

LUCID DREAMING: SOME TRANSPERSONAL IMPLICATIONS¹

Roger N. Walsh
Irvine, California

Frances Vaughan
Mill Valley, California

Waking is long and a dream short;
other than this there is no difference.

Ramana Maharshi (1988, p. 10)

Lucid dreaming and transpersonal studies are two vigorous and important fields with overlapping interests and much to contribute to one another. Unfortunately, they have remained largely isolated and ignorant of each other, in spite of the fact that lucid dreaming research has significant transpersonal implications. Researchers are now investigating advanced forms of lucidity, finding technological means to enhance it, observing physiological correlates, using lucid dreaming as a spiritual practice, and building conceptual bridges to ancient techniques such as Tibetan dream yoga. In this paper we will briefly summarize some of the transpersonal implications of lucidity research and show some links between the two fields.

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DREAMS

From ancient times, dreams have been regarded as a source of inspiration, mystery and messages. For shamans, dreams served notice of their sacred vocation (Walsh, 1990), while for the prophets of Israel dreams were messages from God (Sanford, 1968). "Hear my words: If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream" (*Bible*, Numbers 12:6). In ancient Mediterranean cultures, dreams were regarded as a source of healing, and people came to the

temple of the god Asclepius to incubate healing dreams (Kilborne, 1987). Recently, dreams have been regarded psychologically as “the royal road to the unconscious” (Freud), and as messages of healing and intuitive wisdom from the unconscious (Jung).

However interpreted, dreams are a nightly “miracle” in which a whole universe arises populated with people, places and creatures that seem solid, independent and “real.” Moreover, in our dreams we appear to possess an equally solid, “real” body that seems to be the source and support of our lives, our pleasures and our pains, whose eyes and ears provide sensory input, and whose death means our death. In short, the dream world and body seem to create and control us. Yet this seemingly objective universe is a creation of our own minds, a subjective, illusory, transient, production that we create and control.

When we awaken, we say “It was only a dream” implying that it was “unreal.” In the technical terms of Indian Vedantic philosophy we “sublate” it (Deutsch, 1969). That is, we accord it less validity or ontological status in light of our waking consciousness. Yet in spite of each awakening, night after night, time after time, we take our dreams to be “real” and therefore flee and fight, laugh and cry, curse and rejoice within the dream.

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However, most of us have had at least one experience, while in the midst of some apparently dramatic adventure or terrifying threat, of suddenly realizing that “It’s only a dream.” At that moment we become “lucid;” we are dreaming yet we know that we are dreaming. That moment can result in a sense of relief, delight, wonder and freedom. Then we are free to confront our monsters, fulfill our desires, or seek our highest goals, knowing that we are creators, not victims, of our experience. As the philosopher Nietzsche observed, “perhaps many a one will, like myself, recollect having sometimes called out cheerfully and not without success amid the dangers and terrors of dreamlife: ‘it is a dream! I will dream on!’” (LaBerge, 1985).

THE HISTORY OF LUCID DREAMING

For most of us such lucid dreams are rare and beyond our ability to induce. Is there any way of cultivating our ability to awaken in our dreams at will? A variety of contemplative traditions and dream explorers say yes. In the fourth century, the classical yoga sutras of Patanjali recommended “witnessing the process of dreaming or dreamless sleep” (Shearer, 1989). Four centuries later Tibetan Buddhists devised a sophisticated dream yoga. In the 12th century the Sufi mystic Ibn El-Arabi, a religious and philosophical genius known to the Arab world as “the greatest master,” claimed that “a

person must control his thoughts in a dream. The training of this alertness . . . will produce great benefits for the individual. Everyone should apply himself to the attainment of this ability of such great value" (Shah, 1971). More recently a number of explorers and spiritual masters such as Sri Aurobindo (1970) and Rudolf Steiner (1947) also reported success with lucid dreaming.

For decades Western researchers dismissed such reports as impossible. However, in the 1970s, in a breakthrough in the history of dream research, two investigators provided experimental proof of lucid dreaming. Working independently and quite unknown to each other, Alan Worsley in Britain and Stephen LaBerge in California both learned to dream lucidly (LaBerge, 1985). Then, while being monitored electrophysiologically in a sleep laboratory, they signaled by means of eye movements that they were dreaming, and knew it. Their electroencephalograms showed the characteristic patterns of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, during which dreaming typically occurs, validating their reports. For the first time in history someone had brought back a message from the world of dreams while still dreaming. Dream research has never been the same since. Interestingly, for some time LaBerge was unable to get his reports published because reviewers simply refused to believe that lucid dreaming was possible.

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Since then, with the aid of eye movement signaling and electrophysiological measures, much progress has been made, such as in studies of the frequency and duration of lucid dreams, their physiological effects on brain and body, the psychological characteristics of those who have them, the means for inducing them more reliably, and their potential for healing and transpersonal exploration.

IMPLICATIONS OF LUCIDITY

Lucid dreaming also has stimulated thinking about the philosophical, practical, and transpersonal implications of both dreams and lucidity. One striking philosophical implication concerns the nature of our waking world. If, night after night, we mistake our dreamworld and bodies for objective, "real" things that exist quite independently of our minds and that seem to control us, perhaps we do the same with our waking world and bodies. How do we know that the waking state is not also a dream? Was Shakespeare right when he wrote in *The Tempest*?:

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on;
and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

Tibetan Buddhists point out that "there is no characteristic of waking experience that clearly distinguishes it from dreaming" (Gyatso, 1986).

Various philosophers and mystical traditions agree. The great Taoist philosopher Chuang-Tzu (1991), p. 22) pointed out that for the dreamer "While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he awakes does he know it was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream." The philosopher Schopenhauer suggested that the universe is "a vast dream, dreamed by a single being, in such a way that all the dream characters dream too" (Schopenhauer, n.d.). The Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki (1930) argued that "As long as we are in the dream we do not realize that we are all dreaming." The Indian spiritual genius Ramakrishna (1992) claimed that "The secret of the *jnani's* (sage's) dispassionate mood, his freedom from all contexts, is the direct knowledge that dreaming experience and waking experience are essentially similar." Likewise, *A Course in Miracles*, a contemporary Christian teaching, points out that:

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Dreams show you that you have the power to make a world as you would have it be, and that because you want it you see it. And while you see it you do not doubt that it is real. Yet here is a world, clearly within your mind, that seems to be outside. . . . You seem to waken, and the dream is gone. Yet what you fail to recognize is that what caused the dream has not gone with it. Your wish to make another world that is not real remains with you. And what you seem to waken to is but another form of this same world you see in dreams. All your time is spent in dreaming. Your sleeping and your waking dreams have different forms, and that is all (Anonymous, 1975).

This perspective, a form of philosophical idealism, is the metaphysical view that what we take to be external reality is a creation of mind. Though not popular in these materialistic times, this position has been advocated by various philosophers, East and West. Hegel, for example, claimed that "Spirit is alone Reality. It is the inner being of the world" (Hegel, 1949). The fact that no philosopher has ever been able to demonstrate the existence of an outside world (Jones, 1975) is no surprise to idealists.

Lucid dreamers can have a powerful realization of how convincingly objective and material a dream world can seem, and how dramatic a personal awareness of this fact can be. The lucid dreamer can experience with startling clarity that what seemed an unquestionably external, objective, material, and independent world is in fact an internal, subjective, immaterial and dependent creation of mind. Some begin to question their previous world views, to wonder whether the waking world could also be a dream,

and to agree with Nietzsche that “We invent the largest part of the thing experienced. We are much greater artists than we know” (Nietzsche, 1955).

This suggests important philosophical and practical implications for our usual waking state. While dreaming, we usually assume that our state of consciousness is clear and accurate and that we are seeing things “as they really are.” Only when we awaken or become lucid do we subvert our previous dream consciousness and recognize its distortions. This leads to two questions: Could our usual waking state of consciousness be similarly distorted? If this is so, is there a way to “wake up” and become lucid in daily life?

The mystical cores of many religious traditions answer yes to both questions. They claim that our usual state is distorted and that we live in what has been called in some Asian systems *maya*, delusion and illusion; and more recently in the West, a mutual hypnosis, collective psychosis (Walsh & Shapiro, 1983) or consensus trance (Tart, 1983). These traditions also claim that we can become lucid in daily life and they offer contemplative disciplines to help us awaken to the clear state known as enlightenment, liberation, salvation, wu or moksha (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

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The existence of lucidity raises two additional questions. First, is it possible to further refine lucidity so as to extend it into dreamless sleep? Second, is it possible to cultivate higher states of consciousness within dreams, and thereby develop what Charles Tart calls “high dreams?”

Sages such as Aurobindo, Ramakrishna, and Steiner, as well as Western meditation students in retreat, have described being able to maintain continuous lucidity throughout much of the night in both dreams and dreamless sleep. Advanced transcendental meditation (TM) practitioners report this experience also and some even describe being able to “witness” their dreams (Gackenbach & Bosveld, 1989). By this they mean that in dreams, or even in dreamless sleep, they remain identified with pure consciousness and therefore simply observe the figures and dramas in their dreams without being perturbed by them. Moreover, this equanimous witnessing can extend to daytime waking life. According to the TM Vedic tradition, the first state of enlightenment is reached when witnessing become imperturbable and unbroken (Alexander & Langer, 1989).

Evidently yoga and meditation can induce lucid dreaming, and lucid dreaming can itself be used as a meditation. Indeed, lucidity seems to spontaneously motivate dreamers to do just that. Experience practitioners report that even the thrill of repetitive

wish fulfillment eventually fades, a condition variously known as divine apathia (the Desert Fathers), *nilibida* (Buddhism), or “the equality of things” (Taoism). This leaves dreamers longing for something more meaningful and profound than playing out another sensual fantasy. These people rediscover the ancient idea that sensory pleasures alone can never be enduringly satisfying.

At such a point dreamers may begin to seek transpersonal experiences and to use lucid dreaming as a transpersonal technique. To do this they may employ three strategies. First, they actively seek within the dream for a spiritual experience, be it a symbol, a teacher or a deity. Second, they may adopt a more passive approach, turning control of the dream over to a “higher power,” whether that power is conceived to be an inner guide, Self, or God (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

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In the third strategy they begin a meditative-yogic practice while still in the dream. By far the most sophisticated such practice is the 1200 year old Tibetan Buddhist “dream yoga.” According to the Dalai Lama (1983), Tibetan yogis are taught to develop lucidity, first in their dreams, and then in their nondream sleep, seeking to remain continuously aware twenty-four hours a day. Meanwhile, during daylight hours they cultivate the awareness that their waking experience is also a dream. The ideal result is unbroken awareness, the sense that all experience is a dream, and ultimately “the Great Realization.”

The final step leads to the Great Realization, that nothing within the Sangsara (realms of existence) is or can be other than unreal like dreams. The Universal Creation, with its many mansions of existence from the lowest to the highest Buddha paradise, and every phenomenal thing therein, organic and inorganic, matter or form, in its innumerable physical aspects, as gases, solids, heat, cold, radiations, colours, energies, electronic elements, are but the content of the Supreme Dream. With the dawning of this Divine Wisdom, the microcosmic aspect of the Macrocosm becomes fully awakened; the dew-drop slips back into the Shining Sea, in Nirvanic Blissfulness and At-one-ment, possessed of All Possessions, Knower of the All-Knowledge, Creator of All Creations—the One Mind, Reality Itself (Evans-Wentz, 1958).

NOTE

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Introductions to the theory and practice of lucidity are available in LaBerge (1985) and Gackenbach and Bosveld (1989). Research findings are reviewed in Gackenbach and LaBerge (1988) while the journal *Lucidity* publishes recent research. The philosophical implications of dreaming are discussed by Globus (1987) and their religious significance by Kilborne (1987). A (somewhat obtuse) account of Tibetan

dream yoga can be found in Evans-Wentz (1958), and transpersonally oriented papers on lucidity are collected in Walsh and Vaughan (1993).

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Requests for reprints to: Roger Walsh, Psychiatry Department, University of California Medical School, Irvine, CA 92717.