

## THE VALUE OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN LUCID DREAMS

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The light that shines above the heavens and above this world, the light that shines in the highest world, beyond which there are no others--that is the light that shines in the hearts of men.

. . . The Upanishads (Prabhananda and Manchester, Trans., 1971)

In the June, 1988 issue of *Lucidity Letter* I described the induction of "ecstatic" lucid dreams (Hewitt, 1988). I would like to say more about such experiences, as well as to briefly address the recent controversy regarding the issue of the "risks" of lucid dreaming.

In lucid dreams I have had many wonderful experiences, especially over the last eight years in my work at the Sleep Research Facility at Stanford working as an oneironaut with Dr. Stephen LaBerge. These lucid dreams have included glorious flying experiences, "out-of-body" dreams, and outright "ecstatic" experiences. Lucid dreams of a different character have included racing into medieval battles as a Norman footsoldier armed with chain mail, helmet, shield and spear on an otherwise beautiful, sunny spring morning, participating in wild Roman parties, and being an interstellar spy sitting in a cafe with people on another planet where I was the alien and no one knew. Still other lucid dreams involved the most subtle, exquisite tenderness and love, grief over the loss of beloved dream characters, and experiences comparable in happiness to experience in waking life.

One can decide to avoid wild or frightening experiences in a lucid dream. It is the nature of lucidity to have at least the potential to exercise free will. Finding myself in a lucid dream I would not naturally choose to create an environment of fear or savagery. However, if I suddenly become lucid in a dream environment and find myself riding into a frightful battle, I don't feel obligated to change the experience into, say, a quiet pastoral scene. Is there a reason for me to avoid such experiences? As I mentioned in the previous article, I have found that intentionally giving up control of lucid dream content, after one has passed through a period of learning control in order to maintain lucidity and prevent awakening, can have wonderful results. I could continue and hurl myself into the fight, but then again I

might not--I might run or fly away. It is still my choice, what I feel like doing at the time, which may not be what is most conducive to "growth" or psychological well-being.

I maintain all experiences lead to a synthesis of greater understanding, whether they are experientially positive or negative in their overall effect. Lucid dreaming is a fantastic opportunity for "firsthand" experience and learning--as if it were a "participant video." By racing into a medieval battle, I felt intensely what it would have been like, and experienced the thoughts of the millions of poor fellows who have risked and often lost their lives in some dreadful battle. On the other hand, being an interstellar spy focused my love for science fiction into experiential high adventure. Lucid dreams are a unique opportunity to experience things which otherwise would be impossible in a context which seems very real.

I would like to extend this concept of synthesis to lucid dreams of an ecstatic or "divine" character, although I am not the first to do so, as evidenced by the writings of Patricia Garfield and Kenneth Kelzer. Whether or not a genuine direct contact a "higher plane of being" in which genuine contact may be established with the "divine" or a "higher reality" has been argued for a long time. Suffice it to say that I myself believe such contact is possible, with the "Ground of Being," the basis for all conscious existence and the universe itself-- a direct experience of Reality of a nature which would make our current waking experiences seem dreamlike by comparison. The key concepts for me are "awakening" and "recollection," in a sense similar to that of the Upanishadic view of the universe living within and experiencing through its creatures. The world's religions offer a plenitude of methods, mostly symbolic in nature, for approaching such Reality. For example, the Mass is a symbolic, ritualistic focus for one's desire for union with God, vicariously through worship. The yogic practitioner specifically desires direct experience and thus subjects body and mind to rigid disciplines.

I propose that lucid dreaming may be a vehicle for devotion and the experience of union--as one conceives such union--whether or not such union is actually "real" in waking life or with the "really" real in a lucid dream. Personally I'm convinced it is possible. The following lucid dream on September 18, 1986 in the Sleep Lab is an example of an experience which for me represents an exciting integration of scientific endeavor and inner voyaging. One of the intentions of this night was to conduct an eye tracking exercise in the lucid dream I was to move my outstretched arm and finger back and forth horizontally in front of me while following it with my eyes. The beginning and end of the tracking exercise were to be marked by eye movement lucidity signals.

A long sequence of dreams transpired, before the lucid segment finally started.

I walked around for a while, then leaped into the air, feeling very grateful to be lucid and to be so solid and clear in it. I flew up through branches and leaves, getting caught briefly in my excitement, and ranged about low over the treetops. It was night and foggy, but in a while I came to a place where the stars were visible through high trees. I performed the tracking exercise in the air. For the next ten minutes roughly, I floated high in the star-lit sky, the cloud bank beneath me brightly illuminated. It was incredibly beautiful. I felt very peaceful, calm, exquisitely lucid. As I floated, I marvelled at the detail and stability of the perceptions -- absolutely every bit as aware as my most reflective, contemplative moments when awake! It felt mysterious, spiritual and appropriate--even familiar. I prayed, saying, "Highest Father-Mother, thank you for this experience." I signalled throughout the experience. Once, I closed my eyes and visualized myself among the stars, hoping to get into space, but was unsuccessful.

I performed the tracking exercise for perhaps the fourth or fifth time, marked by signals, and on the last one I ended it with imagined tracking, as Stephen had instructed the evening before.

This lucid dream continued for a total of more than 30 minutes as verified by signals. It was a night sojourn for which to this day I hold fond memories and feelings of awe. For me, the experience (occurring while I was demonstrably sound asleep in bed!) was one of union with and veneration of the universe and whatever Reality lies behind it, of Life itself.

Experiences like these make me wary of cautions about the possible dangers of lucid dreaming. Not all dreamers have such lucid dream experiences as those described here, but I see little evidence for cautioning that lucidity might be potentially "unsafe". The prospect of a lucid dream is very exciting to many who have not had one, and with any approach to the unknown there is sometimes a little trepidation, as I can attest to on behalf of the attendees to my talks. The mere suggestion of possible dangers will, I strongly feel, unconsciously influence a person's ability to dream lucidly. I have had frightening experiences in lucidity, just as in nightmares. The fact of lucidity does not alter the natural unpredictability and emotional volatility of the unconscious mind that influences dreaming, but it does provide more flexibility and creativity as to response. What is the value of raw fear in a dream? In a lucid dream, one at least has the opportunity to respond creatively. Facing fearful situations in lucid dreams can be a means of developing strength.

Those who might object that one cannot have a "true" mystical experience in a lucid dream miss the point. Who is qualified to ascertain the features of a "true" mystical union? It is the experience of mystical ecstasy and the experience of union through a mysterious devotion. I feel in the course of such an event as if it were real, and the effects on my subsequent life are deep and lasting. This is at least as valuable as the symbolic, vicarious experience of the divine.

The equipment for having such dream experiences is already built into the human brain, obviating the necessity to ingest potentially dangerous, probably illegal psychoactive substances for evocation of waking ecstasy. Albeit some mental training and discipline are involved in having lucid dreams at will and developing facility in them, for most people the discipline is less arduous than the long periods of physical and mental discipline involved with yogic practices designed to achieve the same end.

In other words, having such ecstatic experiences may be a natural function of the human organism, requiring only the right conditions for evocation. I propose that such truly wondrous, sublime experiences are waiting to be discovered by many people, and that it is premature to cast doubt on the value and safety of lucid dreaming, especially with the current burgeoning interest in lucid night journeys.

## References

- Prabhavananda, Swami, & Manchester, Frederick. (Trans.) (1971). *The Upanishads; Breath of the eterna*. Vedanta Press, Hollywood, CA, (p. 101).
- Hewitt, Daryl E. (1988) Induction of ecstatic lucid dreams. *Lucidity Letter*, 7 (1).