A Discussion Between Charles Tart and Lucidity Letter Editor, Jayne Gackenbach, Examining Similarities Between Dream Lucidity, Witnessing and Self-Remembering

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Gackenbach: In a recent review of your book Waking Up, John Wren-Lewis said it was very relevant to those interested in lucid dreaming.

Tart: I was very honored that he would say that it is must reading for people who are into lucid dreams since lucid dreaming is mentioned only once in the book. You see, lucid waking is the topic of greatest interest to me nowadays.

Some spiritual traditions use an analogy that we live in a dream. In many dreams, you get pushed around by events. You're not very smart. You don't re-member important, relevant knowledge. You're inconsistent. You don't call on all your resources. You get in these terrible situations, but then you wake up! Not only does the dream problem disappear, but you're so much smarter by comparison. Smarter from the point of view of the waking state, right?

Now some spiritual traditions have used this as an analogy. They say that in our waking state (where we think we're so smart and intelligent), we're just as stupid compared to what could be. So that, in a sense, there's a kind of lucidity that could happen in ordinary waking. My Waking Up book is really about lucid waking; that would have been a good title. . .

Gackenbach: What's your dream recall like these days?

Tart: I've given my unconscious the instruction, "If it's important, please make me remember it." Otherwise there are other things I'm more interested in. I used to be an extremely high recaller. I used to wake up, and if I bothered to write my dreams down, I'd spend an hour a morning at it! Now I typically recall part of a dream on waking. I scan it quickly to see if there's some kind of message or something exciting: if not, I let it go. Lucid waking is much more important to me than the lucid dreaming.

Gackenbach: As I understand the Ouspensky-Gurdjieff material, upon which your book is based, there's essentially an asking of a critical question, a self-reflectiveness, an attempt, purposely, to reflect on what you're saying and doing as much as possible through the day.

Tart: It's not usually expressed as a question, but if you did, it would be asking yourself something like, "What am I doing right now, what am I feeling right now, what am I perceiving right now, what's my state right now?" You could do it that way, but it's usually not done in such a verbal formation.

Gackenbach: How is it usually done?

Tart: It's an immediate shift of attention to being conscious of the normally unconscious. Once you do it, you realize that our ordinary state is that we're "lost." We don't know what's going on much of the time. We're just as passive in ordinary life as we are in dreams. Events happen and our mental processes react. Buttons get pushed, to use that wonderful old sixties language and our conditioned responses occur. A set of mental scenarios begin. Normally you're just running on automatic with these things all the time. Becoming self-reflective, you consciously see your-self doing these things. As you pay enhanced attention more and more, you begin to get an option to be present to your experience more continuously, and to both have more control and be more open to new experience.

Gackenbach: Is there a distinction between being (I like the term) "present to your experience," and the concept of "witnessing" while awake, sleeping, dreaming—twenty-four hours?

Tart: Witnessing is a concept I'd be very happy to use. There are a number of ways to observe yourself. Some ways are biased or have built-in preferences. For exam-ple, lots of people observe themselves from their superego. Your superego has a listing of what is good and bad. It watches you and gives you a shot of anxiety when it thinks you are doing something bad. That's not what I'm talking about. In the first place, superego witnessing is automated. In the second place it's not yours, it was conditioned into you by outside forces—society, your parents and so forth.

There's another kind of witnessing where you look at everything from a spe-cific point of view. For instance, you could get into some spiritual system that said, you should recite this mantra all day long and you will go to heaven or achieve bliss or something like that. So you are intellectually interpreting everything that comes in in terms of keeping the mantra as an organizing core. But you've still got a par-ticular point of view.

Behavior therapy is a kind of self-observation, usually of a rather limited sort. Write down every time you do a certain thing. It's a very specific kind of self ob-servation. The kind of self-remembering I'm talking about says, in the most abstract sense to be

fully present to everything that happens and be fully aware of being present there.
Gackenbach: So the "effort" aspect is not there?

Tart: There is an effort but it is a small effort. It's not much . . . The effort is to remember to do it, because what you discover is that you're constantly swept away by phenomena. Gurdjieff once put it that the idea we automatically have self-consciousness must be a cruel joke played upon us. In point of fact, most of the time we are not fully conscious. I can say from my experience, unfortunately, it's true. Most of the time there's nobody home. Gurdjieff put it very strongly. We're machines; we're running on automatic. You know the East has a similar sort of idea that we live in samsara or maya. It's translated to mean the world isn't real, but that's not the correct translation. It's a recognition that we're constantly filtering our experiences through an automated psychological superstructure that distorts our perceptions of reality. In that sense we live in illusion. You know the thing that really amuses me? The East has the idea that we live in a state of illusion, but western psychology has the nuts and bolts of just how we live in illusion down to a very fine degree of precision. We know the way we construct what we call reality and we know about defense mechanisms. We just don't put it together somehow. We don't question our idea that we're conscious and have free will.

Gackenbach: What about the new work in perception and imagery? It deals with the inner interplay at higher levels—one affects the other—it's not just that one is the other.

Tart: That's clarifying the nuts and bolts issues. The reality is that we open our eyes and assume there's a real world out there. It's a very handy working assumption. Some stimuli hit our sense organs. Some neural impulses are produced, and we assume that we see things as they are. But I think psychology now makes it clear that there are all sorts of abstractive, constructive, additive processes that interfere with a realistic perception of the world.

One of the analogies that I use in the Waking Up book is that we live in a world simulator, like a flight simulator. When you're in one of those things you think you're in the cockpit of a plane. It does all the appropriate things [and the view from the window looks "real"]. We live inside our world simulator. Not only that, we love it. Not only that, we don't know we're in it, which is a dangerous thing. Once you get the idea that you might be distorting things, there's an obvious moral. Pay more attention, dummy! Check up on yourself! But until you get that idea, you don't check up on yourself. You don't make the effort to know it. I look a little more clearly. I watch my reactions while I'm looking to see if they're distorting things.

For example, you're making the effort to be more present to experience: you look at someone, and it's immediately unpleasant. You notice you turned away. Wait a minute, who turned away? I didn't decide to turn away. My God, I've got some automatic reaction: when I see such and such, I automatically turn my head. Who's running this show? Maybe you make yourself look back, and you feel sick. Can you stay present to exactly what the experience of feeling sick is like? Can you learn to stay in reality and study yourself? Watch your reactions? And eventually get back to seeing reality? Eventually you see that this actual person doesn't make you sick at all, but he really reminds you of this [other] guy who pisses you off no end. Your mind is just automatically turning anybody who's tall into this guy, or some-thing like that.

Gackenbach: Paul Tholey has a strong viewpoint which most people in lucidity work agree with. The crucial way to obtain lucidity, he's decided, is to ask the critical question, "Am I awake, or am I asleep?" and while awake, force an aware-ness of the state, of the nature of the state. Eventually it will translate into sleeping. That's a view we see a lot in the lucidity literature. Is this what you're speaking of?

Tart: I lecture on it to my students all the time, advising them to observe themselves.
Gackenbach: I've learned from people I've been working with at the Maharishi International University (MIU) that the Maharishi some 30 years ago met a few of Gurdjieff's students in England. What he felt (I gather to some extent based on those experiences, although it may be that there are other reasons) was that the Gurdjieff method was too forced. Witnessing, he feels, is a natural state of the organism. It will emerge naturally. His technique, of course, is through the practice of Transcen-dental Meditation. The witness will emerge at various times in the cycle of sleep, dream, waking, hypnagogic, whatever. It will naturally emerge. The problem with the other technique, as he understood it, was that there was a force element. And that's of course exactly what Paul's saying. Can you respond to that?

Tart: There certainly is a forced element. There's several things I could say about that. One is that Eastern teachers tend to come from cultures that have much more faith than we do, that things will happen, right? Just say your mantra and things will eventually happen. We Westerners, we're impatient. We don't have that much faith and we want to make sure we do it right. So we tend to force.
Now I'm quite aware that forcing can ruin a technique. I've ruined experience many times by adding a too forced quality. "Force" does something useful, but it too easily puts a tension and a constriction in there. It doesn't need to be in the process; you can use just the right amount. One of the things I'm personally working on now is to get the "superego" as it were, out of the self-remembering process.

Gackenbach: I've been interviewing long-term meditators who witness and I'm try-

ing to identify to what extent it is like lucidity. It seems that an active/passive model is a pretty good one for distinguishing between them. Lucidity basically [involves] a physically and psychologically aroused, actively involved participant. With witnessing there's more of the predominance of the observer. It's non-involved—almost like a movie screen. It can go either way, from lucidity to witnessing or from witnessing to lucidity. Some will argue that lucidity is a first step to witnessing, that it's a developmental sequence. I wonder if it can flip back and forth.

Tart: I'd be more inclined toward that.

Gackenbach: I think, in fact, that you can probably call witnessing, "lucidity" as well. Quiet lucidity versus active lucidity.

Tart: Based on all the literature I've read and on my own experience of it, I would say that lucidity in a dream is an altered state of consciousness. Whether or not there is self-remembering in a lucid dream is an entirely separate dimension. In a lucid dream a person experiences a shift in the qualities of consciousness. So the way my mind is operating feels more like waking than sleeping, and includes factual know-ledge: I'm actually in bed dreaming, still, or I remember how to operate this kind of equipment in real life so I can operate it in dreams. Lucidity brings an ordinary level of conscious knowledge into the dream, which in a sense is a higher state phenom-enon. You, your ability, your freedom of operation throughout the dream world clearly goes up when it becomes lucid—when you know you're dreaming.

Now, the kind of lucid waking I'm talking about, self-remembering, involves a big jump up from the ordinary waking state. So, you could have a lucid dream that did not involve self-remembering, but in theory (I haven't done it and I don't know anybody who has) someone who's good at self-remembering could have an ordinary dream, turn it into a lucid dream, and still not be self-remembering. They could then begin to self-remember within the lucid dream itself and go up to another level.
Gackenbach: To paraphrase then: When you know you're dreaming then either it follows or simultaneously you have full recall of your memories, you have volition and control at much higher level. Is that self-remembering or is self-remembering even beyond that?

Tart: Self-remembering is beyond that stage. Right now, here I am in the ordinary state not doing the process of self-remembering. Here in my ordinary state I have a certain vantage point with lots of knowledge, but my knowledge. My ordinary identity carries a framework, an emotional-cognitive framework, that organizes everything going on—what's important to me, what's not important. Things are being processed through my personality. That also happens in the lucid dream: your ordinary waking

personality now becomes the processing center rather than the usual greatly "shrunken" dream personality center.

If I'm self-remembering, by contrast, when you ask me who am I, I could give you a conventional answer if I think that's what you want to hear: all the facilities of ordinary waking consciousness are available. But the truth of who I am is that I'm not my personality anymore. It's hard to express in words, but I am a process that can know. That process has a tremendous amount of freedom compared to my ordi-nary personality. It's far more open-minded, it has far more access to possibilities.
Gackenbach: Is there a sense of separateness?

Tart: "Separateness" is a poor word to use for this. It's not like I'm standing behind myself. Or that I'm "detached" in the sense of not caring about what's going on. I may be more vividly aware of ordinary experiences than I normally am. The ordinary world becomes a little more real. But simultaneously it seems it is just a particular flux of phenomena at this time. I'm not identifying with it.

Gackenbach: As I understand it, that's what my colleagues at MIU call "witnessing." It naturally emerges as a function of meditation. This is almost identical to the kinds of things you're saying.

Tart: Possibly meditation does produce very similar results.

Gackenbach: Then in sleep, and specifically in dreams, how are these states the same or different? I'm beginning to wonder if you can't be both lucid and witnessing or self-remembering simultaneously. Or one or the other.
Tart: You lost me.

Gackenbach: By way of explanation, let me tell you about this interview I had with this mathematics professor who's been meditating for seventeen years and has very clear experiences. I think because he's not a behavioral scientist, he's able to com-municate better, without jargon. He described how he conceptualizes the continuum from the stage of dream lucidity to the stage of witnessing. First he saw them in de-velopmental sequence. The first step is consciousness; you know you're dreaming. It's minimal lucidity, as we would name it. The actor-observer roles change in the sequence. In lucidity you know you're dreaming; the actor's very dominant. The observer's there but it's not as dominant a role. Then, as you move into witnessing, the actor becomes more suppressed and the observer role more dominant.

Tart: So in a paradoxical way you lose the freedom to change things that occur in lucid dreams and you let the dream run passively again?

Gackenbach: Yes, the passivity is the big dynamic. Not only that, the dream begins to fade. You realize you're dreaming—everything out there is my fantasy, is me. Everything goes very naturally. I'm not going to make it go away, but rather let it continue. You still have a self-representation of the body. That goes. You still have a representation of the self but it's not a "physical" self. Then that goes. You're left with awareness of awareness. Then you go into that and the experience opens again, but it is not "sensory" experience; rather it is conceptually based. So he talks about living mathematical constructs at that point.

Tart: He probably goes to the world of Platonic forms. Where else—what would a mathematician's idea of nirvana be—Platonic forms, formulas!

Gackenbach: He sees it as some kind of abstract algebra, that's his area. It goes further. But after that, I had no idea what the guy was talkin' about.
Tart: Let me distinguish two categories now in terms of self observation and self-remembering. One is what I've been describing to you. It's very prominent in the Gurdjieff tradition, and the place it's almost exclusively done is in the midst of ordinary life. We're being bombarded with sensory impressions, we're socially interacting, the phone could ring, there's lots and lots of input. Now let's operate on a model which I find works well for a lot of things, namely that the total amount of attention available to us is fixed, but we can divide it up. With self-remembering, instead of your attention becoming all absorbed in either outside events or the internal processes triggered off by them, you keep a part of it free to observe the rest. Instead of letting a hundred percent get lost in phenomena, you keep, say, ten per-cent in self-remembering. Paradoxically, this makes the other ninety percent more vivid, but at the same time, you're not so trapped in the particulars of experience.

Now let's look at Buddhist vipasana meditation, which I'm trying to learn to do well. In vipasana meditation you sit down in a place that's extremely quiet com-pared to ordinary life. Nobody's going to talk to you; there's nothing you have to do. It's a reasonably undisturbed place. You sit still. All the body stuff is greatly re-duced. You just try to clearly observe whatever happens in your mind—you make no attempt to control it. There's no good or bad thing you try for, there's no control you exert. You just try to be clearly aware of whatever is happening. Now you're doing something that's much like self-remembering. But, in a sense, the "noise level" is way down, so instead of self-remembering where it's all terribly agitated by external events, vipasana is self-remembering down here where there's much less confusion. Thus you can begin to observe much subtler aspects of mental function. So this process, carried out from two different places, could lead to different things.

Now, let's follow the vipasana meditation model. I may be sitting with my mind wandering (which is usually what happens, because it's hard to do!) But then I focus for a moment, I'm paying clear attention to whatever sensations come and go in my body. There's a line of sensations in my leg, e.g. it comes and goes. That starts to raise a thought and I see how the thought starts to rise. I watch the process but then it just fades. I'm tuning into the finer, subtler thought. Vipasana can become much deeper as your perception of a thought becomes finer and finer. It's like you turn a microscope on your sensations, and, as you zoom and focus the microscope, the power gets higher and higher. There comes a point where, when you look at any-thing, it dissolves into nothing but vibrations. A friend of mine who's a very experienced meditator describes it this way. Any sensation—a painful sensation, a pleasant sensation, whatever—that he looks at closely in this vipasana way dis-solves into vibration. You can then reach a kind of psychological state where all the usual objects of the world we experience, including your body and your sense of self, just become vibratory waves. A lot of people would call that a highly enlightened state.

Gackenbach: But there's still more.

Tart: Yes, I don't think that's the only way it can go. In the Tibetan tradition of Dzogchen meditation, that kind of thing can happen in meditation, and then you intentionally destroy it because you're getting caught up in it, which is a form of subjectivity. If you become proficient, you're able to simultaneously contact that incredibly expanded, nonverbal, holistic view of reality while in the midst and flux of everyday life, being good at living everyday life. So there's various directions you can go in.

Gackenbach: I have talked about this at length with my colleagues at MIU, particularly the concept of the quiet, and the subtleties.

Tart: Let me give you a view of either lucidity or witnessing. It's a totally relative view. There's a continuum. At one extreme you are totally caught up in whatever's happening. The other opposite end is that you are totally out of it. Now there are varying degrees of [lucidity along this continuum]. For instance, even simple ani-mals make cognitive maps of their environment. In a sense, that's a kind of lucidity. It may be a very mechanical kind of thing, like a conditioned response. But there's a sense in which lucidity or witnessing gives us some perspective on experience while it's happening. Even in ordinary consciousness we bring some perspective, some cognitive maps.

Self-remembering, which I'm talking about, introduces a new dimension. Self-remembering does not mean you have some point of view that you claim is higher. It

means you exercise a bit of volition to try to be totally open to whatever is hap-pening at the moment. It's very different from all our ordinary acts of cognition using the conceptual tools already given you.

Gackenbach: So it's passive?

Tart: No, no. Self-remembering is not passive. It's definitely active in a sense that you must make a small effort to do it. It's not automatic. It's always a certain kind of effort. But it's not the usual kind of effort. Usual efforts not only have force behind them, they have a direction and goal. Here the effort is simply to pay attention openly but not force it in any particular direction. I'm saying you can use "lucidity" or "witnessing" to describe two levels of an operation. You have immediate experience and another level of perspective on experience. This can be purely mechanically-operated kinds of perspectives. But there's another kind of lucidity or witnessing whose goal is the transcendence of all concepts, all dualities, all formulations and it involves simply an effort toward openness.

Gackenbach: It's active in the sense of doing, it's happening, and in the sense that there's some effort. It's passive in the sense that, if you start to act on what you're experiencing, you lose the experience: mood making.

Tart: Now that's an important difference. To me, looking at it from a Gurdjieff perspective, losing it means you haven't learned how to do it very well. There are techniques that are essentially passive—more witnessing and the universe will be revealed to you, right? And there are techniques that bring full knowledge and are not totally passive; there are times that require action by you.

Gackenbach: That's it exactly. According to my colleagues at MIU you take time to cultivate the state through meditation, but that for most of the day you go about your business. The self-remembering or witness perspective spontaneously emerges from time to time.

Tart: Is it supposed to happen by itself as a result of your meditation periods?
Gackenbach: Yes, you don't force it.

Tart: This is a traditional model, but I don't think it is completely adequate. Let me illustrate. Recently I was in a Buddhist group meeting and a woman there was complaining that after she'd been to a retreat for a couple of weeks, where she'd been so mindful, that it all faded within a few hours of going home! She just couldn't be mindful at home. That's a very common experience. Now the traditions usually say just keep up your meditation mindfulness practice, do your sitting every day and

eventually it will start to transfer. Indeed, all of them admonish you to transfer it to everyday life, but, the classic Eastern traditions that I know actually don't have much in the way of skillful means for transferring mindfulness to everyday life. They don't have much technology for how you do it. The Gurdjieff tradition, on the other hand, by and large doesn't teach people passive sitting meditation. It starts you right off practicing mindfulness in the midst of life. So I'm writing a paper for the Journal of Humanistic Psychology comparing these two traditions and suggesting some ways to take this mindfulness and start practicing it in situations closer to ordinary life. Then it'll transfer to the everyday life we lead—it will give us "lucid waking."