

Response to Gackenbach

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Jayne Gackenbach reports that in conversations with many people in the United States and abroad she has heard voices expressing concern about the potential for "abuse" of lucid dreaming (1987). Gackenbach feels that "it is incumbent upon the leaders of this emerging field to also voice concerns" (p. 4) and claims that "we are at fault if we do not routinely caution audiences about abuse or even dangers in accessing an incredibly powerful state of mind" (p. 6). While I share some of my col-league's concerns, if not apprehensions, I believe it is premature and inappropriate to "routinely caution audiences" about supposed "dangers" that have not yet been convincingly demonstrated. I do not really believe that there is cause for alarm. I have already discussed my own concerns regarding the proper use of lucid dreaming in my 1985 book, to which I direct readers interested in my views. Here I will limit myself to a few comments on the issues addressed by Gackenbach.

Gackenbach asks, "Should one have control over one's dreams?" An important question, but this formulation seems to me too broad to be useful, as can be seen by parallel questions such as "Should one have control over one's thoughts? actions? life?" I believe the more useful questions regarding dream control are first, "How much is possible?" and second, "What kind is desirable?" Before answering either question, of course, we need to ask, "For whom?" For people interested in using lucid dreams for personal growth I have recommended control of the dream ego rather than dream content control (LaBerge, 1985). The reason for this is that what we learn when we learn to control our responses to dream characters and other con-tent "applies to our waking lives as well—thus we dream in order to learn how to live better both by day and by night" (p. 106).

Gackenbach quotes with apparent approval the statement that "dream lucidity is really the ultimate drug!" and warns of the concomitant abuse and addiction potential. "Really?" Is lucid dreaming a drug? and if so, what kind? antibiotic? narcotic? psychotomimetic? Assuming that narcotic is the metaphor intended, is there any reason to believe that lucid dreaming is more "addictive" than any other pleasant experience including sleep, nonlucid dreaming, or sex? If all that is being claimed is that people enjoy lucid dreaming, and like any other pleasurable experiences, will want to experience them again, do they really have to be warned about this? As for the issue of whether "reality testing" is dangerous for some, I have two comments. First, the proper question for inducing lucid dreams is not "What is real?" but rather, "Is this a dream?" or "Am I dreaming or not?" (see Tholey, 1983, and

techniques summarized in LaBerge, 1985). Practice with this questioning should lead people to an enhanced understanding of the difference between dream-ing and perception, not a confusion of the two. The formulation, "What is real?" on the other hand, seems to lead people to the kind of problems reported by MacTiernan (1987). While on the topic of the MacTiernan letter, Gackenbach seems to regard this as an example of the dangers of lucid dreams. What exactly is the danger? Yes, MacTiernan experienced extreme panic in his dream, but it sounds to me that by that point his lucidity had failed, otherwise the apparent realism of his surrounding would not have caused him to question whether or not he was still dreaming. "Dreams are more readily distinguishable from waking perceptions on the basis of their instabil-ity rather than their vividness" (LaBerge, 1985, p. 112). In any case, MacTiernan states that after he woke up, "I felt a new outlook on my life. I felt more good to be alive than I ever did before."

The other comment I would like to make on the question of whether "reality testing" and lucid dreaming in general is dangerous for some is that, as the proverb puts it, "nothing is without danger for the foolish." This is probably even more true of the mentally unstable, but to put things in proper perspective, we have to ask whether lucid dreams are more dangerous than nonlucid dreams, out-of-body experiences, horror movies, and everyday social life. My impression is that anyone who is likely to get into trouble with lucid dreaming is just as likely to get into trouble with almost anything else. As Idries Shah has observed, "People are always being driven off their heads by something or other, however respectable the creed, and nobody has yet found any method of preventing this" (1978, p. 263).

I would like to make one final comment on the issue of the "ethical" use of lucid dreaming.

Gackenbach ends her essay with the question, "How do we find out what is the proper attitude/behaviors to engage in while lucid in sleep?" The answer she pro-poses is that "we ask other lucid dreamers what works for them, we consult other colleagues . . . and we consider models from both ancient literature as well as from contemporary clinical practice." Gackenbach promotes Kelzer's book as an excel-lent example of what she thinks is "the proper attitude we should have in working with both our lucid and nonlucid dreams." I cannot say that I agree with her assessment, but I have a different point to make here. Gackenbach's principle for determining the right thing to do seems to be social proof: "Look around and see what your neighbors are doing." While there is nothing wrong with observing what others are doing, I have proposed (LaBerge, 1985) that dreamers listen to their own consciences in determining which courses of action to follow in their own lucid dreams. Dreams are, after all, private, not public experiences.

References

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