

## A Conceptual and Phenomenological Analysis of Pure Consciousness During Sleep

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While most accounts of “awareness” during sleep have focused on the phenomenon of “dream lucidity”, in this presentation I will discuss a qualitatively distinct state of consciousness beyond ordinary lucidity that can be experienced along with dreaming and deep sleep. This state is referred to in the ancient Vedic tradition as “samadhi” or pure consciousness”. When this state is maintained during dreaming or sleep, it is said to serve as a silent “witness” or observer to these changing relative states.

### Distinguishing Between Pure Consciousness and Dream Lucidity

Let us begin by distinguishing between ordinary lucidity and witnessing. Dream lucidity appears to involve a commingling of the ordinary waking state with the dream state. During the process of dreaming, it is as if the cognitive capacities of the ordinary waking state become activated, and one can now function volitionally from within the dream world. One’s awareness typically remains identified (or associated) with that of the dream ego, but an arsenal of additional waking state abilities are added (e.g. rational decision processes, memory of having been awake). In lucid dreaming, though one can now actively think about the fact that one is dreaming, one still remains relatively absorbed in the dream world.

In contrast, the experience of pure consciousness is said to totally transcend the activities of both ordinary waking and sleeping. Whereas dream lucidity is typically associated with an increase in cognitive processing and possibly somatic arousal, pure consciousness is described as a heightened state of content-free awareness accompanied by deep silence, a state in which all ordinary activity of thinking, feeling and perceiving has come to a complete rest, yet awareness remains wide awake within itself. What wakes up in lucid dreaming is the localized, active individual ego of the ordinary waking state, the bounded “I” of experience with which we typically identify -- albeit now transported into a dream landscape. In contrast what wakes up during witnessing is the silent, unified state of pure consciousness, said to lie at the basis of all active states of mind and changing states of consciousness. In this state, awareness becomes fully “self-referral”, capable of knowing itself directly without conceptual mediation of any kind. The boundaries of the active, localized self are transcended and awareness is said to become identified with a silent inner unbounded Self at the origin of mind, which is experienced as “i-ness”, “am-ness” or “Being”. Maharishi describes this experience of the Self:

Self has two connotations: lower self and higher Self. The lower self is that aspect of the personality that deals only with the relative aspect of existence. It comprises

the mind that thinks, the intellect that decides, the ego that experiences. This lower self functions only in the relative states of existence – waking, dreaming, and deep sleep ... The higher Self is that aspect of the personality which never changes, absolute Being [pure consciousness], which is the very basis of the entire field of relativity, including the lower self.

In “witnessing”, the Self becomes fully differentiated from and an observer to the changing states of waking, dreaming and sleep and the functioning of the localized self which is embedded in those states. Thus, unlike the typical lucid state in which the localized waking-state self can now function from within the dream; in witnessing, an unbounded Self silently observes from outside of the dream state.

According to Maharishi’s Vedic tradition, witnessing can become a constant reality experienced throughout the 24-hour waking/sleeping cycle and not just experienced during rare moments while dreaming. The goal of Transcendental Meditation (TM) is to provide systematic experience of the pure consciousness state. Maharishi explains:

The Transcendental Meditation technique is an effortless procedure for allowing the excitation of the mind to gradually settle down until the least excited state of mind is reached. This is a state of inner wakefulness with no object of thought or perception, just pure consciousness, aware of its own unbounded nature. It is wholeness, aware of itself, devoid of difference, beyond the division of subject and object -- transcendental consciousness.

During this experience knower, known, and the process of knowing converge in one wholeness of experience. This is described as a self-referral state. Because there is only the awareness of awareness. You are aware that you are. There is no active processing of mental contents it is just a state of pure “knowing-ness,” or being. It is a very gratifying kind of existential reconnection with your basic self.

The goal of meditation, of the TM program, is to maintain this pure consciousness state outside of meditation. On the basis of the deep state of rest experienced during TM, tension and stress is released that otherwise blocks one from this silent experience of the Self. Gradually, over years of meditating, this pure consciousness begins to adhere to you, or you adhere to it, and you begin to maintain this silent state during waking, dreaming, and sleeping. Pure consciousness then functions as a witness to ordinary daily activity. You still may engage in ordinary thought, but the silent state is as a backdrop to active states of consciousness. The advantage of this silent state is that it is a state of complete harmony, peace, and inner fulfillment, and cannot be disrupted. Because it doesn’t get disrupted, you don’t lose this “inner lifeline” to Being within.

A substantial body of research has been conducted on the psychophysiological correlates of pure consciousness. Maharishi predicted that pure consciousness would prove to be a distinctive state of restful alertness qualitatively different from ordinary waking, dreaming and sleeping. On the one hand, a deep state of inner silence would be experienced. On the other hand, one is said to become increasingly alert or aware. Indeed, enlightenment is sometimes referred to as simply being fully awake. Thus, this state is said to have a dual character of being both very silent yet more awake, but not aroused. It is both together in one condition.

It has now been repeatedly shown that in the experience of pure consciousness during TM (as indicated by button pressing immediately after the experience) respiration rate often drops to virtually zero for as long as a few seconds up to a minute. For some advanced practitioners of TM, their respiration is virtually absent for over half of their meditation. On the other hand, during these experiences, EEG alpha and theta power increased substantially. Also EEG patterns became more "coherent" -- i.e., brain waves become similar in phase and frequency within and between cerebral hemispheres (especially in the frontal and central regions). Thus suggesting a simultaneous increase in alertness and functional integration.

### Phenomenological Experience of Pure Consciousness

Now that I have conceptually described the pure consciousness state and how it may differ from lucidity, let me provide some phenomenological descriptions of this state. I'll begin with experiences of pure consciousness in isolation during experiences of TM, as reported by subjects. Their reports are bolstered by the fact that they also displayed substantial periods of respiratory suspension and increased EEG coherence associated with these experiences. The first subject says, "When I experience pure consciousness, it is a state in which I am awake and aware, but not aware of anything except awareness itself. As I merge into the experience, outer-relatedness lessens and inner peace and self-sufficiency remains. It is not an intellectual experience. It is by far the most intimate and simple experience in my life."

A second experience: "I experience pure consciousness as a state of unboundedness and total ease and deep relaxation. There are no thoughts, no feelings, or any other sensations like weight or temperature. I just know I am. There is no notion of time or space, but my mind is fully awake and perfectly clear. It is a very simple and natural state." This quote clarifies that this is "pure" in that it is content-free. There is no object of thought. It is not qualified by any particular thought or feeling. It is awareness awake to its own nature, but without any content. That is why the experience has been described as "being" or just "am-ness."

These experiences, of course, don't just take place in meditators, they occur in non-meditators as well. The purpose of meditation is to stimulate more frequent

occurrence of this experience. In a Prelude, written by the nineteenth century poet Wordsworth, a spontaneous experience of pure consciousness seemed to be described. "That serene and blessed mood in which the affections gently lead us on until the breath of this corporeal frame and even the motion of our human blood almost suspended we are laid asleep in body and become a living soul." This poem clearly describes the dual character of pure consciousness. He describes this experience of attention spontaneously settling down as it does during meditation, until the breath becomes "almost suspended". Yet at the same time we "become a living soul".

We have begun to conduct research to determine if pure consciousness can be maintained outside of meditation -- especially during sleep. In a pilot study of an advanced TM meditator who claimed to be having this witnessing experience of a serene inner-state throughout waking, dreaming, and sleeping, we found when compared to the sleep of two lucid dreamers and a non-lucid dreamer, that this particular subject seemed to physiologically maintain a deeper state of rest. He had lower respiration rate, lower heart rate, and less REM density, but he also appeared to be alert and could signal from REM sleep, Stage I, and Stage II sleep with strong lateral eye movements. This suggests that he may be experiencing the restfully alert state of pure consciousness during sleep.

Through the efforts of Jayne Gackenbach and Robert Cranson we also now have some preliminary content analyses of the pure conscious experience during sleep. A very advanced group of meditators at an in-residence meditation facility in upstate New York filled out questionnaires on their frequency of experiencing three types of consciousness in sleep: lucid dreaming (which we defined as actively thinking about the fact that you are dreaming); witnessing dreaming (while dreaming you experience a quiet, peaceful inner awareness or wakefulness completely separate from the dream); or witnessing deep sleep (during dreamless sleep you experience a quiet, peaceful, inner state of awareness of wakefulness). These subjects were then required for validation purposes to provide a detailed description of these experiences. Gackenbach then performed a content analysis by first identifying categories that may discriminate among these experiences and then assigning the different experiences into each category. There were 55 lucid dreams, 41 witnessing dreams, and 47 witnessing in deep sleep experiences reported by these 66 advanced male meditators. The content categories showing distinctions between them are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1  
Percent Representations for Content Categories as a Function of Type  
of Sleep Consciousness Experience

Content Categories	Type of Sleep Experience		
	Lucid Dream	Witness Dream	Wit. Deep Sleep
Number of Experiences	55	41	47
State Transition*	20%	2%	55%
Physical Body Reference*	2%	5%	27%
Dream Body Flying*	11%	12%	4%
Dream Body Running*	16%	2%	0%
Lightness Reference*	0%	7%	8%
Dream Control*	47%	5%	2%
Feeling of Separateness*	7%	73%	33%
Positive Emotions	35%	43%	25%
High Positive Emotions*	7%	17%	17%
Consciousness Trigger*	53%	0%	4%

\*An asterisk indicates a significant difference using Chi-square between types of sleep experiences for that content category at the .05 level.

Most revealing of these categories was the one on feelings of separateness. In lucid dreaming only 7 percent of the cases were those in which people reported feeling separateness. Whereas in the witnessing dream experience, 73 percent of the cases spontaneously reported in their dream description that the dream went on, but they were separate from it. These reports are consistent with our conceptual descriptions of witnessing as involving the complete differentiation of pure consciousness from the dream state -- functions as a silent witness completely distinct from or outside of the dreaming state.

Following are examples of maintaining the silent experience of pure consciousness along with but separate from the dream state: "Sometimes no matter what comes into the dream, I feel, an inner tranquil awareness that is removed from the dreaming. Sometimes I may even be caught up in the dream but the inner awareness of peace remains." Another example: "I watch it as it is going on separate from me. There are parts, me and the dream, two different realities." These are examples of this feeling of separateness.

Another category which is interesting is that of emotion. There seem to be positive emotions associated with all three states, but extremely positive emotion was reported more frequently for witnessing dreaming and witnessing deep sleep as were feelings of

lightness. This is reminiscent of, according to Maharishi's Vedic tradition, an experience of profound bliss or "Ananda" experience of the inner Self or Being.

On the other hand, dream control was much more frequent during lucid dreaming than witnessing dreams. This is consistent with the claims that dream lucidity typically involves active information processes, manipulation of dream content. As it were, the "will" or volitional capacity of the individual ego can act on its thoughts and desires. This is in contrast to the experience of pure consciousness which is said to be one of complete inner fulfillment or contentment. The Self does not act, but silently observes the changes occurring within waking, dreaming, and sleep.

Also over half the time lucid dreaming was triggered by incongruent mental events in the dreams that appeared to stimulate or awaken intellectual or discriminative processes typical of the waking state. On the other hand, witnessing dreaming and sleep were virtually never triggered by such mental events. The most unambiguous criterion of witnessing is maintenance of pure consciousness even during deep sleep. Because lucidity involves active thinking and deep sleep is generally, although not always, without mentation, it is not surprising that lucidity (as typically experienced) drops out during deep sleep. However, after long-term practice, TM practitioners gradually begin to report experiences of "witnessing", or maintenance of pure consciousness, even during dreamless sleep.

Here are a few examples: "It is a feeling of infinite expansion and bliss and nothing else. First, it is like an abstract experience of bliss. There is no identity at all. Then I become aware that I exist, but there is no individual personality. Then I become aware that I am an individual, but no details of who, where, or what or when. Eventually these details fill in, and I might then wake up. Sometimes I'm lying there very quietly enjoying the silence, and then I will gradually become aware that I am snoring." Mother experience: "How do you describe an unmanifest experience? It has only happened a half dozen times in 15 years, but when it occurs, its crystal clear. Silence, wakefulness. Dark/clear and open. Silent/lively - like an amplifier turned on, but no sound. The experience fades as boundaries of dreams or waking state gather, gain definition and overshadow."

From the perspective of Maharishi's Vedic Science, the significance of the experience of pure consciousness is that it provides the foundation for the development of stable higher stages of consciousness or "enlightenment". Witnessing of deep sleep indicates that the inner wakefulness of pure consciousness is now beginning to be maintained even during the most extreme conditions of mental inertia -- dreamless sleep. Indeed, according to Maharishi, the first stable higher stage of consciousness termed "cosmic consciousness" -- is defined as the maintenance of pure consciousness throughout the 24-hour cycle of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep.

One final consideration, in the growth of the first stage of enlightenment, pure consciousness is said to become a silent observer or witness to the changing states of waking, dreaming, and sleeping. However, this development of inner self-sufficiency should not be confused with a state of compassionless detachment. In accordance with Erik Erikson's injunction that identity provides the basis of intimacy, it is also when one establishes one's ultimate inner identity "Being" or Self that a truly profound foundation for intimacy with others is achieved. Unless you fully know who you are through the self-referral of Being, you are not in an ideal position to know and help others. The unbounded Self is classically described as "nonattached" not because it is withdrawn but because it can no longer be disrupted or overshadowed by the boundaries or changing values of thoughts, perceptions and actions. The blissful experience of inner Being thus provides a natural basis for sharing. The sharing of one's happiness and inner resources with others.