

Proceedings from the Second Annual Lucid Dreaming Symposium Session 3: Transpersonal Implications of Lucid Dreaming

Distinguishing between Phenomenon and Interpretation: When does Lucid Dreaming become Transpersonal Experience?

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Discussions of the transpersonal implications of lucid dreaming are already a firmly established part of the lucid dreaming literature. Patricia Garfield suggests that, "lucid dreams are microcosms of the mystic experience." (1979, p. 213) Stephen LaBerge describes certain types of lucid dreams as "instances of transcendental experiences, experiences in which you go beyond your current level of consciousness." (1985, pp. 242-243) Scott Sparrow concludes that the experience of light and energy in a lucid dream is what is "universally recognized in the literature on meditation and contemplative prayer as actual communion between the individual and the Divine." (1976, p. 51) A number of articles in *Lucidity Letter* (e.g. in Vol. 4, No. 2) have dealt with the close association between lucid dreaming and what are called out-of-body-experiences (OBEs). A religious "near-death experience" (NDE) has been seen to duplicate lucid dream phenomena (Gillespie, 1985).

For those interested in what is called transpersonal psychology, such discussions can be exciting. Lucid dreaming appears to be a doorway to experiences that transcend normal awareness. But for those who are wary about mystical speculation, it may seem already too late to rescue the reputation of lucid dream research. We cannot avoid the fact that religious feelings and supposed mystical experiences are occasionally part of lucid dreaming experience, but we can avoid looking at such phenomena uncritically. We can separate the basic description of a lucid dream from its transpersonal interpretation.

Describing the Phenomena

All lucid dreaming experience, including what seems to be transpersonal, happens individually, and we have to depend on individual introspection for our information. Someone may describe a lucid dream that has supposed "transpersonal" aspects in the language of a metaphysical system, or of scripture, or of a teacher to whom the experiencer is committed. But the dream researcher or cognitive psychologist who studies the material would find an uncommitted objective description of the phenomena more informative.

The basic elements of a dream report are: descriptions of sense experience, including all aspects of dreamed body awareness; mental experience, including thoughts, assumptions, and feelings; urges and intentions; and actions, including speaking. Negative elements are also important to report--darkness, silence, the degree of body awareness, passivity. Every part of a suspected "transpersonal" experience can

be broken down to its parts. For instance, the feeling of passing through a tunnel to another level of existence can be broken down to: the feeling of speed and rotation, supposed direction of movement, the touch of arms or legs against the side of the tunnel, the visual effects of light, the assumption about where one was going, the emotions felt, and so on to what one saw and assumed when the tunnel experience was finished. No religious or "transpersonal" content should be omitted, only its interpretation. "I felt that I was on another astral plane" would be interpretation.

There are words that are inappropriate in an uninterpreted description. The word "Self", particularly when capitalized, may convey either the Hindu concept of the experiencer of dreams and waking experience who is not identified with any physical or mental aspect of the person, or the Jungian concept of the wholeness of the person. The word "void", particularly when it is preceded by the word "the", is highly suggestive of the Buddhist concept of an emptiness that underlies all worldly manifestation. As long as there is no agreement by psychologists on the definition of "dreamless sleep", it is probably better to avoid the term. The term may carry the Hindu meaning and be tied to verses in the Upanishads that describe the state, or it may be understood in the Tibetan Buddhist context and indicate the experience of a number of visual signs.

Light plays a prominent part in unusual lucid dream experiences. This is surely a light that I see within myself, but if I speak of it as the inner light, and particularly if I capitalize the L and maybe the I, I give the light a religious interpretation. The primary candidate in Western culture for the title "inner Light" is Christ, the light that enlightens everyone, as is taught in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. If I speak of the light as the "clear light," I presume its identification with the "clear light" experience of Tibetan Buddhism. The word "clear" for the Tibetans is not simply descriptive. It has non-visual meaning, at least in part. If I believe it is the Tibetan "clear light" when I see it, then I should describe the light impartially and mention what I thought at the time.

Even when using non-sectarian language we need more precision in our description. Often discussions of light in lucid dreams give the impression that there is only one kind of light. But the light may be formless, or round, or in streaks, instantly gone or stable, soft white or a blazing white, or even orange-yellow. Darkness also has variety. Such concepts as merging into the light or feeling a buzzing light could be explained more in detail. Then there are phrases that seem to describe but tell us little; for instance, "I felt mystical" or "I entered a higher state of consciousness."

We also need to recognize the distinctions between what actually occurs and what seems to occur, between real presence and image. For instance, I may say, "I saw a great light coming in through the window and I flew joyfully over to it." I really was joyful. And I really saw light. But I did not see a window. I saw an image of a window, defined by the appearance of light. I did sense flying, but I didn't really fly.

The Dreamer is Part of the Dream

The dreamer is the observer of the dream, but the dreamer is also a part of the dream. All my experience of myself in the dream is intimately tied to my being in the

dream state--my body awareness, my thoughts and feelings, my assumptions and certainties, my limitations of rationality and memory, my observations, and the conclusions I draw about the dream. All is part of the data of the dream. To understand what happened I must first wake up and observe the one who has observed the dream. Some lucid dreamers believe they have their normal intellectual abilities while dreaming lucidly (Tart, 1984). Others report that they do not reason clearly and remember freely in a lucid dream (Gillespie, 1983; 1984). Obviously, if my judgment is impaired while dreaming, I cannot judge to what extent my judgment is impaired. Only when I am awake can I reflect critically on the observations and judgments I made while dreaming.

While dreaming, I may draw conclusions with transpersonal implications-- that God is in the light, that I have left my body, that the figure in the doorway is Jesus, that I have died, that demons are attacking me, or that I have reached dreamless sleep. These conclusions are interpretations of the experience that arise during the experience, and thus are part of the data to be examined upon awakening. An interpretation may come through minimal reasoning. I see only light, so I conclude that the light is surrounding me. But it appears to me that a large part of interpretation or understanding in a dream or in "mystical" experience happens simply spontaneously, without true recall, recognition, or reason. I see a great light and I "know" that God is in the light. I "know" that I have died, with no apparent basis for that knowledge.

Non-transpersonal Interpretations

"Transpersonal" means extending beyond the individual person. "Transpersonal experience" may mean two general types of experience. I may transcend the experience of my own physical and mental self, whether or not I experience anything beyond myself. Or I may experience another reality beyond my normal experience--the Self, brahman, God, the void, or nirvana--with or without transcending myself completely.

It is when I am awake that I (or others) decide on the basis of the data to what extent an experience was transpersonal. I may be inclined to accept without doubt my intuitions as a dreamer. Or I may never feel an obligation to agree to a transpersonal interpretation of my experience.

Any "transpersonal" experience in obvious continuity from dreaming could surely be suspected of being "only a dream." This is the simplest explanation of "transpersonal" phenomena, no matter how open we are to more complex explanations. Visions are dream images. Levitation and flights-of-the-spirit are dreamed sensations. Light, however spectacular, is seen as dreams are seen. Religious feelings and knowledge come as feelings and knowledge come in dreams. Feelings of timelessness, ineffability, and paradox are not unusual in even ordinary dreams.

Transpersonal Interpretations

We can examine the dream data to see to what extent the dreamer has

transcended awareness of his own physical and mental self. Total transcendence would be the complete elimination of all body awareness (physical and dreamed) and all mental content--that is of all phenomena. The elimination of all dreamer-related phenomena results in object-less consciousness. A lucid dreamer says, "If conditions permit me to concentrate for long . . . I gradually lose body awareness and approach the total elimination of objects of consciousness. Mental activity ceases." (Gillespie, 1986) The reporter describes the gradual elimination of phenomena and thus the gradual transcending of himself. But he does not imply that any transpersonal reality, such as the void or brahman, was experienced beyond himself. A conclusion that the experience of objectless consciousness is in fact the experience of the void that underlies reality or is brahman would be an interpretation that reaches beyond the data.

The description may note that there was an "awareness" during the dream of some transcendental reality. Wren-Lewis (1985) was aware of being "flooded with mystical consciousness." Gillespie (1986) mentions experiences of brilliant light in which, "there remain no images. I become aware of the presence of God and feel spontaneous great joy." In both these cases, the belief in the reality of the transcendental experience is part of the phenomenon. During the experience the dreamer is certain of the transcendental meaning. But when we are awake, as Steven Katz says (1978, p. 8), "We can never be certain that any of our experiences have their source in a transcendental reality." I can believe that my experience reflected reality beyond myself, because the experience fits the description found in the teachings I am committed to, or because I find the experience convincing. In a sense, experience of transcendental reality begins when I believe it begins.

I do not intend to rule out transpersonal interpretations. I only intend to show the need for a distinction to be made between the description of phenomena and transpersonal interpretations. To describe analytically is not to be committed to disbelief. There is certainly a place for transpersonal psychologies and I believe that an objective uninterpreted description of dream and "mystical" phenomena contributes to a proper understanding of them.

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