

Comments on OBEs and Lucid Dream

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In Chapter 9 of Lucid Dreaming (LaBerge, 1985), I argue that the only necessary feature distinguishing lucid dreams and OBEs is how the person interprets the experience. In order to have an OBE you must merely believe that you have in some sense “left your body.” Of course, the subjective sensations of being out-of-body provide no proof as to whether and in what way you actually have “left your body.” Those interested in the details of my reasoning should read the original.

Here I will confine myself to clarifying some misconceptions. Rogo (1985) argues that OBEs cannot be a form of lucid dreaming on the grounds that the two experiences are accompanied by different physiologies. Rogo cites evidence suggesting that lucid dreams occur only during REM sleep, whereas OBEs occur from almost any state except REM. Even if both of these claims were true, OBEs still could be dreams, since dreaming takes place in a variety of physiological states, not just REM. However, careful reading of my book reveals evidence proving both assertions false.

As to the first point, a variety of studies have demonstrated that lucid dreams characteristically occur during REM sleep. However, in my dissertation (LaBerge, 1980), I described the NREM stage-1 sleep-onset lucid dreams of a single subject, a phenomenon later verified by Dane (1984). As to the second point, in the very chapter criticized by Rogo, I clearly stated that our laboratory subjects “frequently describe lucid dreams initiate from brief awakenings within REM periods as ‘leaving their bodies’” (LaBerge, 1985, p. 216). In fact 5 out of our 14 subjects who have signaled lucid dreams in the laboratory have reported this experience. Two examples are recounted in my book; perhaps it will clarify matters to quote one of them (my own):

“It was the middle of the night, and I had evidently just awakened from a REM period since I effortlessly recalled a dream. I was lying face down in bed, drowsily reviewing the story of my dream, when suddenly I experienced a very curious sensation of tingling and heaviness in my arms. They became so heavy, in fact, that one of them seemed to melt over the side of the bed! I recognized this distortion of my body image as a sign that I was reentering REM sleep. As I relaxed more deeply, I felt my entire body become paralyzed, although I could still seem to feel its position in bed. I reasoned that this feeling was most likely a memory image, and that actual sensory input was cut off just as much as motor output was. I was in short, asleep. At this point I imagined raising my arm and experienced this imagined movement as if I had separated an equally real arm from the physical one I knew to be paralyzed. Then, with a similar imagined movement, I “rolled” out of my physical body entirely. I was now, according to my understanding, wholly in a dream body in a dream of my bedroom. The body I had seemed to leave, and

which I now dreamed I saw lying on the bed, I quite lucidly realized to be a dream representation of my physical body; indeed, it evaporated as soon as I put my attention elsewhere. From here, I flew off into the dawn...

I would say that having awakened from REM sleep, I was (as always) experiencing my body image in a position calculated by my brain. Since this calculation was based on accurate information about the physical world obtained through my awake, and therefore functional, senses, the body position I experienced corresponded to my actual position of lying in bed. Since during sleep (particularly REM), sensory input from the external world is actively suppressed my sensory systems at this point no longer provided my brain with information regarding the physical world. Thus, my brain's representation of my body image was no longer constrained by sensory information concerning my body's actual orientation in physical space and I was free to move it in mental space to any new position that I chose. With no sensory input to contradict me, I could freely "travel" anywhere in mental space (p 217-2 18)."

I doubt if most people think about their OBEs in such an analytical manner; they are more inclined to believe that if it felt like they were out of there bodies, they were. Sometimes the distinction between lucid dreams and OBEs is very fine indeed. For example, Father X writes that "the only essential difference between (my OBEs) and my lucid dreams is that I am totally conscious when I enter this other state of consciousness, whereas my lucid dreams always begin with a non-lucid dream and then it becomes lucid. "This is, of course, exactly the distinction I have repeatedly drawn between "Wake-initiated" lucid dreams (WILDs) and "Dream-initiated lucid dreams (DILDs) (e.g., LaBerge, 1980, 1985). WILDs comprise about 25% of our laboratory sample of lucid dreams (LaBerge, 1985) and as I have said, they frequently take the form of "leaving one's body."

I am making an appeal for a more scientific, critical-minded approach to the relationship of OBEs to lucid dreams. It is not enough to claim, as Monroe (1985) does, that OBEs are simply not dreams or that "those who have actively participated in [research at the Monroe Institute] have inescapably, [sic] and conclusively accepted the reality of the out-of-body experience." Monroe asserts that "the protocols, methodology, and measurement systems may be different from conventional scientific process, by necessity. Physiologic parameters are not necessarily the major gauge of non-physical events." Unfortunately, Monroe appears to simply assume that the OBE is non-physical, occurring "without the support mechanism of a physical body and physical sensory stimulants [sic]." If this is science, where is the evidence? If it is not, as I fear, it may be like--in Monroe's words--"trying to measure and analyze electricity with a coffee cup. "Incidentally, what psychophysiology is about is trying to correlate mental events with brain physiology, not an altogether absurd undertaking unless you believe your brain is nothing more than a cooling system. Anyone more than "somewhat aware" of the recent developments in the study of lucid dreaming will know how successful the psychophysiological approach has

been in shedding light on an phenomenon previously no better understood than the OBE. I see no reason why OBEs could not be efficiently studied by the same signal-verification methodology that is now standard for laboratory investigations of lucid dreaming.

I would like to leave readers with something to think about regarding what it might mean to “leave your body.” First of all, what exactly does “being in your body” mean? “Being in the body means constructing a mental body image. Because it is based on sensory information, it accurately represents the body’s position in physical space. While dreaming, we are out of touch with our bodies and consequently liberated from the physical constraints imposed by waking perception. Thus, no awkward sensory facts are present to limit our movement in mental space, and we are free to move out of the spatial orientation defined by ‘being in the (physical) body.’ The part of us that ‘leaves the body’ travels in mental, not physical, space. Consequently, it would seem reasonable to suppose that we never ‘leave our bodies’ because we are never in them. Where ‘we’ are when we experience anything at all--OBEs included--is in mental space. Milton’s famous phrase, “The Mind is its own place,” goes not quite far enough. The mind is not merely its own place, the mind is its only place.” (LaBerge, 1985, pp 220-221).

References

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