

Lucid Dreaming and Meditation

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Since the era of Greek antiquity, philosophers have known of the possibility of lucid dreaming—that is, recognizing that you are dreaming *while* you are in the dream state—and theologians since the time of St Augustine have been aware of such dreams as well. But it was only in the 1980s that lucid dreaming entered the domain of legitimate scientific inquiry, largely as a result of studies conducted by Stephen LaBerge and other psychologists at Stanford University. Such research has revealed much about the nature of lucid dreams and has provided many practical techniques for learning how to induce such dreams and increase their frequency, duration, and clarity.

But such research was preceded and in many ways surpassed centuries ago by Buddhist contemplatives in Tibet. As Stephen LaBerge comments, “On the ‘rooftop of the world,’ as early as the eighth century A.D., the Tibetan Buddhists were practicing a form of yoga designed to maintain full waking consciousness during the dream state. With these dream yogis of Tibet, we find for the first time a people who possess an experientially based and unequivocal understanding of dreams as solely the mental creation of the dreamer. This is a concept fully at the level of our most recent scientific and psychological findings.”¹

In Tibetan Buddhism, the practice of dream yoga is pursued within the larger context of seeking to understand the mind and the true, inner causes of both suffering and

genuine happiness. The overall structure of Buddhist theory and practice is the Four Noble Truths: (1) recognizing the reality of suffering, (2) eliminating the fundamental, internal causes of suffering, which are identified as craving, hostility, and delusion, (3) realizing the possibility of the cessation of suffering and its source, and (4) following the path of spiritual purification and transformation that results in such freedom.

The basis of all Buddhist practice is ethics, which can be summarized as “avoid inflicting harm on yourself or others, and be of service when the opportunity presents itself.” The next phase of practice is learning to balance the mind, and one central aspect of such mental training is the refinement of attention. This involves methods for enhancing the stability and vividness of attention, calming the mind so that one can maintain a continually focused, clear awareness. As the Buddha declared, “The mind that is established in equipoise comes to know reality as it is.”² Such a balanced mind is then used to explore the nature of the mind and the origins and potentials of human consciousness.

This is where the ancient tradition of dream yoga comes in. Experimental physicists conduct their research in laboratories that are composed entirely of physical phenomena. Likewise, Buddhist contemplatives who master the discipline of dream yoga are able to use the dream state as the basis for investigating the mind, and their laboratory is composed entirely of formations of consciousness! The first step in such practice is to learn how to recognize the dream state for what it is while dreaming. In the beginning, one’s lucid dreams are bound to be of short duration, for one becomes so excited that one quickly wakes up! But with time and practice, one learns how to stabilize the mind and sustain lucidity, and this opens up many possibilities for exploring the dream state. The

first thing to check out is: to what extent can one change the contents and events in a dream at will? Buddhist contemplatives have found that the only limitation on the malleability of dreams is the scope of one's own imagination. Moreover, as one gains deeper insight into the nature of dreams, one discovers that nothing in a dream can harm one. Everything is simply a manifestation of one's own mind, and even the most horrific images and events are no more dangerous than mirages or reflections in a mirror.

A further step in the practice of dream yoga is to allow the dream to fade away, but without losing the clarity of one's awareness. In a dream, all one's physical senses are already shut down, so when the dream imagery disappears, it vanishes into the empty, luminous space of awareness itself. This is a unique opportunity for exploring the "clear light of sleep," in which one experiences consciousness without the overlay of sensory images and conceptual constructs. In this way, one can begin to probe the nature of consciousness itself and observe how it takes on different modalities and forms as one's physical senses and cognitive abilities are aroused.

Modern lucid dream researchers draw a sharp distinction between the waking state and the dream state, and recognizing this distinction plays an important role in their techniques for inducing lucid dreaming. But in some ways, waking consciousness and dreaming are more similar than we might expect. As Stephen LaBerge remarks, "dreaming can be viewed as the special case of perception without the constraints of external sensory input. Conversely, perception can be viewed as the special case of dreaming constrained by sensory input."³ The parallels between waking and dreaming are explored in great depth by Tibetan Buddhists, who have concluded that, compared to spiritual enlightened beings, normal people lead their lives in a dreamlike state. When

asked whether he was a man or a god, he replied simply, “I am awake,” and that is the very meaning of the word Buddha: “one who has awakened.”

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¹ Stephen LaBerge, Ph.D. (1985) *Lucid Dreaming: The Power of Being Awake & Aware in Your Dreams*. New York: Ballantine Books, p. 23.

² Cited in Kamalashila's *First Bhavanakrama*, G. Tucci (ed.), in his *Minor Buddhist Texts, Part II*. Rome, 1958, p. 205.

³ Stephen LaBerge, Ph.D., *Lucid Dreaming*, p. 14.