

Lucid Dreams and Meditation

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A problem with many studies of lucid dreams is their theoretical and empirical insularity—a lucid dream, apparently, is a lucid dream is a lucid dream. Of course things are always uniquely themselves, but to see what something means, it is necessary to try to place it in the broader context of its natural series with related phenomena.

So it is with lucid dreams. A lucid dream, of course, is knowing you dream while the dream is actually going on. It is sometimes seen as an approximation in the dream to our waking cognitive faculties, but that is doubtful since it makes it sound like lucidity is necessarily unique to dreaming and experienced lucid dreamers do report confusions of thought and memory that are characteristic of the rest of dreaming. Rather lucid dreams are as different from ninety percent of waking experience as they are from ninety percent of dreaming. They share with out-of-body experience, near death experience, and especially with meditation, a special sense of clarity, exhilaration, and freedom (reminiscent of Maslow on “peak experience”) that comes with emergence of a detached receptive attitude in the midst of our more narrow everyday involvements - whether dreamt or real. Lucid dreams are a spontaneous form of the state sought within the so called “insight” or “mindfulness” meditative traditions. They transform dreams in the same way that meditation transforms wakefulness. Meditation is privileged in this comparative series because we now know so much about it from the point of view of very different theories and methods. If this comparison is useful, then not only will meditation cast a uniquely clarifying light on lucid dreams, but lucid dreams will help us with otherwise obscure points about the nature and goals of meditation.

For instance, the first problem we come to is that we do commonly associate meditative practice not with a balance between what Deikman calls the receptive or observing self and ongoing involvements, but with isolation and withdrawal. But only in its early stages. The “mindfulness” or “basic witness” set is so hard to develop and goes so against the grain of ordinary participations that most traditions begin in the maximally simplified context of “just sitting.” Once stabilized, however, many traditions try to extend mindfulness practice into first simple, then more complex activities – as well as into ordinary dreaming and sleep. Accordingly, more and more of the meditator’s life approximates the qualities of a lucid dream - involved, yet detached and observing at once, with the resultant subjective sense of “clarity” and “being.” The best illustration of this attempt to be “lucid” during normal waking activities is found in the Gurdjieff-Ouspensky teachings - which reject ordinary “withdrawn” meditation altogether and cultivate a continuous sense of “self remembering” in the midst of everyday settings, where otherwise we lose ourselves and forget that we are alive. That is, the full context to

which successful “self remembering” wakes us up in the form of a “being” or “I am” experience that does sound like dream lucidity.

Of course some of the best evidence for equating lucidity and meditation comes from the development of lucid dreams in advanced Tibetan Buddhist practice - which they understand as the form of meditation available during sleep. The recognized dream is to be transmuted in various ways and one also attempts to understand ongoing waking experience as itself a dream - both of these being an aid to realizing the nonsubstantial, open bases of all experience. Dream meditation on the immediate thatness of the dream experience leads to a direct insight into the way that things are at once definitely formed and clear, yet open, empty, and illusory - which is not so much the expression of a metaphysic as a phenomenological description of what results from “turning around” on immediate experience for its own sake. For instance, similar descriptions come from the early introspectionists’ studies of William James, Titchener, and Carl Rahn.

My colleagues and I at Brock have recently reported phenomenological, psychophysiological, and correlational links between lucid dreaming and meditation. With Bob Ogilvie and Paul Tyson, we found heightened EEG alpha with pre-lucid, relatively bizarre dreams and evidence that experienced lucid dreamers may show a mixed organismic state - transitional between the states of sleep and waking. But I concentrate here on a study with Barbara McLeod in which we found significantly more lucidity in long term meditators and its correlation with years of meditative practice. Along these lines, my student Roc Villeneuve has just found a correlation between lucid-control dreams and intensity of response to a meditative technique taught to them within the experiment. In the study with long term meditators we also found that just as waking meditative practice eventually leads to the release of major alterations of consciousness such as white light or luminosity experiences, so there were significant associations between degree of lucidity and archetypal/psychedelic dream content rarely seen in normative samples - such as geometric/mandala patterns, encounters with archetypal figures, and various luminosity phenomena of the kind also described by George Gillespie and Scott Sparrow. Since there is no association at all between degree of lucidity and deliberate attempts to change one’s dreaming toward lucidity, it may well be that dream lucidity and control develop automatically as the result of long term meditation. We were especially interested to find that some of our subjects were not sure them-selves how to categorize their highly unusual dreams - they sometimes could not tell whether they had awakened and were spontaneously meditating or whether they were asleep and having what we had defined for them as a lucid dream.

Now that I’ve worked to define lucid dreams as a form of meditative state - in terms of their double aware-ness of context and specific involvements, and the resulting sense of clarity and exhilaration, I should return to the relativities of defining anything in its essence - because one of my own dreams recently showed me that as important as such attempts at generic classification may be, a dream could fit all these descriptive

criteria and still not actually be lucid. I dreamt I had returned to a small house full of sleeping cots called the “rest house.” I was about to lie down when a disembodied but familiar voice said “You’re acting like you really think you’re in the rest house, but you’re not, you know. Try and figure out where you really are.” Fascinated, I looked about me with the sharpened sense of clarity and excitement that I associate with my own, all too few lucid dreams. I knew things weren’t as they seemed and I stared at the walls waiting for them to collapse into my “real” surroundings. But they just got more and more crystalline and radiating until I woke up. Slightly chastened, I realized that it had never occurred to me that I might be dreaming, although it was a spontaneous meditative-like state. Now there is no getting around the fact that lucidity has to be defined as knowing you dream, but I would still suggest that that is not why we study lucid dreams. We study them because of the valued subjective effects usually (but by no means, always) released by lucidity and dream control. A common underlying cognition between lucid dreams and meditation is implied by the way that meditation gradually extends itself into dreaming as lucidity and the way that developed lucid dreams become more and more visionary and oriented toward a spiritual interpretation of life.

In fact I would argue that part of the traditional “function” of any seriously held spiritual belief is to create the “lucid” sense that we are simultaneously part of this world and its doings and yet detached from it by virtue of a broader intelligence of context - which does normally elude us. Consider what we call the “belief” in reincarnation: One is in a particular life but it is as if a dream when sensed as one in a long series of such lives, and yet it is also utterly important in determining how those future lives will be lived. Even secular existentialism creates much the same dual awareness. Such beliefs help to convey the experience of “being”, while lucid dreams and meditative states can directly elicit this same sense of context - one which clearly requires its own specific cognitive psychology.

References

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