

A Journal of Attempts to Induce and Work with Lucid Dreams: Can You Kill Yourself While Lucid?

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Editor's Note: This somewhat abbreviated version has fewer examples of Experiment 1 than the original.

The following is a narrative of my attempts to create lucid dreams and my experiments with the lucid dream state. I cite the journal notes I kept during that time period. The technique I used to induce lucid dreams was to "find my hand" (à la the technique described in Carlos Castaneda's books). This entailed concentrating on my hand to remind myself that I was dreaming. If the image wavered or faded, I would avert my vision for a moment then concentrate on my hand again, to renew the focus.

Initially, it took a great effort to create the lucid dream state. At the beginning, before falling asleep I would concentrate on wanting to find my hand in a dream. . . . I then began a series of within-dream experiments to investigate the mental and physical properties of the lucid dream state. These investigations involved exercising control over the dream events; conducting intellectual exercises, such as recalling long series of numbers; attempting to purposefully harm myself; and creating an aware-ness of my physical (sleeping) body. Specifically, I established four experiments as a sort of stepwise increase in power or control in the dream-conscious state:

1. Find my hands and maintain their image;
2. "Stop the world," à la Carlos Castaneda;
3. Close my eyes in a lucid dream; and
4. Commit suicide in a lucid dream.

Find My Hands and Maintain Their Image

Over a period of time I was able to exercise great control over entering the lucid dream state and controlling the dream. The following journal entries depict this effort . . . :

Incredible dream of great awareness and control. Dreamed I was in a house or man-sion somewhere and suddenly realized I was dreaming. It was a sudden cognitive aware-ness of being simultaneously conscious and dreaming. I now think back and realize that in this dream I was consciously thinking in words; I cannot recall whether I think in words this way in other, normal dreams. It

seemed quite unique.

After realizing I was dreaming, I found my hands. I stared at them for a short while, and they blurred/faded slightly, so I averted my vision to a hallway or room I was in, then looked at them again. I became fascinated with my conscious directive of seeing my hands. The very lines in my palms were quite distinct, and I found I could stare at them increasingly longer without losing the image.

Then, to consciously test my power, I willed my sister Vivian to appear. She did, but then turned into my girlfriend Rosemary. I was fully conscious and aware that all the forms I was seeing, all of my sensations were subconscious and a dream. I was quite delighted with being able to control this "power" of awareness and being able to make things happen outside of myself, retaining an aloof, cognitive alertness.

Then I left Rosemary and went into another room (which resembled the bathroom of the present apartment). Someone slowly followed me in (either Vivian or Rosemary), but I was staring at both my hands, held a bit below eye level, trying to concentrate on them. I recall I thought (not spoke) "No, they (meaning whoever followed me in) are not really there. This is just a dream, a dream. They're not there, not in a form that I'm consciously familiar with." I was trying to shut out this external dream-world form, concentrating on my form only. I found that instead of averting my vision when occasionally necessary to maintain a clear image of my hands, if I moved my hands continually (I tried interlocking my fingers in various fashions . . . and even counted my fingers), or if I held them at eye level, fingers spread, and turned slowly in circles to see the background scene move in the space between the fingers and hands, I could maintain the image.

7 May 1976 (Friday). After a lapse of almost a month since my last dream-conscious experience, I dreamed again of finding my (left) hand.

The dream-conscious state came to me as I was walking in my dream. I suddenly realized I could do what I please in the dream form, and began flying. I recalled my month-long lapse, and happily found my left hand, before awakening at 1:30 am.

"Stop the World"

The second objective for controlling my dreams was to "stop the world" (a Carlos

Castaneda term), meaning maintain a conscious awareness of dreaming, while dreaming, and to consciously refute the seemingly substantial "form" of things around me in the dream. This objective included attempting to meditate in a dream, which I was never able to execute. Events from the 30 January dream (above) illustrate an attempt to refute the dream image. Following is another example in which I was unsuccessful in refuting the dream image:

23 March 1976 (Tuesday). Recall a dream in which I was battling with my motorcycle helmet face shield, which had grown in size 50% and had come alive. As I held it at arm's length, I noticed my left hand, and instantly this brought on the dream-conscious state. I was trying to refute the form of the dream (the shield was trying to choke me), by reiterating that it is "just a dream." I awoke soon after.

Close My Eyes

The third objective was to close my eyes in a dream. I have never recalled doing this before; I wanted to explore what would happen.

27 February 1976 (Friday). Found my right hand, and had the experience of being simultaneously awake and asleep. I remembered the experiment of closing my eyes while dreaming, and carried it out. I was staring at a landscape, brightly lit, and then closed my eyes in my dream. The landscape turned to blackness; I was looking at nothing, yet I was still consciously thinking in the dream. In a short time I lost my conscious power and lapsed into a long, normal dream, and awoke after that.

Commit Suicide

The final, and most precarious experiment, was to commit suicide in a dream. I had already had two dreams several years earlier in which I had died. In one, I fell of a cliff, actually hit bottom, felt bones break, skin tear, my body bounce, rocks cut, etc., and I blacked out thinking, 'I'm dying, this is it, I'm dying. . . .' The other dream was one of being shot by a shotgun—with the same feelings and same thoughts. But to consciously direct my demise in a dream world would yield . . . what? I must find out. The following dream sequences illustrate my experiences with this objective. The discussion in the 6 March entry is particularly significant, in that I began to become aware of bodily sensations while dreaming.

13 February 1976 (Friday). . . . I then left the room and tried to recall what I had earlier thought about if I should ever have a dream such as this one.

Anyhow, in my present dream I left the bathroom and could only recall my idea of suicide (for some reason I forgot about the other experiment objectives). In the dream, I recalled another dream I had had several months earlier where I was also consciously aware of it being a dream; in that other dream, I was overlooking a spiral staircase descending into dizzying depths and darkness, and felt a surge of vertigo, and thought or said "Oh no, I'm not going down there!" In the present dream, recalling the setting of that earlier dream, I consciously re-created the scene of looking down the center of the spiral staircase. I was able to control my setting. My plan was to jump over and kill myself. But, upon leaning over the edge, I began to think, 'Wait a moment. I know this is only a dream, and I can't really get hurt, but how do I know for sure that this won't affect me some other way? After all, it's said that one may suffer a heart attack if the strain of a dream is too great.' (Apparently, in this dream, I forgot my other earlier dreams of dying, that I can indeed survive such a shock.) I hesitated jumping, and felt unsure or unconfident. I decided not to try it.

I awoke sometime soon afterwards, but details between aren't clear.

6 March 1976 (Saturday morning—6:30 to 11:00 am). Found my hand several times between which I surfaced to a semi-wakefulness state, twice. Details are now vague.

This morning, I had awakened from 5:00-6:30 am to drive toward the beach to view a comet visible in the eastern, dawning sky. It was quite cold out, so I had worn gloves while driving the VW bus. I had returned home and went back to sleep by 6:30 am. One of the ensuing dreams was of driving in the van. I looked at my right hand, gloved, and brought upon the conscious/unconscious state. Someone had been in the van with me in this dream, talking incessantly, but as soon as I established my conscious internal thought I began to tune them out. I suddenly recalled my experiment objective of dream-suicide, and saw the perfect opportunity. However, I first "checked" with myself to make certain I was dreaming (more on this later), and then purposely, consciously veered off the road toward some trees. The van came to an abrupt halt before touching the trees, however, not as part of my conscious directive, but of the subconscious, as if strong brakes had been applied. The scene then faded and blurred.

I found my hand perhaps twice again in different settings, but details are unclear.

In retrospect, I am curious about why I could not succeed in striking the trees. Why was I not able to consciously direct this action, and why did my subconscious succeed [in preventing me]? This has not been the first case thus far of failing in a dream once

a conscious directive had guided my actions. It makes me wonder what would happen if my goal was indeed realized. Would I be witness to a final fusion of conscious with subconscious? Or would I witness a forced repression of subcon-scious directives? If it is the former, can I expect conscious, cognitive "understand-ings" to apply to unconscious reactions? And if it is the latter, might this infringe upon my present mental stability? I am seeking not dominance of conscious over subconscious, but fusion. I have no way of telling if I am working in that direction.

Secondly, in retrospect, tying in with this "fusion" idea, I am curious as to how in this dream, as in past dreams, I had "checked" with myself to make sure I was dreaming. How is this done? I believe that while external sensory impressions from my true physical body are usually cut off during sleeping, and the only "sensory" impressions come from within the dream, I am nonetheless using some physical or neural awareness to ascertain the state of my sleeping body. It is as if I had momen-tarily put a "hold" on my dream-impressions and established a reassurance that my physical form was indeed lying down in bed, safe, asleep, dreaming. Then I felt safe in carrying out "dangerous" actions in my dream. So, for an instant, I had tied into my physical body consciously, while being unconscious and enveloped in my dream-impressions. What I ultimately seek is to refine this condition. I want to be able to be fully aware of my physical body, even move it, while in a dream-conscious condition. Again, I can only guess that I am working toward a healthy fusion of conscious with subconscious states, not a dangerous and unhealthy dominance of conscious over subconscious. What I ultimately seek, then, is a capacity, an awareness of dream impressions and physical impressions to be realized simultaneously.

Over time, I became increasingly aware of perceiving actual bodily sensations while in the lucid dream state, as the following entry illustrates:

22 March 1976 (Monday). After awakening several times during the night, I had a short dream of seeing my right hand, while someone was persistently talking to me. Soon afterwards I drifted from the dream state into a semi-wakefulness state, not physically alert, but consciously alert. In this state, I witnessed a dream image merge with my con-scious thoughts. I'm now not certain what transpired, but it felt as though I consciously willed the dream image to come; in the half-wakeful state either immediately succeeding or during this recalling of the dream image, I became physically aware of myself lying in bed, dreaming, and at the same time seeing the dream image. The state transpired too quickly to be certain of the chronology of it all.

Also, in the dream of finding my hand, I consciously carried out a further exper-iment I had devised to test my physical feelings in the dream-conscious state: I simply,

consciously breathed in the dream. But between the time I found my hand and breathed (seconds), my lips and face felt as if they had gone numb. I forcefully opened my mouth and inhaled sharply, and felt (in the dream) air rush into my lungs. (Whether I also physically inhaled at the same time while lying in bed asleep, I cannot say. If I had, then the sensations I "felt" in the dream of inhaling were those actually physically induced.) Looking back on this dream, I believe that the feeling of numbness of my face may have been actually the feeling of trying to become consciously aware of my physical face while asleep.

At the same time, I was exploring the limits with which I could exercise conscious, cognitive effort in a dream. To further test the extent, characteristics, and essence of the dream-conscious state, I devised another experiment. Thus far, I had been able to carry out all four experiments I had devised: find my hands, refute dream-forms (block out dream stimuli), close my eyes, and attempt my own demise. Now, to test the extent of conscious in a dream, I memorized the value of pi to 16 decimal places. I wished to try to and reiterate that figure in a dream, to test the re-relationship between long-term memory and the dream state, via concentrated recall effort.

2 April 1976 (Friday). Dreamed I was walking and found my right hand. More often now, the dream-conscious state precedes my lifting my hand to my eyes, as it did in this dream. I recalled my experiment objective of reciting pi in a dream to test the extent of conscious recall, and did so. I recited it mentally; I did not speak in the dream, but consciously thought the numbers. However, as I reached the seventh decimal place, and was forced to exert greater effort to recall the numbers, I failed and rounded the numbers off the seventh place, and stopped there. An instant later, in the dream, I was aware of what I did, but before having time to try again, I awoke.

Eventually, I abandoned the entire series of experiments, ironically because of the success I was having with the last of the experiments. That is, in the lucid dream state, I was able to become acutely aware of my body sleeping in bed. I was asleep, dreaming, but conscious that I was dreaming, and conscious of my actual body in bed, which I could willfully move about. I abandoned the experiments because I began to become confused as to when I was normally asleep, asleep in this lucid dream state, or awake. At one point, I was able to lay in bed, asleep in a lucid dream, with my eyes open and with full consciousness of moving my arms, legs, and face. It was only a step from there to sleep-walking in an aware, lucid dream state. What would distinguish these various states of mind if I was conscious, aware, and able to move? The various realities were beginning to eclipse one another.

6 March 1976. It was over the next few months that I succeeded in inducing a dream-conscious state in which I was simultaneously aware of my physical

body. I found this state both fascinating and frightening, as I was beginning to become confused as to various states of mind (sleep, awake, dream-conscious). I dropped the experimentation shortly thereafter.

I found the lucid dream state difficult to abandon. For weeks after I chose to drop the experiments I still found my hand in dreams and entered the lucid state, and often found it most difficult to wake myself. Eventually, the dreams faded and I began to have normal dreams on a regular basis. But to this day, I still have lucid dreams perhaps once a month.