that occurred to you and seemed to have a similar effect.

WILSON: Well, I suppose the suicide attempt did produce this effect. But you know, ever since then I recognized that the answer lies in crisis. You see, we feel really alive when we are in what you might call "all systems go" states. If you can actually get yourself into this state where adrenalin is flooding in, when you're really intensely concentrating on something, then you feel fully alive. Now, our problem is we're always falling below that level, and what's more, as soon as you place us in a pleasant situation, where we should be extremely happy in theory, immediately everything drops, and quite suddenly, instead of being happy in the pleasant situation, we're happy for a few seconds, and then we're bored. You know, the German philosopher Fichte said, "It is heaven to become free, but actually to be free is nothing." And this is true. As soon as we are free permanently, we just relax. To become free, that's the moment when it suddenly becomes heavenly. Clearly then, in some peculiar way, we've got to keep our level up. Now, the way I would express it is this. Human beings are what you might call about forty-nine percent real you -- the essence, the free will -- and fifty-one percent robot. So the robot slightly always overbalances the real you. Now, as soon as a crisis occurs, as soon as anything drives you to make a real effort, quite suddenly the real you rises that extra one percent, and suddenly you are fifty-fifty. And in the fifty-fifty moods -- you know, setting out on holiday; driving along on a spring morning and thinking, my God isn't it all beautiful -- in the fifty-fifty mood, when you and the robot are perfectly balanced, in crisis situations, in which suddenly -- you know, Hans Keller, who used to be head of BBC music, said that in Germany in the 1930s, when Jews were disappearing into concentration camps, and he was Jewish, he said, "Oh my God, if I can just get out of Germany, I swear that I would never be unhappy again for the rest of my life." You can see exactly what he meant. It would be so easy to remain happy for the rest of your life, compared to the prospect of vanishing into a concentration camp. But what do we actually do? Under these circumstances, where we think, "God, if only . . ." we suddenly find that normality, pleasantness, puts us into this curious robotic state in which we forget everything, and down we go again.

MISHLOVE: You've written extensively about the romantic poets and artists, like Van Gogh, who seemed to experience such an exquisite sense of the life force permeating everything, and such great joy, and then would commit suicide and turn to depths of despair.

WILSON: Well, that was the thing that really started me off on this whole business. I was fascinated by these romantics of the nineteenth century -- as you say, like Van Gogh, or like Goethe and Schiller and Wordsworth, the early romantic poets, who would experience these exquisite moods of universal perception, in which everything was self- evidently good, and in which everything in the universe seems to be connected together, and then suddenly waking up the next morning thinking, "My God, what did I mean by it?" -- the feeling that it was an illusion, that maybe you'd had a drink too many, or whatever. So the question I asked myself from the beginning is, how could you determine which was true -- the moods of intensity, or the suicide note that Van Gogh left saying, "Misery will never end"? The philosophers at the time, when I produced The Outsider -- people like A.J. Ayre and Gilbert Ryle and so on --

would have said, "That's a totally meaningless question. After all, you feel one thing in one mood, you feel another thing in another mood. They're just relative." Now, I could not believe this, because every time I've experienced these moods of intensity it's like going to a hilltop and seeing precisely the same vision, exactly the same landscape below you. It must be solid, or it wouldn't be the same every time. It would be different every time. On the other hand, of course, in what you might call the worm's-eye-view moods, things appear bad in a different way every time. You suddenly feel that the truth is these views of the worm's- eye view are subjective and emotional, and it's only the bird's eye views that are true. I've always believed this deeply -- it's the big that's true, not the small. In other words, close-upness deprives us of meaning. I have always felt this is the basic truth of life. Somehow you've got to get that trick of pulling back and seeing things through a kind of wide-angle lens. As soon as you do this, you instantly go into a state of intense optimism.

MISHLOVE: In other words, for you the small details, the melodramas of our lives that sometimes cause us such despair, aren't as real as the larger picture.

WILSON: Well, I think that the main problem is that we have no way of galvanizing ourselves when we are in the low moods. That's the real problem. Now, at this point -- this was two years after I'd written The Outsider -- I came upon this interesting clue in the form of a letter from an American professor of psychology called Abraham Maslow, who wrote to say he'd read a book of mine called The Stature of Man, in which I'd said that I was fed up with the fact that modern literature appears to feel that telling the truth means to express defeat and misery, and that any form of conquest is generally regarded as a fantastic lie. Maslow said that he got sick of studying sick people because then he talked about the sickness, and he instead decided to study the healthiest people he could find. So he asked among his friends, "Who's the healthiest person you know?" And he studied these healthy people, and he made this discovery which no one else had ever made, because nobody else had studied healthy people, which was that healthy people have with a fairly greater frequency what Maslow called the peak experience -- just bubbling experiences of overwhelming happiness, not mystical, just ordinary happiness. The interesting thing was, his students, as soon as they began talking about peak experiences, would say, "Ah yes, I remember now," and begin to describe some precise peak experience they'd had in the past. Not only that -- and this was the really significant point -- as soon as they began talking about their peak experiences to another and discussing them all the time, they began having peak experiences all the time. So in some way, you see, the question of how to create the peak experience depends upon realizing that this is a norm of ordinary human consciousness. It's a perception. It's not an emotion, it's a perception. You turn your face in that direction, towards the peak experience, and it's like looking at something that gives you pleasure, like a mother looking at her baby. You just suddenly bubble over.

MISHLOVE: It's as if, if we are willing to acknowledge the possibility of something greater, we open ourselves up to it, and we can experience that.

WILSON: I think it's more than simply acknowledging the possibility of something greater. I think that we recognize that in our own depths we possess enormous reserves of strength of which we are normally totally unaware. This is what fascinates me. This is obviously what happened to the romantics. They just had these bubbling experiences of power coming up from their own depths, and were startled by this. And what's more interesting, I've noticed again and again when you experience a sense of power coming from your own depths, you are likely to feel that in some way it's coming from the external universe, because it so transforms the universe -- like Van Gogh's vision of the starry night, with all the stars turning into great whirlpools of force and the trees looking as if they're flames rising toward the sky -- it so transforms it that it appears to be an external vision. Of course all that's happening, so to speak, is that you are glowing with light that transforms the external universe. So in all the mystics you get this strange thing. They say the inner becomes the outer, and the outer becomes the inner -- it's characteristic of all the mystical experiences, that. And then, as soon as I began to see this, that it is a matter of sort of inner strength, I became extremely interested in this problem. The question I asked myself was, how then could you create the peak experience at will? Because obviously, if you want to compare that with what you might call the depth experience, the depression, somehow you've got to create them and put them side by side so you can see them side by side, and you see which is higher than the other. Well, I talked to Maslow about this, and Maslow said, "It's impossible. You can't do it. The peak experience comes when it wants to, and it goes when it wants to, and there's nothing you can do about it." Now, the nineteenth-century romantics had said this. You know, Pushkin compares the poet's heart to a coal which is blown into a red glow by the flame of inspiration and then goes black again, and there's nothing he can do about it. And yet, I said to Maslow, "In a sense, you're contradicting your own basic theory, that there are higher ceilings of human nature, that we're free." That's what fascinated me so much, this notion that we are actually free -- that we get these curious moments in which freedom floods over us with a kind of explosion that suddenly shakes us awake. It's what the Buddhists call enlightenment. Whenever it hits you, you get this strange feeling of, "My God, of course." Then of course you wake up the next morning saying, "Of course what?" So the problem was to define it precisely, and the only way you could do this was by learning, if possible, to create peak experiences at will, and that was the problem to which I gave myself after about 1958 -- how could it be done?

MISHLOVE: Many Buddhists would suggest there's a logical paradox there, because the I, the part of us that wills, is not the part of us that gets to experience that.

WILSON: Yes, precisely. That was something I discovered many years later -- in the late 1970s, in fact, when of course I suddenly discovered that we have two I's inside us. I'd known about this split-brain psychology for years -- I mean, I'd known that the right brain is concerned with pattern recognition and all the rest of it, the left brain is concerned with logic and language and mathematics. And it hadn't struck me as terribly interesting. I thought, OK, so what? Then I read this book, The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind by Julian Jaynes, in which he explains that if you split somebody's brain down the middle, which they do to prevent epileptic attacks, they literally turn into two people. This is what interested me so much -- that they become two people, and that the person who actually says "I" lives in the left brain. You know, what Jaynes says is if you show a split-brain patient an apple with the left eye and an orange with the right eye, and you say, "What have you just seen?" he will reply, "An orange." If you say, "OK, write with your left hand" -- which is connected to the right brain --

"what you have just seen," and you don't let him see it, he will write "Apple." You say, "What have you just written?" and he replies, "Orange." If you show him a dirty picture with his right brain, he will blush. If you say, "Why are you blushing?" he says, "I don't know." So obviously I, I don't know, means that I lives in the left brain, and that total stranger lives over in the right. Now, you may say, "But I'm not a split-brain patient." On the other hand, Mozart said that tunes were always walking into his head fully fledged, so he just had to write them down. Now, where did they come from? Obviously, that other self in the right brain, and they walked into the place where Mozart lived. Now, if Mozart was a split-brain patient, so are we all.

MISHLOVE: We all have two hemispheres, of course, to our brains.

WILSON: And what's more, they're totally disconnected

-- disconnected to such an extent that we're not even aware that we have this other person living in the other hemisphere. Now, when I began writing a book about Wilhelm Reich --

MISHLOVE: We have just about a minute now, Colin.

WILSON: Oh shit -- I realized that in fact these two were exactly the same as Laurel and Hardy in your movies, and that the person living in the other hemisphere is in fact Stan Laurel. He's the one who sends up all the energy; Ollie is the living you. And somehow they're like lumberjacks at either end of a double-handed saw, whose business is to collaborate. If you once actually get the collaboration of Stan in the other hemisphere, everything is fine.

MISHLOVE: So to summarize a very long story here, it would seem as if part of the art of rising from the depths of despair to the heights of peak experience is to develop a kind of working relationship between these Laurel and Hardy characters.

WILSON: One is totally creative, but unfortunately is so silent that you don't even know he's there except in your high moods, your intense -- Van Gogh could see his Stan when he was painting A Starry Night, and soon as you know Stan is really there, what I'm saying is that he will always support you, always send up these surges of creative energy when you need them.

MISHLOVE: Colin Wilson, thank you very much for being with me. It's been a pleasure.