

## A LOOK AT MYSTIC LIGHT

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Unusual experiences of light are occasionally mentioned in accounts of lucid dreams in which the dreamer knows that he or she is dreaming. Garfield (1979) mentions experiencing lines and cracks of light, a sparkling globe, light emerging from a room, sunlight, and light shining on water. I have reported (Gillespie, 1987) points of light, small lines of light, cracks of light, disks of light, and other forms of light. I do not suggest that these minor forms of light are mystical.

But a few lucid dreamers have reported strongly devotional or religious experiences centered around these light forms which have become for them an important part of their lucid dream experience. Sparrow writes,

Since the inception of lucidity into my dream life, the lucid dream has clearly evolved in a specific direction -- toward a closer relationship to the inner Light....

I have begun to regard lucidity as a platform within the dream upon which I can become receptive to this Light. (1976, p. 10)

Kelzer says,

It is the Light that the lucid dreamer approaches and with which I had been seeking to unite....It is the contact with the Light itself that is the most valuable and important benefit in the cultivation of lucid dreaming (1987, pp. 58-59).

In an account of my own lucid dreaming, I have written,

I did, in fact, slowly reach that point of faith at which I accepted my experiences in the fullness of light to be what they appeared to be -- experience of God....Because of my devotional experiences of light, because of my belief that phenomena described in mystical literature are explainable in terms of dreaming, particularly lucid dreaming, and because I see a relationship between meditation and lucid dreaming, my interest in lucid dreams has become largely religious. (Gillespie, 1988c, p. 350)

In Tibetan Buddhism, particularly as taught within the six topics of Naropa, the appearance of light within lucid dreams is of great spiritual importance (Chang, 1963; Evans-Wentz, 1958; Gillespie, 1988a; Guenther, 1963; 1976; Musès, 1961). Tucci

says that in all Tibetan religion, great importance is attached to light, "whether as a generative principle, as a symbol of supreme reality, or as a visible, perceptible manifestation of that reality" (1980, pp. 63-64). Lucid dreaming is a means toward the goal of the experience of the "clear light," by which the Buddhist reaches *nirvana*.

I intend to discuss the nature of the light that is experienced in lucid dreams, particularly light that accompanies strongly religious or devotional circumstances. I will give examples of its appearance from Sparrow's, Kelzer's, and my own accounts. I will repeat Eliade (1962/1965) in referring to the more numinous experiences of light as mystic light, because the phrase indicates that there is an element to the experience that distinguishes it from other experiences of light. When I, hesitatingly, discuss the following accounts as mystical, it is not to make a judgement about their transpersonal status, but to recognize that these experiences are *reported* to be numinous, and they accord with accounts narrated in the literature about mysticism. Protected, I hope, by these caveats, I will present some examples of mystic light in lucid dreams.

### **Experiences of Light**

My first example is a dream of Sparrow's:

I am walking in my front yard, looking at the stars and hearing music coming from the house across the street.

Suddenly, what appears to be a meteorite drops out of the eastern sky. At this point, I become lucid. The light falls all the way to the horizon. As it hits the earth, there is a flash of bright light.

I drop to the ground and prepare to meditate...Two lights begin to approach me from the area of impact...I wait until the lights are directly overhead. Then I know it is time to close my eyes and meditate.

Immediately a tremendous energy wells up within my body. I try to surrender to it. As I do, light begins to fill my vision. There is a tremendous sense of warmth and love, which continues for a good while (Sparrow, 1976, p. 51)

Kelzer narrates a long lucid dream, in which he is one of the three magi traveling eastward alone by camel in search of the Christ child. After leaving Herod's court, he follows the star to a small home where he sees the Christ child lying in a crib near Mary and Joseph.

A beautiful bright light radiates from the child continuously. I hurriedly dismount from my camel and take my place, kneeling beside the others.

Suddenly I feel a tremendous rush of emotion within me...I burst into uncontrollable sobbing....All of the feelings of the journey pour through me: extreme joy, relief, sadness over Herod, courage, determination and many other feelings....

....With a flood of tears streaming down my cheeks, I ask, "Will you accept pure gold?" The child with a delicate little smile simply radiates in silence.....The babe and the Light are priceless beyond compare. I am completely overwhelmed....

....I am totally entranced by the dazzling, beautiful light that emanates continually from his whole body and especially from his loving eyes. (Kelzer, 1987, pp. 40-41).

Through my years of lucid dreaming, I have planned while awake what I would do when I next realized I was dreaming. By September, 1982, I had had several unexpected experiences of what I have called (Gillespie, 1987) a fullness of light, which were to me extremely joyful and devotional experiences of God. I planned that the next time I knew I was dreaming I would ignore the dream environment and passively think of God, repeating "God is love." The dream for September 2 was:

We were back in Jorhat, India to teach at an Eastern Theological College. We had just arrived and were moving into a long, low bungalow. As I stepped into the house, I reflected on my many dreams lately of being in India. But I was now actually in Jorhat again. Or was I? No, of course not; I was dreaming. I remembered what to do, more or less. I was already kneeling beside the bed. I simply placed my folded hands on the bed and closed my eyes to pray.

I began to pray, saying "God is love" or "Praise the Lord." Instead of ignoring the dream environment, I imagined pushing away the feelings of touch about me. The feelings detached. I floated about, continuing to praise God. I changed my phrase to "Blessed is the name of the Lord." As I floated, the sun came from above my head, just slightly to the right, and remained high in front of me. I saw only the light of the sun as the light increased about me. The total effect was that I was floating in light. I had little or no awareness of the lower part of my body. I still had awareness of my eyes being shut, as I had shut them to pray. Any contradiction between my shut eyes and my seeing the light didn't occur to me. I continued looking at the light and repeating, "Blessed is the name of the Lord." Eventually I remembered my preferred text, "God is love," and began to think that again and again. I kept being moved about, but gently. I felt calm. I woke up in the midst of repeating, "God is love." (Adapted from Gillespie, 1983).

In Kelzer's account, the light is well integrated with the other visual aspects of

the dream. In Sparrow's, I cannot tell what else is visual other than the darkness. In my account, the visual environment offered by the dream gives way to darkness as I pray, and then to light only, specifically the fullness of light.

When I talk about the fullness of light, I do not mean paradoxical light, that is somehow dark and bright at the same time or a "glowing darkness," as mentioned by Hunt (1984; 1985). Nor do I call the experience "light" for lack of a better word. Gackenbach and Bosveld (1989) tell of a professor who has experienced a "transcendental state" which includes an experience of what he calls "the light of awareness." He calls the experience "light" because light seems to be the closest equivalent to it. I have experienced various forms of darkness and light in lucid dreams. The closest to paradoxical light or light that is not exactly light has been what I have described as "shiny darkness, such as of black lacquer" (Gillespie, 1987), which was neither paradoxical nor for me a numinous experience.

The fullness of light is a literal experience of intense light, the very opposite of darkness. The light fills the visual field and has the whiteness, intensity, and vibrancy of the light that is next to the sun high on a clear day. It is never difficult to look at. The experience is never exactly the same. The circumstances that lead up to or accompany the light vary. Sometimes I am more aware of my dreamed body, sometimes less. I may float, spin, or dance. I may lose body awareness almost completely. The joy and devotion that accompany the experience have not always been of the same intensity. Sometimes the outline of a "sun" remains visible in the light and sometimes not. Once the "sun" seemed farther away than usual, which probably means only that it was smaller. Once there were "rays" in the light; once the light was more orange-red. One experience of fullness of light could more properly be called a near death experience, except that, as far as I know, I was not actually near death (see Gillespie, 1985). The experiences differed so, that at times I had to make waking judgments afterward to decide whether the experience fully qualified as a "fullness of light," or whether I should consider it to be only "contentless light only" or "light with sun only" (see Gillespie, 1987).

My experiences are priceless to me, but the purpose of this article is not to give my personal feelings and theological interpretations. I will try to examine the nature of mystic light without allegiance to any personal, religious, philosophical, or academic position. I will raise questions about the nature of mystic light and the experience of it. I will not offer many solutions because there is little point in offering solutions to problems before they have been articulated and studied. In fact, I intend to muddy the water as much as possible, because I believe the mud must be dealt with before the language and thought about mystic light can become more clear.

## **Mystic Light and Ordinary Light**

Eliade, one of our most respected historians of religion, has referred to mystic light as "supernatural light" and "spiritual light" (1962/1965). But how is mystic light different from ordinary light? Indeed, what does the question mean? How is what different from what? Are we comparing mystic or spiritual light waves with ordinary light waves? Ordinary light waves occupy three-dimensional space. They originate from sources such as the sun or a light bulb and they reflect off surfaces. If we speak of mystic light waves, do we not assume a three-dimensionality in which the light waves must move? Is that a physical three-dimensionality or a mystic three-dimensionality? Do mystic light waves necessitate mystic sources of light, mystic or spiritual eyes and retinas for the waves to stimulate, and a spiritual visual cortex to decipher the light waves? Will spiritual eyes blink if mystic light is too great? Can spiritual light stimulate physical retinas? Would we see spiritual light waves themselves or only what they reveal?

If we are not comparing light waves, are we comparing sources of light? Can only something mystical be a source of mystic light? Is mystic light itself mystical or only the source of that light? Can there be mystical shining without light waves? If something shines internally, where does it shine?

Are we comparing a mystical brightness with ordinary brightness? Can the subjective experience of brightness be different in mystical experience from what it is in ordinary waking experience? Is not the experience of brightness or light essentially the same whether mystical or ordinary? Don't we call such varying experiences all by the same name -- "experiences of brightness" or "experiences of light" -- because there is subjectively that same brightness? If the subjective brightness itself is the same, what makes one brightness mystical and another not?

## **Mystic Light and Dream Light**

In this discussion I am primarily concerned with numinous experiences that occur during or grow out of lucid dreaming. Is mystic light different from ordinary dream light? What is ordinary dream light? Are we talking about three-dimensional dream light waves within a three-dimensional dream? Is the dream image three-dimensional or does it only portray three-dimensionality? If the dream image is two-dimensional, can there be light waves of any kind? Can there be a mystical source of light within a dream image?

Is dream brightness part of the dream image or is it caused by the dream image? Does dream perception of light parallel waking perception? Is there a

mystical perception that parallels or is contained within dream perception? Will mystic light reflect off dream surfaces and stimulate dream retinas? When Kelzer (1987) sees the light radiating from the child, is that light dream light or spiritual light? Dream light from a spiritual child? Spiritual light from a dream child?

Does dream light or mystic light differ essentially from dream image? At what point does dream brightness become light as opposed to bright object? Is light simply a contrast of brightness with the image around it? Sparrow tells about an experience during lucid dreaming:

Outdoors, I see a light in the sky. I am told that I must turn my head away if the light is to descend upon me. I am aware that I am dreaming. I bow my head. The ground around me begins to be illuminated by the brilliant orb (1976, p. 51).

In this example, where does the dream or mystic light on the ground differ from the image of the ground? Is there possibly a simple continuum from dream object through bright object, to a brightness that may be interpreted as light coming from the object, to a brightness that obscures the object, finally to light only? Can visual dream environment ever be separated from the light that seems to reveal it?

Is dream light real light or a portrayal of light? Is mystic light in a dream only a portrayal of light? Is the experience of light in a dream like the experience of a lamp in a dream -- just as a dream lamp is not really there, its light is not really there? Or is it that just as I really experience the dream image, I really experience the light as a bright image? By what criteria do I determine whether the light I see is dream or something other than dream?

In another article (Gillespie, 1989), I suggest some distinctions between lights that appear to be part of an ongoing lucid dream and other lights, which I call "stable intense lights," which appear to be unrelated to dream images. Must a light be other than dream image to be mystical? Is all light that is not part of that ongoing dream mystical?

### **Mystic Light as Image**

The dream image and the image of mystic light are both mental images. So what do they have in common? There is no agreement on the nature of internal images, nor even on whether there can be such a thing as an internal visual image (Block, 1983; Gardner, 1985). If we do not know what an internal image is, can we say that dream images are of the same nature as mystic light? Can we say that they are not?

Two rival sides on the question of the nature of mental images are discussed by the philosopher Ned Block. He calls one side "pictorialism," the supposition that "the mental representations of imagery represent in the manner of pictures" (1983, p. 504). The opposing view, descriptivism, "(a popular view, especially in the artificial intelligence community), says that the representations of imagery...represent in the manner of familiar symbol structures such as those in a computer or those in English" (1983, p. 504-505).

Is mystic light seen as a picture is seen? Or at least as some kind of mental "picture" is seen? Or is light, even mystic light, no more than a transformed sentence?

The main problem in accepting the presence of mental images or "pictures" has been the problem of the homunculus (Block, 1983; Crick, 1979; Gardner, 1985; Gibson, 1986; Morris and Hampson, 1983; Shepard, 1984), a problem that I see as a false problem (Gillespie, 1990). If there is a visual image in the brain, who or what is in the brain to see it? Wouldn't the image or light there need to be perceived by a little man in the head, by means of his own eyes, retinas, and brain? Wouldn't he need another person in his head to see the mental image created in his head by the light, *ad infinitum*? Shepard conjectured that the problem of the homunculus was the reason that Gibson disavowed the term mental image (Shepard, 1984). Is the mystic light in the brain or not? And how is it being seen?

There are questions to ask about mystic light, whether or not it is exactly like other mental images. Does mystic light differ from the experience of mystic light? I suggest elsewhere (Gillespie, 1989; 1990) that image is the experience of image, but I cannot go into that discussion here. If a light is on in another room, I may think of it as having an independent existence from me. It is there whether I experience it or not. That light is not the same as my experience of it.

Does a dream image or mystic light or brightness exist apart from my experience of it? Or is the experience of the image or light the only existence of the image or light? May mystic light, like pain, be the same as the experience of it? I have no pain if I do not experience it.

If the image of light is no more than the experience of it, what are the implications?

If it exists only during my experience, it is not eternal. The Gospel of John (1:9) speaks of the true light that enlightens every person coming into the world. This light is sometimes called the inner light. Although the scriptural inner light may be intended metaphorically, mystical experiences of light are sometimes called

experiences of the inner light, for instance by Eliade (1962/1965) and Sparrow (1976). But Christian theologians consider the inner light to be eternal and constant.

If mystic light exists only while I experience it, how can it be constant?

Teresa of Avila occasionally experienced light during her mystical experiences. She has said, "It should be kept in mind here that the fount, the shining sun that is in the center of the soul, does not lose its beauty and splendor; it is always present in the soul" (Teresa of Avila, 1979, p. 40).

Can there be a shining that is not experienced? What is the light when it is not experienced? What is brightness when it is not an image? Is mystic light a temporary dream image that portrays a mystical and constant shining?

According to Tibetan texts, the clear light is reached with difficulty through waking or lucid dream meditation. It is the innate light from which everything comes forth and into which all manifested forms fuse (Guenther, 1963; Tucci, 1970; 1980; Wayman, 1980).

If light is no more than my experience of it, how can all things come from light? Can my experience of light be in some sense universal and not individual? How do we judge which image of light is essentially mine and which is universal? If light is no more than my experience of it, then how can I fuse with it or dissolve into it? Am I not already fused with it?

### **The Extent of the Light**

What is the extent of mystic light? If I see a shining meteor or a radiant child, I may consider that I see the extent of the brightness. If I feel that I am floating within a fullness of light, then I am not aware of the boundaries of the light, nor am I aware of the boundaries of the image that I call light.

Can mystic light extend beyond what I experience? Can it reach behind my floating dreamed body where I do not experience it? (see Gillespie, 1988b, 1989). If light is limited to the experience of light, would not even a fullness of light be only what I see?

Swami Sivananda describes experiences of yoga and says, "You will see infinite light and you will merge yourself in it" (1975, p. 374). What is infinite light? Can infinite light be limited to the image I experience? Doesn't "infinite" seem to mean extending endlessly, three-dimensionally in every direction? Can I experience only a



part of the light which is itself infinite? Can I experience it all? Can I even see depth in light? How do I know the extent of what I see? Is "infinite" only a judgment that I make about the experience?

How do I know whether the image of light is two-dimensional or three-dimensional or even non-dimensional? Is the awareness of depth or distance simply the way I experience what has no depth or distance at all?

Matus quotes Symeon the New Theologian as saying, "The spirit [nous] immersed in your light becomes so bright that in the end it is light itself" (1984, p. 104). Bucke explains that the person who enters cosmic consciousness "has a sense of being immersed in a flame, or rose-coloured cloud" (1969, p. 72). Does immersion in light imply a real three-dimensionality? Or is immersion only a subjective experience? Can one feel immersed in a two-dimensional image? If light is the experience of light can I enter any further into what I am already experiencing? If it is a real immersion, what is immersed in what? What does it mean to float in light? Can floating and light be simply two separate images?

In the fullness of light, I feel that God is in the light, unseen. Where is God? Among light waves? In the subjective brightness? If the light is image, what does it mean that God is in the image? Can anything other than image be in the image? How does my being in light differ from God's being in light?

### **The Light as Mine**

If light is no more than my experience of it, then just as the experience is mine, is not the light also mine? Is it a part of me? What is the raw material of this image that is mine? If the light is mine, can it still be transcendent, that is, not mine? Just as pain, which is my own, may indicate the presence of someone else pinching me, may light as my own indicate the presence of another? If there is transcendence in the experience, is it perhaps simply removed one step farther away -- beyond the image of light?

Can the light be both mine and transcendent? Can I ever experience any more than the experience itself, which is mine? If light is ever transcendent, how will I recognize it as light unless it appears like a non-transcendent experience of light? If the light is mine, can it still be God as it was at times to Saint Symeon in the Christian tradition (Matus, 1984) and Saint Ramalingar in the Hindu tradition (Annamalai, 1973)?

The Hesychasts of Mount Athos claimed to experience the vision of "uncreated

light" (Eliade, 1962/1965). Can light be both mine and uncreated?

In a dream, I may commune with people or animals that I see. In the sense that they are products of my own mind, do I really commune with other beings? As with dream characters, I may commune with the light (Sparrow, 1976), but if the light is my own, with whom do I commune? Can I commune with my visual image? Or is the light only incidental to a transpersonal communion?

Moody (1988) discusses near death experiences in which "a being of light" is met. Is the being of light no more than the experiencer's own visual image? Is a being of light different from a being felt to be in light? If the being is actually of light, what is it of? Does it consist of my mental image? What is it when I don't experience it?

If every element of the experience of light is mine, or even if it is not, what is my relationship to the mystic light? Perhaps this question is the same as, "What is my relationship to the visual image? Where am I, or perhaps even what am I, in the dream or in the experience of light?"

Do I have a spatial relationship to the light or to the source of light? Is there a dream body that looks toward the light or that floats in light? Are my dream eyes or spiritual eyes any different from the little man in the head who is needed, so they say, to see the visual image in the head? Do I see the dream or mystic light without eyes of any kind? What is the relationship between experience and experiencer?

The question of this relationship is essential for understanding those experiences in which one's individuality is lost in the light. In terms of waking physical experience, becoming dissolved or absorbed in light makes no sense. Does it make sense in any terms? Does a relationship between dreaming and mystical experience help to explain how one can be lost in light and even become light?

I have suggested elsewhere (Gillespie, 1986) a continuum from dreaming through lucid dreaming to the phenomena of mystical experience. Is it the body being dreamed that appears to be lost in light? In the fullness of light, what actually disappears? A body? Or my awareness of body? Is there a difference between dreamed body and dreamed body awareness? Can there be any more to a dreamed body than what I am aware of? If I am aware of light while losing awareness of body, where else can I seem to disappear than into the light?

If I lose awareness of all body image and mental content in the light, does that leave me with pure consciousness? Isn't the light the object of consciousness while I

am the subject of consciousness? Does not pure consciousness mean that there is no object of consciousness, not even light?

Saksena says, "The transcendental consciousness of the Hindus, ...which exists as pure and as just itself is in no relation whatever, either of identity or of difference with any other thinking, for either there is nothing else beside it (as in Vedanta) or there has been effected an absolute separation with the 'other' (as in Yoga) (1971, p. 210). Even if I seem to become one with light, I am aware of the light and it is the object of my consciousness. Can light in some way be my consciousness? Nothing can be both subject and object of consciousness (Saksena, 1971).

There must be many more questions to ask. Some may be annoyed at this approach to mystical experience. How can I dissect spiritual experience as if it were no more than a frog in a biology lab? I dissect it because I take it seriously and believe that whatever is transcendent can withstand a search for greater understanding. Some may wonder how I can hope to understand what is essentially paradoxical and ineffable. I like what Steven Katz writes:

The terms "paradox" and "ineffable" do not function as terms that inform us about the [content]<sup>1</sup> of experience, or any given ontological "state of affairs". Rather they function to cloak experience from investigation and to hold mysterious whatever ontological commitments one has (1978, p. 54).

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<sup>1</sup> The original article had the word "context" here instead of "content". I have established a personal communication with Dr. Katz (3/26/90) that the word "context" was a typographical error.