

Lucid Dreaming and Mysticism:
A Personal Observation

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As I read the literature on lucid dreams, I see the occasional temptation to refer to un-usual lucid dream phenomena as mystical ex-perience, or to imply that it is. These phe-nomena include the “enlightenment” of knowing one is dreaming, the recognition that what one sees is part of oneself, the feeling of energy or currents through the body, the seeing of light, the feeling of levitation or that one is out of the body, the hearing of “divine” music, and many others. It is true that many lucid dream phenomena may be found in a wide variety of mystical literature, and the connection between dreaming and mystical experience is worthy of study. But a cautious language is called for.

In the study of religions it is well known that the word “mysticism” is difficult to define in a manner pleasing to everyone. It is used so loosely at times that it can include anything occult, religious, pious strange. Historians of religion normally choose to use the work in a quite restricted manner. What mysticism is, is open to discussion, but it is more or less an experience of some other greater than oneself—God, brahman, the all, the universe, Being, or some spiritual being, that comes through transcendence of oneself., It is an insight into the nature of reality.

As we read mystical literature we have to recognize whether a phenomenon is an essential part of experiencing the “other” or incidental. It is St. Teresa’s vision of Christ which is mystical, not her feelings of levitation or projection. We may levitate or project in lucid dreams and never know any reality greater than ourselves. We need to distinguish between the phenomenon itself and our interpretation of the phenomenon for instance between light the phenomenon and divine light the interpretation, or between the sensation of rising out of the body and being out of the body. We may say that we hear “divine music,” but then we have chosen to speak of it as “divine music” rather than as music. We may have a spectacular vision unusual in its form, light, and color, but at what point should we consider it as a vision rather than as dream environment? Carefulness of language is necessary in all dream study because we are tempted to give too much weight to the unusual possibilities of what we have experienced. Having an experience described in mystical literature does not make it mystical. It may in the end be as useful to speak of mystical experience in terms of dreaming as to speak of dreams in terms of mysticism.

I have a particular reason for saying all this, I am a frequent lucid dreamer. I have recorded to date 376 lucid dream experiences. Through my experimenting in dreams I have encountered a great variety of phenomena described in mystical literature. On the one hand, I am a Christian clergyman sympathetic to religious experience. But on the

other hand, I have been a teacher and student of the history of religions enough to appreciate objectivity, precise language and a critical attitude. This has not been an easy combination.

The mysticism—related phenomena that I have experienced have occurred around two opposite types of experience, which I think of generally as the darkness and the light.

I became interested in the term “dreamless sleep” which is a state of consciousness described in the Upanishads. It is identified with the experience of ultimate reality. About that time I read Frits Staal’s suggestion in Exploring Mysticism that the identity of dreamless sleep by the Hindus with the State of being at one with the Absolute may provide us a key to understanding mysticism. He said this along with the suggestion that the serious study of mysticism is better made directly and from within rather than just indirectly through the reports of others. I decided that for my next series of experiments I would try to eliminate the elements of dreaming and bring about dreamless sleep, with no presuppositions as to what should result. I began that specific attempt about two and a half years ago. Gradually I was successful while dreaming lucidly, in eliminating the total dream environment including body awareness and all mental activity. The elimination of the elements of dreaming leaves consciousness in darkness.

The experience of light, on the other hand, is not brought about by the dreamer, but comes unexpectedly while the dreamer is lucid. Others have also reported experiencing (Sparrow, 1976). The minor form of the light appears like a ball of light of no set size. The extreme form of the light is the seeing of only light. All else is eliminated. This experience is for me accompanied to varying degrees by feeling, of devotion and joy. It is a religious experience for me. This I have experienced so far thirteen times. It has never happened twice in exactly the same way.

The experience of darkness and the experience of light and the roads to them are full of mysticism—related phenomena that must be reflected upon critically when awake. As the literature on lucid dreaming expands, these so-called mystical phenomena must be dealt with objectively, with no prejudice either for or against a truly mystical interpretation. I am now bringing my journal to a close in which I give details of these experiences and my reflections on them. It is Dreamer’s Progress: A Record of Experiments Made While Dreaming. For its conclusion I have been trying to get beyond conjecturing and sum up what I really believe about all that has happened during these experiences. The religious, side of me is having to be critical. And the critical side of me must leave room for belief. I believe that in the end an attempt at honesty and careful language will be most helpful to myself and to others.

Sparrow G.S. Lucid dreaming: Dawning of the Clear Light. Virginia Beach, VA: A.R.E. Press, 1976.

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