

Can We Distinguish Between Lucid Dreams and Dreaming—Awareness Dreams?

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Charles T. Tart, in the March, 1984 issue of Lucidity Letter, proposes that we make a distinction between lucid dreams and dreaming—awareness dreams. Under the term “lucid dream” are to be included those dreams “in which the dreamer is aware that he is dreaming, clearly recalls his waking life, and considers himself to be in full command of his intellectual and motivational abilities.” It is “an altered d—SoC (discrete state of consciousness)” in which the dreamer is “experiencing the overall quality of his consciousness as having clarity, the lucidity of his ordinary waking d—SoC.” On the other hand, he proposes the new term “dreaming—awareness dreams” to describe “ordinary dreams that include some concurrent awareness that one is dreaming, but where this awareness is not accompanied by a shift in consciousness to the altered state of lucid dreaming.” In the November, 1983 issue of Lucidity Letter I had described my lucid dreams as being without my normal intellectual faculties, for I do not have the memory or reasoning ability that I have while awake, even at my best moments. Tart believes that such lucid dreams as mine should be called “dreaming—awareness dreams” and the term “lucid dreams” kept for those in which the dreamer has the lucidity of his or her waking state.

I suggest that the case for the commonality of these supposedly different types of dreams is stronger than the case for their difference, and that trying to maintain a distinction between the two would create a number of problems.

To begin with, Tart’s description of dreaming—awareness dreams is based on some questionable assumptions. On what basis can it be concluded that anything less than waking lucidity in a dream constitutes an ordinary dream? My lucid dreams are very different from my ordinary dreams in ways I will describe. I am also wary of lucid dreaming being called an altered discrete state while dreaming—awareness dreams are assumed to include no shift in consciousness to that altered state. Do we know enough yet about states of consciousness to conclude that two varying degrees of lucidity constitute different states? Do we know enough yet about shifts in consciousness to conclude that realizing one is dreaming does not indicate a decisive shift to lucid dreaming?

I see no difference in motivational ability between my own experience and what I read of others’ lucid dream experiences. I desire and intend and proceed to carry through my intentions. I am usually in charge of what I do in spite of occasional spontaneous unplanned acts, as in fact I am in much of my ordinary dreaming.

The essential distinction, then, if there be one, between lucid dreams and dreaming—

awareness dreams is in degree of lucidity, that is in degree of memory and intellectual abilities. It is not sufficient that this degree of ability be judged while dreaming. A dreamer who feels she remembers waking life and considers herself to be in full command of her intellectual abilities may be mistaken. In an ordinary or lucid dream I feel that my mental functioning is as when awake. It is only while awake that I can reflect critically on the dream experience and see that my mental abilities were limited. While dreaming, I do not have the discerning abilities to enable me to notice my limitations. I believe I remember things correctly, I confidently plan my next action and make judgments without hesitation. After the dream I might remember only my self—assurance about my mental abilities. But I have seen my limitations by recollection and by testing myself while dreaming lucidly. For example, I found that I had no trouble with rote memory, but when I tried to recall where I was sleeping (after frequent moving around) I could not. While I found that at times I could spontaneously plan a dream experiment that made sense, frequently what I planned made no sense at all.

Tart suggests that since Frederik van Eeden coined the term “lucid dreaming” and characterized his own lucid dream consciousness as more like waking than dreaming, we should reserve the term “lucid dream” for when the dreamer’s lucidity has the overall quality of his ordinary waking state. Van Eeden’s account of his lucid dreams is found in Tart’s edited volume, Altered States of Consciousness (Garden City, 1972). In introductory notes to van Eeden’s account, Tart says that van Eeden “felt that he possessed all of his normal intellectual faculties.” (p 116)

The distinction between lucid dreams and dreaming—awareness dreams becomes more difficult to maintain when we see in van Eeden’s account evidence of somewhat less than waking lucidity, and in my “dreaming-awareness dreams” somewhat more lucidity than in my ordinary dreams. Van Eeden never actually says in his article that he feels he is possessed of all his normal intellectual faculties. He never compares his lucidity (memory or reasoning ability) to that of the waking state. He says he has full recollection of his day—life and his own condition, has perfect awareness, is able to direct his attention and can act voluntarily upon reflection. He does not say he can recall anything at will. He does not seem to remember everything up to date. He does not say what “full recollection” means. Though he reflects, he does not say that he can reason as when awake, or how clear that reflection is. He does say it is difficult for him to control emotional impulses in lucid dreams. He forgets that his brother has died. He believes that others in the dream are also dreaming his dream. He takes himself for younger than he is. He feels in the dream that he understands something that only puzzles him when he awakens. He admits that lucidity in one lucid dream had not been very intense.

In my lucid dreams, though I never have the lucidity of my waking moments, I am decidedly more lucid than in my ordinary dreams. Even before I realize I am dreaming, I acquire enough lucidity to notice anomalies in the dream, to realize that certain situations are dream—like and to reflect on the question of whether I am dreaming. Ordinary

dreams are full of anomalies, contradictions and dream-like situations that I accept without notice.

It is the onset of lucidity that enables me to notice, reflect and realize, and enables the lucid dream to occur. It is lucidity to realize I am dreaming, to sustain that knowledge for some time and to realize its implications. I know the dream is not ordinary physical reality, that dream people are not separate entities and that it won't help me to write down notes or to run to the bathroom until I wake up. I normally remember that I am to proceed with some task, even though frequently I can't think of what it is. When I think of it, I can usually carry it through, though sometimes I forget what I'm doing, or I suddenly do something unplanned. I observe closely, though my judgment is bad. I can decide to remain detached or to become involved with the dream. These abilities are not characteristic of my ordinary dreams.

It is not just the knowledge that one is dreaming and the greater lucidity of the dreamer that distinguish lucid dreaming from ordinary dreaming. Van Eeden and others have reported that lucid dreams are much more clearly remembered afterward than ordinary dreams. Mine are clearly remembered and remain more vivid in my mind than the usual ordinary dream.

A reported characteristic of lucid dreams is their relative brightness and clarity. I also find this, though I do not find it restricted to lucid dreams. Lucid dreams occasionally lead to extraordinary experiences of light, as discussed, for example by Gregory Scott Sparrow, in Lucid Dreaming: Dawning of the Clear Light. My lucid dreams have led to unusual experiences of light that additionally distinguish them from ordinary dreams.

There will be variety in lucid dreams--in brightness, in the experiences of light, in how well--remembered they are, in the amount of memory and intellectual ability. Mine vary in all these respects. These characteristics must vary from person to person, from dream to dream and from moment to moment in the dream. Within the context of this variety, how is the distinction to be made between lucid dreams in which the dreamer is somewhat less lucid than when awake and dreaming--awareness dreams in which the dreamer is somewhat more lucid than in ordinary dreams? Where is the boundary to be made? Is this boundary to be identified while dreaming or decided upon during critical reflection? How much memory will count as waking memory and how is it to be measured? Would one evidence of intellectual ability be enough or would we need evidence of continued intellectual ability? How can we judge what the dreamer would be able to do although he doesn't? Would the more critical observers tend to have dream--awareness dreams because they see their limitations, and the less so tend to be called lucid dreamers? This does not exhaust the complications that researchers would encounter in trying to distinguish continually between degrees of lucidity. If researchers studied only those dreams they could feel assured were lucid, would they not very well be studying only part of a continuum, and instead of seeing the full scope of lucid dreams,

study only those dreams that seem to fit a pre-determined definition?

Certainly at the moment the clearest distinction that can be made is that between knowing one is dreaming and not knowing, and until we know more precise characteristics of lucid dreams and develop more precise methods of measuring lucidity while dreaming, this is the most practical distinction that can be made.

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