

OBEs - Are they Dreams?

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A great deal of controversy has accompanied the presentation of the theory, as in Stephen LaBerge's book Lucid Dreaming (LaBerge, 1985), that so-called out-of-body experiences (OBEs) are simply dreams or possibly even pre-lucid dreams. That this is true is not surprising, since, as many who have had such experiences have noted, these experiences often surpass all others in vividness and emotional intensity. They leave one with an extraordinary sense of conviction that what one has just experienced is real, perhaps even more so than ordinary reality. However, this same conviction is often experienced by people in ordinary dreams not involving the OBE feeling. I have often heard recounted, and personally experienced the thought, "This cannot be a dream; it is too vivid, too real." Upon awakening, however, the dreamer realized that the situation he or she was just experiencing was entirely fictitious--a dream after all.

What I am saying in essence is that strong conviction alone is not enough to demonstrate the reality of any experience. One must have proof. With this premise, we can never prove to ourselves that what we are experiencing is real; however, we can prove that what we are experiencing is not real, be it sleeping dream or waking hallucination. For example, in dreams, people often fly (with their dream bodies or not) unaided by wings or machinery. Such flight is in defiance of the natural physical laws true of external (non-mental) reality. Thus, when we fly, we can be certain that we are experiencing a dream or hallucination. Therefore, the way we know we are dreaming is not by conviction (indeed the tendency in dreams is to not believe that it could possibly be a dream); we know we are dreaming because the world is not behaving in the way we know it does in external reality.

As for OBEs, people are quite often, understandably, so impressed by the intense experience they have been through that they do not stop to question whether the situation they were in while "out-of-body" was realistic, or even possible. In the case of one of LaBerge's OBE experiences (LaBerge, 1985, p. 212-213), he had that feeling of conviction that it was real during the experience, but after awakening realized that he had been asleep and that the situation of the experience was absurd. Therefore, he concluded that he had been dreaming, however, not lucidly, for then he would have been aware during the experience that his surroundings were of purely mental construction.

The same arguments apply to OBEs which originate outside of sleep. The word 'dream' can be used loosely to refer to mental experiences which are not connected to external reality. Those who wish to test the status of such experiences must simply ask themselves if the world they are visiting "out-of-body" corresponds to the real external world. Again, if there should be a direct correspondence, this is not proof that the person was actually

“out-of-body”-- it could mean telepathy or a very precise memory--but any lack of correspondence indicates that the world seen “out-of-body” is a world within the mind.

Scientific tests of the validity of OBE vision have been performed, and the results have not been encouraging. In one rather thorough study by Karlis Osis of the American Society for Psychical Research, using experienced OBE “travelers” it was demonstrated that there was almost no correspondence between OBE perception and the real world (Osis, 1973). One study, of course, does not disprove the possibility of the true phenomenon. It is a fascinating subject and a well-conducted study demonstrating otherwise would be welcomed by many researchers, including us.

Going back to the old idea of the mind leaving the body in dreams (on which the OBE is simply a variation), let me explain how our research makes this possibility unlikely. We have found that there is a striking amount of correspondence between the actions of the dreamer in the dream and changes in the physiology of the dreamer’s body of which the dreamer is totally unaware (LaBerge, in press). This is true even of lucid dreams we have recorded in the laboratory which begin with the dreamer having the experience of leaving his body. These findings imply that there is always a connection between the dreamer’s mind and his body, though his conscious mind is receiving no sensory input from the body.

A few more words on the experience of OBEs. They quite often occur at the onset of sleep, accompanied by a feeling of paralysis and sometimes an intense feeling of vibration or a buzzing sound. The feeling of paralysis and helplessness accompanied by bizarre hallucinations is quite common. What happens is that the deep muscle paralysis associated with REM sleep is sometimes “turned on” at the onset of sleep (during stage-1 sleep, a state quite similar to REM sleep). The mind loses contact with external sensory input and hallucinations occur (similar phenomena are experienced in sensory deprivation) as the mind creates its own sensory experience. Unlike later in sleep, the ego, or conscious mind, has remained awake. The sudden transition from waking reality perception to body paralysis and hallucinated perception can be quite disturbing and many people are frightened by these “paralysis experiences.” In some of these experiences, the sleeper feels that he is leaving his body, not unreasonably, since he knows his real body is paralyzed (though he cannot really feel it) and yet he has a hallucinated world to move in. So the dreamer leaves behind his real paralyzed body and moves off into his mental world in a mentally constructed body. A similar phenomenon can also occur later in the night when a person awakens and returns to sleep by going directly into REM sleep with the waking ego still in control. When the dreamer realizes that this is happening, i.e. that he or she is entering a dream, we call this a W-type (for wake- type) lucid dream (LaBerge, et al, 1981). If the dreamer does not realize that he or she is dreaming, but instead believes him- or herself to be still awake, an OBE can easily occur. These experiences can be quite beautiful, and to believe that they are journeys into a mental world rather than the physical one in no way decreases their magic. Indeed, the possibilities are increased, for the world within the

mind holds less limitations and more wonders than the physical world we ordinarily perceive.

References

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