

Phenomenology: Personal and Theoretical Considerations Beyond Lucidity – A Personal Report

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In the December 1985 issue of *Lucidity Letter* my husband John Wren-Lewis described a radical and continuing change of consciousness following an near-death experience (NDE) which gave him a new perspective for understanding dream-processes, including lucid dreaming. In the same issue Charles Tart, Harry Hunt, George Gillespie and Michael Grosso used John's observations as a basis for discussing a number of issues which have been prominent in *Lucidity Letter* since its inception, such as the range of meanings which can be attached to the term 'lucidity', and possible relationships between lucid dreaming and meditation. My purpose in writing this present note is to describe a very unusual sleep-experience of my own in October 1985 (shortly after John's article had been sent off but before I knew of the other comments) which casts new light on some of these issues.

We were staying in an old Christchurch manor during a very rushed working tour of New Zealand when I picked up Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's *The Book of the Secrets* and read the chapter on 'devices for transcending dreaming 'before going to sleep one night. In it Rajneesh suggests that the famous 'self-remembering' techniques used by Gurdjieff can be adapted to achieve dream lucidity by taking a clear sense of identity into sleep. So, as instructed, I dutifully repeated the words "I am, I am, I am..." only to wake up several hours later laughing because Rajneesh and Gurdjieff had got it all wrong; the truth was much more like "I am NOT." I was emerging from a state of consciousness without any 'I', and experience without and experiencer - a condition that sounds like a total contradiction when described in ordinary words, yet had a reality that made 'Ann' seem like a mere figment of the imagination.

Indeed the very process of 're-entry' felt much like being dreamed into existence, as all the personal bits and pieces - hopes, fears, loves, hates, achievements, goals, opinions - were gradually re-collected, not around any central core of 'Ann,' but actually *producing* the entity known as Ann, who felt to be no more than a bundle of memories. There was incredible liberation in realizing that this whole collection had no more permanent significance than a knot in a string or the inside of a clenched fist.

I feel sure this was the classic mystical 'Void' experience which was also the core of John's NDE, though I can now confirm what he and many others have said, that until it happens any efforts to conceptualize it are totally wide of the mark. It was in no way a blissful or peak experience in any sense that I have ever understood or known, since these have always involved an 'I' who does the experiencing, even though this 'I' is imagined or felt to be bigger or better than the normal self. The phrase 'Only one sky', which was with me on waking, made sense for the first time - not an 'I' perceiving or even merging into the Clear Sky, but *Only Clear Sky*. I also realized that my efforts at spiritual growth had merely produced a firmer knot, and that my battle with ego had been

mere shadow-boxing exercises against a mirage with no real existence.

While the Void-experience undeniably fulfilled Rajneesh's promise of 'transcending dreaming,' it was nothing like any lucid dream I have ever had or seen described in the literature, not even the 'Tart-style' dream with full consciousness of the body in bed etc.. In fact, I have deliberately not called it a dream because it was devoid of all those cognitive qualities in terms of which dreaming is usually defined. George Gillespie writes of using the lucid dream state to perform a Tibetan-type meditative exercise of 'removing content' in an attempt to reach a Void-experience, but as he describes it, the very process of 'removing content' would seem to confirm the 'I' who is doing the removing and therefore to lead in absolutely the opposite direction.

So I would confirm John's conclusion, affirmed in Michael Grosso's comment, that the altered state of consciousness which mystics speak of as 'liberation' or 'awakening from the life-dream' is something qualitatively different from 'witness-consciousness' either waking or in lucid dreaming. On the mundane level of lucid dream research, I would very much agree with Charles Tart about the need for fuller discussion of terminology, since even the apparently simple statement "I knew I was dreaming" begs the question, "Just who is the 'I' knowing this?"

My reservations about the kind of 'lucid dream meditation' described by Gillespie would apply just as much to any other kind of meditation. As Krishnamurti points out repeatedly in his writings, the very nature of meditation as an activity which I perform must confirm the 'I'. So I would plead with Hunt, Tart and others for much more critical caution about using the term 'meditation' as if it could be simply equated with mystical awakening. While I do not doubt that meditators may come to such awakening, I wonder very much whether this is any straight forward result of their meditative efforts, any more than the Christchurch experience was a straightforward result of the Rajneesh exercise, which was actually intended to yield dream lucidity with a firmer sense of 'I'.

This brings me to what is perhaps the most interesting conclusion to be drawn from the experience, a very encouraging one for dreamers generally, namely that in some curious way the sleeping brain or psyche seems to have 'known better' than my conscious intention. In everything I have written about dreams, I have emphasized that the psyche can be even more creative in attempting to complete the day's unresolved problems while asleep than when awake (not at all in the very limited sense of a day residue Zeigarnick effect, Freudian wishfulfillment or Jungian compensation, as Hunt seems to think in his comment on John's article.) And the Christchurch experience confirms this even though it wasn't exactly a dream, for it shows the sleeping psyche picking up an unrecognized presleep concern ("Who exactly is this 'I' of the 'I am' exercise?") and completing it in a way my waking mind could never have conceived.

I cannot really believe that my brief somewhat perfunctory repetition resulted directly in a transformation of consciousness, and I wonder whether Gurdjieff and Rajneesh, both trickster par excellence, ever meant it to be a centering exercise, though they knew it would have to sell itself to the ego in that guise. Perhaps they really meant it to function as a koan, hoping that on occasion at least it would so deeply confuse the mind's self-

referencing habits that they would be transcended. Whether that was the intention or not, it certainly worked that way for me in Christchurch, possibly helped by endless discussions on the nature of the Void since John's NDE; and it has given me, as the NDE gave John, an entirely new basis both for daily living and for future work with dreams. I share the story here primarily in the hope of stimulating some of the new way of thinking about consciousness emphasized by Tart as the major need for future research in the whole field of psychology.