

Ordinary Dreams, Lucid Dreams and Mystical Experience

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It is difficult to give a definition of mystical experience that would satisfy every scholar. I use the expression mystical experience to mean an apparent experience of some reality greater than oneself that comes by transcending, to some degree, awareness of one's own physical and mental self and one's physical surroundings. This reality may be understood as God or some other spiritual being, brahman, Being, the universe, oneness, the void, or nirvana. I would distinguish for my purposes here between the phenomenon that is seen as the mystical experience itself and other more incidental phenomena that precede or accompany the mystical experience, such as visions of disks of light, the feeling of levitation, or bliss.

I believe that the phenomena reported in mystical accounts, whether essential to the mystical experience or incidental to it, can often be understood in terms of dreaming, particularly lucid dreaming, in which the dreamer knows he or she is dreaming. Let me be clear that I accept neither ordinary dreaming nor lucid dreaming to be mystical experience. But there is an observable continuum from ordinary dreaming to phenomena of mysticism. Just as lucid dreaming may develop out of ordinary dreaming, phenomena associated with mystical experience may develop out of lucid dreaming, particularly such phenomena as visions of darkness or light, the elimination of objects of consciousness, or apparent experience of God.

I base my observation on my own experience with frequent lucid dreams over a period of years. My main concern here is to show the progression from ordinary dreaming through lucid dreaming to the phenomena of mysticism, not to examine the phenomena in detail.

Initial Phenomena

When I fall asleep I lose perception of the external world. A combination of visions, locutions and physical sensations serve as alternates to waking perception. I forget almost everything. My rationality is limited. What I know is not based on my perception or memory or rationality. I act and speak spontaneously. My dreams are often unusual, confusing, ambiguous and difficult to remember. Often, a dream leaves me with a feeling of its importance, but I am unable to express what happened. Dreams are often ineffable.

Ordinary dreams are not mystical experience even though they may have some of the

characteristics of mystical experience—loss of perception of the external world, visions, locutions, loss of memory and rationality, spontaneous knowledge, and ineffability. I still experience images that originate in and appear in myself. Although I have apparently transcended awareness of my physical surroundings, I have not transcended myself.

At times I become lucid in a dream, that is, I come to know I am dreaming. This often happens in dreams in which I think a little more clearly than usual or in dreams that are brighter or clearer than usual. My memory, if it improves at all, improves only slightly after dream lucidity develops. I am still much closer to ordinary-dream mental capabilities than to waking capabilities. And I am still not aware of my physical surroundings or circumstances. I may continue acting and reacting spontaneously as in ordinary dreams, or I may purposefully make changes in the dream.

Lucid dreaming is not in itself mystical, even though I can bring about many changes in the dream that make it very different from ordinary dreaming. For instance, once I know I am dreaming, I may proceed to fly, I may sing a hymn or pray with no inhibition, or I may hug a threatening beast fearlessly and domesticate it. But I have not yet transcended my mental activity or the images that I produce.

Elimination of Entanglements

However when I know I am dreaming, I can act purposefully to eliminate my mental activity and dream images, the two being closely related. If I can think to do so, I can close my (dreamed) eyes to eliminate visual images. This produces darkness. I still need to eliminate the remaining aural and tactual images, body awareness and the mental activity that produces the images. To do this I must detach myself from the remaining ongoing dream manifestations and concentrate my attention on the darkness which is, so to speak, before my eyes. This is often not easy to do because voices speak to me, dogs bark, hands grab at me and other manifestations disturb me. These disturbances I call "entanglements."

If all goes well, as I concentrate I gradually lose awareness of my dreamed body—the feeling of being supported (on the ground or whatever), the lower part of the body, then the upper part of the body, and last of all the area around the eyes, which is the area most in my awareness. What I lose awareness of no longer exists in the dream. In this way I approach the elimination of all dream imaging.

But as I concentrate, many other things can happen instead of my gradually losing body awareness. Normally while dreaming I feel as attached to the ground or the floor or whatever supports me as I do when awake. But when I start to concentrate my

attention away from my body I lose awareness of my attachment to the ground. Almost invariably I then feel my legs rise up in front of me and I float up involuntarily. I think of that as "losing my anchor." This type of "levitation" often precedes the very realistic sensation of shooting through the air at great speed, which has been called in mystical literature "the flight of the spirit." I have experienced levitation and flight outside of the dream context as well, in a condition that seems to be between the sleeping and waking states. The two are essential elements of what is called out-of-body experience, a phrase I prefer to avoid.

Sometimes when I float or toss about I see lights in patterns, with color and movement. These patterns of light have appeared only after I have set about to disrupt the dreaming process by closing my eyes and concentrating, that is only while I am lucid. At times I have seen a disk of light of no set size, usually appearing in the darkness that I have brought about. I have seen disks of light only in the lucid dream context. Disks of light are occasionally mentioned in mystical literature, but my experience of the disk has not been religious.

If conditions permit me to concentrate for long without entanglements, without floating or any added sense experience, I gradually lose body awareness and approach the total elimination of objects of consciousness. Mental activity ceases. I have reached this point of pure consciousness, but have not held onto it that I know of. Inasmuch as sense awareness and mental activity have ceased, I have transcended my physical and mental self. By interpretation after the event this may be considered a mystical state—the experience of brahman, the void, or what one may. But there is no religious feeling and no interpretation at the time. I can eliminate dreaming with particular methods similar to those used in certain meditative traditions, but only if I am lucid—only if I proceed without problems. Let me add that I used these methods without precise knowledge or study of particular procedures.

Fullness of Light

The final phenomenon is the fullness of light. This light has appeared only while I dreamed lucidly, but it has not been brought about by my own action in any obvious way. It has appeared while I was in darkness or in a significant room or while engaged in religious activity. It usually appears like the sun moving down from above my head until all I see is brilliant light. I become aware of the presence of God and feel spontaneous great joy. As long as I direct my attention to the light, I gradually lose awareness of my dreamed body.

To lose dream imagery and awareness of myself in the evident presence of God, is to experience transcendence of myself. This is the experience, whatever the ex-

planation. Fullness of light, awareness of God, gradual loss of awareness of myself, joy (often called bliss), and uncontrollable devotion are phenomena mentioned commonly in mystical literature. These experiences of mine have proceeded only out of the context of lucid dreaming.

My purpose has been to show my progression from ordinary dreaming through lucid dreaming to phenomena found in reports of mystical experience. I have not intended to make a statement on the meaning of these experiences, nor of mystical experience in general.