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Title

Tibetan Buddhist dream yoga and the limits of Western Psychology.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/70g9147s>

ISBN

9781440829475

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Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed

In R. Hurd & K. Bulkeley (Eds.) *Lucid dreaming: New perspectives on consciousness in sleep. Volume 2: Religion, creativity, and culture.* Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014, pp 1-22.

Tibetan Buddhist Dream Yoga and the Limits of Western Psychology

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“Look to your experience in sleep to discover whether or not you are truly awake.”¹

The Buddha has been called both The Awakened One and The Enlightened One, and both of these qualities are evoked by the word *lucid* in the way that we now use it to refer to lucid dreaming. However, the uses to which lucidity in dreams has been put by the West is limited and relatively superficial compared to lucidity in dreams, dreamless sleep, daily life, and even death in the practices of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism. As the Tibetan teacher Tendzin Wangyal puts it, “Dream practice is not just for personal growth or to generate interesting experiences. It is part of the spiritual path and its results should affect all aspects of life by changing the practitioner’s identity, and the relationship between the practitioner and the world.”² What does that mean? How can it be accomplished? And what implications might these practices have for our psychology and for Western science more generally? In this chapter I will address such questions, first by discussing the Buddhist material, and then by examining the ways in which the effects of lucidity in Tibetan Buddhist practitioners challenge basic assumptions about bodies and minds in Western science.

These are not merely academic issues. Even in my own meager experiences, lucid dreams have the power to make vividly real--in fact sear into my mind--teachings previously only glimpsed through a screen of concepts. This is important for people, regardless of what sort of path they may think they are or aren't following, because Buddhism specializes in "elephant in the room" teachings, pointers to aspects of everyday experience that haunt people but that, in our usual non-lucid frame of mind, we desperately don't want to recognize. Western dream theories, like Western psychological theories about waking life, tend to focus on the contents of experience: perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Buddhism, in its deeper teachings, reverses the direction of that searchlight to look to the nature of experience and the experiencer. That is where, according to Tibetan Vajrayana, we find not only our fundamental ignorance and avoidance but also our potential for transformation. That is what Buddhist sleep and dream practices are about.

Tibetan Buddhist Yogas of Sleep and Dream

General Buddhist Background

Buddhism originated approximately 25,000 years ago, and, during the long arc of its historical development, its teachings and practices evolved. There are presently three major world forms of Buddhism (as generally agreed by both Buddhist practitioners and religious studies scholars). These are Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, all of which are actively growing in the West. A characteristic of the evolution of Buddhism is that each of the later forms incorporated the basic teachings of the earlier ones, added understandings of its own, and reinterpreted the

earlier teachings in the light of the additions. It is in the advanced practices of the Tibetan Vajrayana that lucidity in dream and sleep become central, but, as I will try to show, lucidity in the night could equally augment realization for the other forms of Buddhism. It can also be a boon for anyone, spiritually engaged or not, who is willing to turn away from obsession with the contents of experience and look where the finger of lucidity is pointing.

What is meant by lucidity in the Tibetan context? In Western usage, a lucid dream is one in which the dreamer is awake and conscious within the virtual reality of the dream. He knows, "This is a dream. I am dreaming," while the dream continues. The awareness that it is a dream can last for only a moment (as is usual for excitable beginners) or throughout a lengthy dream with many episodes. Lucid dreams vary in how stable they are, in what and how much the dream self knows, and in how much control the dreamer has over himself and the dream. For the novice Tibetan Buddhist dream practitioner, the same constraints apply, and lucidity simply means being able to wake up in the dream. However, this does not mean being fully awake in the Tibetan understanding of what that is. The ultimate purpose of the practice is to enable the practitioner to be awake to the essence and nature of reality whether by night or day, and whether alive or dead. What does that mean?

Tibetan advanced Vajrayana (such as *Mahamudra* and *Dzogchen*)³ teaches that there is a natural primordial state beyond the mind (not created or fabricated by mind) that is pure, complete, and all-good. The phenomenal world of experience, both inner and outer, is the radiance of that primordial state. When a person comes to the pure perception (*dag snang*) of himself and the world as that timeless and

perfect radiance and can act effortlessly and with integrity from such knowledge, that is the point when he is said to be truly awake. The confused dualistic mind from which we start is blind to that mode of knowing. A person with a confused mind runs in circles during the day destroying himself and his world and at night sleeps “the corpse-like sleep of death.” From the point of view of pure perception, the objects and events of both day and night are like dreams: brilliant, vivid, poignant, even sacred, but possessing no inherent nature. That is not to say that they are an illusion; it is that they have a different kind of being than we can grasp with the dualistic sensory surface of our minds. In the words of the meditation teacher and accomplished dream yogi Steven Tainer,

Lucidity means living from the root of your being. It means not getting sucked into moving to a root that is shallow and stupid. This narrowness and shallowness is an action that we perform. We do it and we can let go of it. In the case of dream, the point is made very clearly. Dream allows you to open up a level of experience not generally available.⁴

This is why in the Vajrayana the use of the dream analogy and training in dreams can be so useful to this path.

If such language looks like mere philosophy or poetry (or nonsense), that’s because we’ve started at the fruition of what should be a long journey, rather than at its beginning. So it is time to backtrack. Conveniently there is a mode of teaching within the Tibetan Vajrayana called the three-*yana* (three-path) approach in which the development of the mind of the practitioner is said to mirror the historical developmental of Buddhism.⁵ Within the Vajrayana there are also two different

approaches to developing lucidity in the night, each suitable for different stages of the three-yana journey. In the approach of strong intention, the practitioner focuses on becoming awake during his dreams using methods resembling those in the West. When somewhat stable in lucidity, he can apply Dharma teachings to his dreams in order to achieve greater insight. In the yogic approach used in Vajrayana proper, lucidity is accomplished by bringing the mind into the central energy channel of the body where intention is aided by body positions, guidance of breathing, and/or visualizations. Because the stages of sleep and dream are considered parallel to the stages of death, lucidity practices are also taught as preparation for dying. Using the conceit of a three-yana journey, I will sketch the evolution of Buddhist teachings and show how lucidity applies at different stages.

Early Buddhism

The first word of teaching the Buddha is said to have uttered is *dukkha* which means *suffering* or *unsatisfactoriness*. Suffering is also the first of what are called the Four Noble Truths.⁶ It tends to be a mysterious first truth for Westerners given our cultural myth of Struggle, Success, Live Happily Ever After. The iconic image of the youthful Buddha is of someone who had everything anyone could want and yet was still discontent, in fact so discontent that he felt impelled to leave it all and begin his journey. Here, in classic narrative form, is the first proclamation that the content of one's life and mind is not all that matters.

How can getting everything one wants still be suffering? To see this requires looking closely *into*, as well as *at*, one's experience, neither of which people ordinarily do. This is where meditation enters. In early Buddhism, meditation

practices were developed to first calm and stabilize the mind (Sanskrit: *shamatha*), so that from that platform of “peaceful abiding” one would be able to direct awareness toward moment-to-moment mental functioning and develop insight into its nature. (Present therapeutic uses of Buddhist derived meditation techniques in the West rely heavily on calming, not insight.⁷) What were the insights that were to be developed by Buddhism? Some of the first are called the Three Marks of Existence. They are:

Impermanence

We may think we already know about it. “You’re going to die;” say all religions. Poets sing of it: “kings are forgotten,” “maidens wither,” “the times they are a-changin’.” In Buddhism such things are called *gross impermanence*. While they are important in arousing motivation to practice (one traditional exercise was contemplation of corpses), insight practices were aimed at a subtler form of perception. Fundamental impermanence, the appreciation of which can change consciousness, was understood to be the moment-to-moment arising and falling, birth and death, of perceptions and thoughts themselves. This *subtle impermanence* is so intimate an aspect of our knowing process that it ordinarily escapes notice. Although the first thing that a new meditator may encounter is a profusion of ever changing thoughts, that is usually interpreted as “I’m doing it wrong” rather than as a discovery.

Enter lucid dreaming. When impermanence is taught as an abstract doctrine, people’s usual reaction is, “Of course; so what!” But when, in a lucid dream, the dreamer realizes that all that detail, color, creative exuberance, and awesomeness of the dream as it unfolds moment by moment is also disappearing even as it comes

into being and that it will not even be remembered except in the grossest sense, then the literalness of impermanence may start to penetrate. And having experienced it in dream, one might look more closely at the waking world of the senses and see it manifests in that very same way.

A personal experience: I am not a natural lucid dreamer, so was delighted one night on a retreat to wake up in a dream and remain lucid for more than a few seconds. I was standing on Shattuck Avenue, a main thoroughfare in Berkeley just west of the university campus, and began to peer at the colorful buildings around me with the idea of comparing them to my memories of how that familiar spot looked in real life. With each eye movement I saw something different, something beautiful, haunting, but ungraspable and saddeningly impossible to remember. Giving up, I leapt into the air; so did all the other pedestrians on the street, and we began a dance in flight. When I returned to Berkeley, I visited that spot. After my initial bemusement at how drab it was, I started to peer at the buildings as I had in the dream and was flooded by the wondrousness of ordinary vision so like the use of vision in the lucid dream had been and then by passing glimpses of the beauty of people on the street, earthbound as they and I were in this particular moment. Glimpses of lucidity in dreams and in waking life can reinforce one another leading to a cycle of increased lucidity.

Egolessness

Buddhism is famous for its doctrine of no self, a concept greeted with paranoia by clinical psychologists and smugness by brain researchers. In fact, the Buddhist idea of egolessness concerns a different dimension of experience than is covered by

either of those fields. Buddhist teachings show a clear awareness of the integrity and resilience now attributed to a healthy ego by clinical psychology and discuss these virtues under other names such as wholesome habits and wisdom attributes.

Egolessness is also not the same as the constructs that replace the idea of a real self in cognitive science, such as self-schemas, supervisory structures, and brain states.

After all, who is it that is blithely discoursing on self-schemas and brain states?

What the early Buddhist teaching of egolessness is pointing towards is that when one closely observes moment-to-moment experience, one's self is seen to not have the solidity and continuity that we imagine. (Spoiler alert: Mahayana and Vajrayana add considerably to this account.) And yet this fantasy self can also be clearly seen as the source of one's motivations, emotions, and actions. With further insight, the observant person sees how perception and action based on this self bind one to a false and constricted life based on grasping for what is perceived good for that self, aggressing against what is perceived as threatening to it, and ignoring what is judged irrelevant.

The form of knowing based on these three tendencies of grasping, aggression, and ignorance is called consciousness (Skt: *vijñana*, Tib: *namshe*). It is in contrast to alternative deeper and more comprehensive forms of knowing that we can call *awareness* (from a path perspective Skt: *vipashyana*, Tib: *lhagthong*; from the more fundamental perspective of nondual awareness Skt: *vidya* Tib: *rigpa*). The distinction is important for understanding the Tibetan teachings on lucidity (and everything else). Consciousness is understood to give a false view of reality, a view that leads to suffering. The purpose of lucid dream (and the other practices) is to

lead the practitioner out of consciousness to the other truer modes of knowing. Since consciousness is built around a mistaken view of one's self, anything that lightens the sense of self is a boon to the path.

Lucid dreaming can do just that. One hallmark of a lucid dream is that the dreamer realizes that his dream self is not his real (i.e. his daytime) self. With that knowledge, relaxation can occur. The lucid dreamer can see his dream self change form. He can see it readily cope with situations that would be nightmares for a non-lucid self. A more advanced lucid dreamer can play with the dream self, changing its body, its environment, and its moods in a flash. The grip of concepts on the dreamer's mind, including concepts about himself, could begin to lighten. All of this can transfer to waking life. As with the teaching of impermanence, experience of the permeability and flexibility of the self in a lucid dream has a personal potency that no amount of deconstruction of the self by philosophical or neurocognitive arguments can match.

Suffering

We all know about disappointment, sickness, tragedy, and the other pains of body and mind, but what close observation of experience by even a partially insightful mind reveals is that in a life fueled by grasping, aggression and ignorance there is no contentment. Getting what you want increases rather than assuages desire (watch what happens the next time you bite into something delicious); protecting against something feared only increases paranoia; triumphing over a hated enemy feeds further aggression, and ignoring is beset by uneasiness. Struggling to escape one of these painful states of mind either ensnares one further into it or leads to one of the

other painful states. This constant cycling from one mode of being in consciousness to another is called *samsara*, the prison in which most people live their days and that is reproduced in dreams at night. Getting out of the prison requires first seeing the chains of cause and effect (karma; habits) that keep one bound and then acting to break those chains. Close observation reveals why habits are so maddeningly resistant to change--normally by the time one realizes what one is doing (for example, eating yet another potato chip), the conditions for doing so have already happened unnoticed.⁸ With strong intention combined with close observation one can catch the process early enough to interrupt automaticity and replace responses known to perpetuate suffering and create obstacles to the path with more beneficial ones.

Lucidity in dreams can augment this process. Lucid dreams can make causality real to people. In waking life one seldom gets instant feedback about the effects of one's intentions and actions, but in a lucid dream, the dreamer's mental states as well as overt actions can have a direct effect on the dream. A feared monster may get bigger, and if the dreamer runs from something frightening, it likely chases her or perhaps she finds she cannot run. A dreamer who single-mindedly wants to win in a tennis match may find his opponent performing superhuman good shots. The dreamer can also see how a change in his intentions or actions might bring other results. He reminds himself that it is a dream, relaxes, and the monster shrinks, the feared person changes or disappears, and the opponent becomes human again. I once realized I was dreaming in the middle of a nightmare of the type I tend to have each year before the first day of fall classes. I was running in a panic, unable

to find my class. When lucidity allowed me to pause, I could see that I was so distraught because I really wanted to communicate to the students in that class. Then lo! There I was in a lecture hall before a vast audience of beautifully dressed, attentive (and fragrant) people.

In a lucid dream, a person can relate in new ways to the experience of suffering itself. Normally people do their utmost to avoid this negativity. But when the dreamer knows that the nightmare is a dream, she can face into it. In fact, she could actually be appreciative of the negative, somewhat in the way that we can appreciate drama in a movie, novel, music, or painting. This also can transfer to daily life.

Mahayana

Mahayana Buddhism is estimated to have begun around 100 AC in India and eventually spread throughout East Asia. It incorporated the foundational teachings and practices of earlier Buddhism and to them added two new realizations to be discovered by practitioners: emptiness (*shunyata*) and compassion (*karuna*).⁹ When Mahayana is taught as part of the three-yana path in Vajrayana some understanding and experience of these two aspects of Mahayana is considered an indispensable gateway and prerequisite for entering the Vajrayana.

Shunyata

Shunyata is slippery to talk about because it concerns what is beyond our conceptual mind. One traditional way of teaching it is by means of negations; a second way is by analogy to dreams. Objects and people in dreams do not exist in the same way that we take daytime trees and rocks and ourselves to exist, but neither

are dream objects nonexistent. From the three-yana Tibetan perspective, lucid dreaming might serve as a fast track for recognizing some of the insights of shunyata.

1) The empty aspect of shunyata. Just as on a movie screen where there is nothing behind the images (no actual prairie, horsemen, or guns), so it is for the images in a dream. A lucid dreamer could be aware of this (though usually is not) even while the dream is playing out and thus be ripened for eventual insight into the experiential façade of waking life.

2) Shunyata as interdependence. Things do not have a self-nature but arise interdependently with everything else. A lucid dreamer could marvel at the way the setting, occupants, and situation of the dream arise mysteriously and creatively from his own mind at a given instant. This might lead to appreciation in waking life of the vast net of interdependence that constitutes the world.

3) Shunyata as sudden release. The moment of realizing you're dreaming might provide this kind of abrupt experience of freedom.

4) Shunyata as Great Doubt. This does not mean a small, worried doubt about a particular thing, but doubt of conceptual and emotional constructions as a whole. A contemplative lucid dreamer might practice looking at each thing in the dream (and in life), including the thoughts of his dream ego, asking "Is that really so?"

5) Shunyata as no-mind or don't-know-mind or completely open mind. The lucid dreamer might be graced with that sudden glimpse beyond all thought that is said to underlie any experience.

Compassion

That first flash of the open mind of shunyata is also a flash of open heart: compassion, warmth, friendliness, and caring. Shunyata is understood to be inseparable from compassion “like the two wings of a bird.” This kind of compassion is called *transcendent* because it is not based on the business deal mentality of what-will-I-get-out-of-this, but on the wisdom, generated through the open mind of shunyata, of what needs to be done in this moment. In fact, Mahayana practitioners take Bodhisattva vows to be reborn in life after life in order to be of benefit to other sentient beings.

Lucid dreaming can bring direct experience of the effects of generating compassion, even if it is the ordinary self-referential kind. (We have to start somewhere.) When a dreamer confronted with something fearsome realizes he is dreaming, his fear usually lessens or vanishes, and, if so inclined, he may be able to generate compassion for his dream enemies. He then gets rapid feedback (as discussed in the section on causality); a feared or attacked monster typically gets nastier, whereas a loved monster may transform into a sad little creature, a friendly monster, prince charming, who knows? Not surprisingly, there is anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of lucid dreaming in therapy for phobias. Feedback in waking life may not be as rapid or situations as dramatic as in lucid dreams, but who has not experienced that after a change of heart toward some intractable seeming situation, such as a job or relationship, the outer situation also changed.

Vajrayana

The Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle) began circa 800 AC in India. Early forms of

it moved into China and Japan, later ones to Tibet.¹⁰ As with Mahayana, Vajrayana incorporates and reinterprets teachings that came before it, adding two basic realizations and a cornucopia of skillful means (i.e. practices) to accomplish these.

Background in Vajrayana

What does Vajrayana add to Mahayana? There is disagreement on this matter, particularly about the meaning of emptiness, among the four main lineages into which the Buddhism of Tibet is organized. Briefly summarized, three of the lineages (Nyingma, Kagyu, and Sakya) hold the *shentong* (other empty) view¹¹ in which it is the dualistic conceptual mind of samsara with its appearances of self and other that is empty; however, there is another form of knowing beyond that mind that is filled with wisdom. It is through this wisdom that one knows the natural primordial state that is complete and perfect, radiating the phenomenal world of experience. Known with the pure vision of wisdom, the ordinary world of experience--samsara with its grasping, aggression, ignorance, and suffering--is seen to actually consist of the wisdom energies of that radiance.

The other lineage (the Gelug) holds a *rangtong* (self empty) view in which emptiness of the mind and world is the only absolute truth, and one can speak in positive terms only about compassion. Note that with respect to view, the Gelug order is a Mahayana and not a Vajrayana lineage;¹² however it draws its practices from the same pool as the other lineages, so in that respect is like them. For simplicity, I will focus primarily on the teachings and practices that are Vajrayana in view as well as means in the discussion of Vajrayana lucidity.

At this point one might ask: if wisdom knowing beyond the mind of samsara is so good and so potent, why don't people just embrace it without need for any kind of path at all? In fact such a mode of knowing--direct and nondual--is terrifying to ego. Why?

This is an intimate question. We are talking about the relation of the subject and object in personal experience. Usually we are so actively engaged in the activities of life that we lose ourselves in them. This is not direct nondual knowing, but a state of absorption without awareness. The self-observer is there but out of sight, fragmented into a cloud of perceptions, intentions, fantasies, thoughts, emotions, and memories that provide the sense of who one is and what one is about, but do not make one fully present. When that person attempts to stop and look at her experience, say with some form of mindfulness meditation, the shadow of the ever present but slippery observer (perhaps a talkative one) comes to the fore, another kind of unstable duality that makes it difficult to be aware.

In the wisdom mode of knowing, the mind is neither absorbed nor separated but simply on the spot. This has been likened to sliding down a razor blade. The bubble of one's life in samsara with all its apparent meanings is popped. People may give up everything for a spiritual path--pleasure, wealth, comfort, fame, relationship, even life itself--as long as they can keep the sense of a witness to it all. The mind touches the nondual, and it flees. One does not come to any path wanting this; one wants better interior decoration for ones bubble not its demise. Yet the nondual is the gateway to the mind that can see the groundless edifice in which humans live as dream, thereby clearing the way for transformative wisdom to manifest. Hence the

need for the skillful means aspect of the Vajrayana: teachings, transmissions, and practices such as dream yoga.

The role of the Tibetan Vajrayana teacher (the *lama*) is to act as a conduit for the primordial state and its radiance. The lama gives mind-to-mind transmissions both of deep and of more specific wisdoms. He directs his students and the communities of students that are practicing under his guidance. Teachings, texts, and *sadhana* practices are also considered conduits--sadhanas are liturgies in which particular wisdom energies are visualized as "deities" with accompanying mantras and *mudras*, i.e. gestures. Working with a Vajrayana teacher requires a bond with that teacher (*samaya*) that involves commitment and should not be undertaken casually.

The practitioner's inner energy body also plays a central role. Advanced *sadhana* practice and the Vajrayana sleep, dream, and death practices presuppose a yogic view of the body. The body as a solid object with its organs, blood, brain, muscles, skin, and so on--the body that Western medicine, neuroscience, and increasingly psychology take as what is most fundamental--is called the *outer level* or the *gross body*. A yogic view shows the body made instead of subtle patterns of energy.¹³ At this *inner level*, we see a body structured around channels (*tsa*) and chakras resembling, but not the same as, the Hindu system. An inner central channel rises straight up in front of the spine, flanked by two side channels. From each chakra on the central channel, networks of increasingly finer subsidiary channels spread throughout the body. Moving through the channels is life energy (*lung*). This system is considered subtler than the medical meridians and chi of Chinese


medicine with which Westerners are familiar. From the Tibetan yogic point of view, a wild, disturbed, or deluded mind is the result of life energy racing through the side channels and their branches; thus the mind and its energy need to be brought into the central channel. From there the practitioner can move to the secret level of manifestation at the heart chakra and from there to realization of the clear light nature of the self-known basic ground of being itself.

Tibetan Lucid Dream Practices

There are two main settings in which the Tibetan yogas of sleep and dream are taught and practiced. Within the Kagyu lineage, sleep and dream are considered advanced retreat practices for which much preparation is needed. They are taught as one of the Six Yogas of Naropa,¹⁴ a practice cycle undertaken toward the end of the traditional three-year retreat. Preparation includes not only a firm grounding in the realizations discussed as part of early Buddhism and Mahayana, a commitment to one's Vajrayana teacher, and completion of the traditional Vajrayana *ngondro* (preliminary) and *sadhana* practices, but also a set of strenuous yogic physical preliminaries to prepare the body properly. Only then can the practitioner begin the first of the Six Yogas of Naropa, which is *tummo*, the inner heat practice, done to purify past karmic habits.¹⁵ The second of the Yogas of Naropa is the practice of the Illusory Body; here, with the body-mind now cleared of major obstructions, the practitioner aims for realization that his gross body is not real in the way his gross senses take it to be. After that he can begin lucid sleep and dream practice in earnest. The primary technique for generating lucidity is falling asleep with one's mind resting on the appropriate seed syllables in the chakras of the central channel.

For the nondual mind of the central channel, lucid awareness in dreamless sleep and in dreams are both natural; which of these is first evoked will be guided by the location (chakra) in the central channel on which the practitioner focuses. The final result would be realization of the clear light nature of one's being both night and day.

The Nyingma lineage is more relaxed about giving transmissions of awakened states, and teaches lucidity practices to students earlier in their paths.¹⁶ These practices can be done in ordinary life, though retreats are also helpful. During the day the student is instructed to stay present, focusing on the dreamlike quality of experience. It is interesting to compare this practice with the LaBerge treatment of daytime observations.¹⁷ In the LaBerge system you ask yourself, "Am I dreaming?" in order to observe and contrast the daytime evidence that you are *not* dreaming with actual dreams--for example, clocks, printed material, and gravity behave differently in dreams. In the Tibetan practice, the point is to arouse the student's nascent intuition that ordinary daytime experience, fleeting and insubstantial even if vivid, is a dream, or at least dreamlike. At night visualization of seed syllables and symbols in the chakras provides the power. The syllable of the primordial ground is a white

Tibetan Ah () . Focus on a white Ah in the heart center leads the mind toward lucid dreamless sleep. Focus on a red Ah in the throat center courts lucidity in dreams.

Once somewhat stable in lucidity in dreams, the practitioner is encouraged to play with transforming the dream images. The purpose is to become master of the dream rather than the dream being master of the person. Vajrayana teachers are

well aware that lucid dreaming can be as seductive as ordinary non-lucid dreams and that without the insights, commitments, motivations, and tools provided by Dharma practice, even a stable lucid dreamer is likely to use the dream for the goals of samsara, i.e. to manipulate the content of his dreams for entertainment or therapy rather than pursue it as an aid in awakening--as is amply illustrated by the lucid dreaming movement. In fact the reader may have judged this discussion of the Vajrayana section not as sexy as earlier ones because we are no longer dealing with content of dreams.

The teacher guides the student both in ordinary ways, such as making recommendations of what to do or attend to in a lucid dream, and in more direct ways while the student sleeps. Recommendations might include performing meditation practices both mental and physical in the lucid dream state, practicing compassion toward the apparent beings in the dream, noticing the vividness, color or clarity of perceptual dream objects, or perhaps starting to exercise the student's nascent Vajrayana powers by carrying out Buddha activities in the dream, such as pacifying difficult dream situations or enriching meager ones. Such exercises have particular power; it is believed, because the sleeping mind, while usually even more unaware and deluded than by day (after all you're asleep), is also potentially closer to one's core nature; thus anything done in a lucid dream can be a potent source of moving one's entire being toward awake.

Some teachers also perform direct guidance to the student's mind during sleep. Such mind transmissions are understood to operate through the interdependent nature of the phenomena of the world. Some pathways between

interdependent minds, such as those between a Vajrayana teacher and his committed students, become open enough for the student to receive an impetus during sleep that can move him toward greater lucidity and realization. Occasionally a student might receive a prompt toward a specific kind of dream. Realizing that such direct connections exist and are efficacious can be quite startling to Western students (myself included) irrespective of their intellectual belief in interdependence.

Typology of Dreams

The view of interdependence also forms the ground for the Tibetan typology of dreams. Ordinary Tibetans do not normally engage in lucid dream practices; however they are very interested in dreams, tell their dreams to each other, and are particularly interested in dreams of clarity and prophetic dreams.

Dream types are:

1) Karmic dreams: for ordinary people most dreams arise from life events. Tibetans realize, as do Western dream researchers, that a large proportion of these dreams, particularly those occurring in the early part of the night, are from recent events--in Western dream research this is called *day residue*.

2) Dreams of clarity: these are dreams of something that is real but beyond the dreamer's daylight personal experience; for example, an ordinary person might dream of her child being killed in an automobile accident at the same time that was actually occurring, or a young Tibetan lama might receive teachings and texts in a dream from a teacher he had never met but later discovered actually existed. You can

see how connections within an interdependent world could constitute part of an explanation for such dreams.

3) Prophetic dreams: Tibetans explain prophecy thus: if you see an ant scurrying across the surface of a table, you can predict that if she doesn't stop or change direction, she will reach the edge and then have to either go downwards or to the right or left. From within the constricted vision and psyche of the ant, however, she doesn't know that. Ordinary people, living in the cocoon of their imagined selves, are like the ant. But the Mahayana or Vajrayana practitioner, having a wider field of knowing than others, might see clearly in a dream what will happen if a situation continues on its present course. This is not a fatalistic view because that course can be changed. (In the sciences, we do this kind of prediction with probabilistic models.)

4) Clear light dreams: these can only be accessed through lucid dreamless sleep, the topic to which we now turn.

Lucid Dreamless Sleep

Lucid dreamless sleep is normally not attempted until the practitioner has gained at least some proficiency in lucid dreaming. The practices to induce lucidity in dreamless sleep¹⁸ are similar to those of lucid dream, basically sustaining a lucidity inducing visualization as one falls asleep. However here the visualization is in the heart center rather than the throat and may be composed of a progression of images whose purpose is to conduct the practitioner into the sleep state with awareness unbroken. The reason why lucidity in dreamless sleep is difficult is that it requires nondual awareness. People imagine that being lucid, i.e. knowing one is dreaming, in

dreamless sleep would be oneself as an observer looking at a blank darkness. Meditators have the same fantasy when told to observe “the space between thoughts.” But both of these require a different kind of knowing altogether. There is no separate me looking into blankness. Lucid dreamless sleep is the sleeping mind knowing itself without content. No amount of yogic instruction can succeed unless the practitioner is willing to let go of her observer and abide in the self-knowing light of her mind. This cannot be faked.

The clear light dream (more properly the clear light awareness) is the final stage of lucid dream and sleep practice. Here the mind rests as the self-knowing open luminous clear light. The fruition of this is that when experiences with content again spontaneously arise, whether in dreams or waking life, those experiences can be seen as the expression of the clear light ground of being: timeless, pure, complete and all-good. Or, in the words of the Nyingma master Lochen Dharma Shri, “For ordinary people sleep takes place in the manner of obscuring the mind with darkness. But for those who have apprehended the clear light, like rays of sunlight cast upon a clear sky, all appearances arise in clarity, without conceptualization, joyfully and without clinging.”¹⁹ From this state can come powerful skillful actions to benefit the confused world.

Lucid Dying

The stages of dying and traversing the *bardo* (intermediate state) between death and the next rebirth²⁰ are understood in Tibetan Buddhism to be analogous to the stages of falling asleep, dreaming, and resuming one’s life the following day—except that there is more fear and higher stakes involved in the experience of dying. Stages of

physical death and rebirth are likewise considered analogous to the death, transition, and rebirth that we go through in waking life moment-to-moment and situation-to-situation. It is perhaps because such accounts of death and rebirth find resonance with people's experiences of groundlessness and fear in daily life that the Tibetan view of death has gained best-seller popularity in our culture, irrespective of its consideration as a religious belief.

As someone dies, his senses and the elements of his body are understood to dissolve until, at the moment of death, his mind enters a state analogous to that of dreamless sleep or the split second space between one thought or perception and the next. For the ordinary person this passes as an instant of unconsciousness, but the person who has practiced constant lucidity in life has the opportunity to recognize this as the clear light and to liberate himself from karmic chains as the clear light nature of his mind joins the mother clear light nature of the ground of reality. If this opportunity is missed, the person enters the *bardo of intrinsic reality* in which the fundamental energy aspects of his mind manifest forms: first peaceful forms of overwhelming brilliance, then fearsome wrathful forms. This stage is analogous to dreaming or to the sensory perceptions and emotional involvements of waking life. If the practitioner of lucidity can recognize these forms as his own mind, he again has the opportunity to liberate himself and release the energetic patterns of his mind into basic luminosity.

If the opportunity is again missed, the dead person goes on to the *bardo of becoming* where, blown about helplessly by thoughts and visions and panicked by his groundlessness, he becomes desperate for the solidity afforded by a body and

will blindly grab at anything available, however impoverished or hellish. This is analogous to the state of a person waking from sleep whose indistinct feelings and wandering thoughts gradually converge into his habitual attitudes of anger, desire, anxiety, resentment, hope, dullness, longing, resignation and the rest, a process that falls apart and re-congeals throughout the day.

Does this description of the death journey sound remote and theoretical? I confess it was somewhat that way for me until I saw my root teacher a day after his death. The Tibetan understanding is that in the dying process the subtle energies of the nondual mind withdraw from the outer body, move into the central channel, and, at the moment of dying, unite at the heart center. For an ordinary person that lasts only an instant as he passes into unconscious darkness. However the mind of a Tibetan high lama will remain in the heart center in what is called the *death samadhi*. The lama is medically dead: no brain activity, no organ activity. But his heart center remains warm, and transmissions of enlightened mind states can radiate from him with overwhelming power and clarity. This may continue for days, even weeks or longer. Experiencing such an event is amazing, and it makes it vividly clear how little our science actually knows about either body or mind.

Implications for Western Science

Lucidity practices in Tibetan Buddhism present challenges to many aspects of Western science. I will discuss some of these, beginning with those specific to dreams and sleep and progressing to the more general.

1. *Lucid dreaming and REM sleep*. In contrast to the conclusions from Western dream research that lucidity occurs only during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep

(and the most physiologically active portion of REM at that), the results of Tibetan Buddhist dream and sleep yogas demonstrate that lucidity not only does not require REM sleep but also does not even require dreaming. This challenges the equating of dreaming with REM sleep presently prevalent in psychology and neuroscience.²¹ And since lucidity in dreamless sleep is not possible with dualistic consciousness, it also challenges our psychological and cultural assumptions about consciousness.

2. Implications for sleep disorders. The Tibetan example could enrich our understanding of sleep disorders. The Tibetan claim is that it is during deep dreamless sleep that a profoundly positive and transformative awareness (which they call the clear light) is most available to people, but that the ordinary person in his non-lucid “corpse like sleep” cannot recognize it. However, there may be greater and lesser degrees of permeability to such a positive state in the ordinary sleeping mind. Neuroscience research has shown that during the sleep of normal people, brain activity (as measured by blood flow) diminishes in the areas of the prefrontal cortex used in problem solving and logical thinking, whereas in clinically depressed patients these areas remain highly active.²² Might some people be holding on so tightly even in sleep that they cannot benefit from an existence affirming energy available to them in the night? Given that most forms of mental illness are accompanied by sleep disturbances, this is surely a lead worth exploring.

3. Implications for mental illness. Ordinary people, clinicians, patients, and Western psychological theories, all focus on the contents of experience: thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Therapies and most other human endeavors are directed toward changing those contents. As we have seen, Buddhism reverses the direction

of inquiry to look at the nature of experience and the experiencer instead, and it directs efforts to change one's life and experience toward *how*, rather than *what*, one experiences. There is one clinical application of such a changed focus, mindfulness training; it is generating much interest,²³ and much more could be done towards understanding it.

4. *Different kinds of knowing.* Western psychology assumes that the dualistic mind of the ordinary person is the only form of knowing there is, but the implication of the Tibetan Buddhist material is that there is a deeper, more relaxed, and more expanded form of nondual awareness that has quite different properties and needs to be studied in its own right. (This distinction could clarify, among other things, ongoing confusions in research on mindfulness.)²⁴

5. *Implications for the nature of the body.* What is the body? In Western science, medicine, and popular understanding, we acknowledge only the material "flesh and blood" aspect of the body, the part that, in the Tibetan view (and other Asian medical and yogic systems), is called the gross outer body. In contrast is the inner energy body. Medical and yogic practices that work directly on the inner energy body can have both physical and psychological effects; Tibetan yogic lucidity practices are a striking example. Surely it is time that we take these energy physiologies seriously enough to investigate them.

6. *Implications for the basic nature of the mind.* What is the mind? The prevailing assumption in psychology, cognitive science and many other fields is that the mind--and hence experience--is just the activity of the brain. Observing changes of blood flow in the brain has become the gold standard and final arbiter for

studying anything human. Many of the phenomena involved in Tibetan lucidity practices (interdependence, mind transmissions, dreams of clarity, prophetic dreams, and the death samadhi) are direct challenges to this view. For example:

6a. *Interdependence, mind transmission, and the extended mind*: In the Tibetan Buddhist vision of interdependence, the phenomenal (i.e., able to be experienced) world arises afresh each moment as an interconnected and interdependent whole. Although our minds, at the ordinary level, have their own individual stream of causality, when we relax and expand the mind enough, we can tune into aspects of the world outside of ourselves, picking up subtle present conditions, future probabilities, and perhaps the pathways for transmitting more enlightened energies.

6b. *Death samadhi*: In the death samadhi of advanced Tibetan lamas, the deep mind has literally separated from brain and body. Whatever that mind is, it is dwelling at the heart center of what is otherwise an undeniable corpse. It makes itself known by warmth at the heart center and by the profound effects it can have on the minds of living people in its presence. This alone should shake the foundations of our assumptions about minds in psychology.

7. *Implications for the nature of matter*. Mind transmission and the Tibetan death samadhi are not alone. Evidence that at least some aspects of the mind are separable from the brain and, perhaps, body has been building for many years. These studies and observations have recently been catalogued in two judicious, though unfortunately little attended, books.²⁵ What would unify, make measurable, and give a ground for theoretical explanation of such disparate phenomena would be if physics were to discover a mental field and mental energy particles that allowed

the mind in its own right to join the ever-expanding domain of what is considered material. Given that we now have particles without mass, dark energy, bosons of various types, and, at least in theory, vibrating strings of energy that constitute the universe, why not massless *mentons* that operate within a mental energy field?

Final Note

There is a particular appropriateness to having a chapter on lucidity in Tibetan Buddhism in this compendium of work on lucid dreaming. Tibetan Buddhism may have played a significant, though usually unrecognized, role in the birth of lucid dreaming as a field of study in the West. In the early 1970s, Stephen LaBerge attended a workshop on Tibetan Buddhism at the Esalen Institute in California. There the Tibetan lama Tarthang Tulku, newly arrived in America, stood before the class gesturing broadly around the room and repeating, "This...dream!" As LaBerge puts it, "Rinpoche²⁶ managed to get the idea across to us (how, I don't really know, I wouldn't rule out telepathy...) that we were to...try to maintain unbroken continuity of consciousness between the two states of sleep and waking."²⁷ LaBerge credits this experience as a seed for development of his own lucid dreaming which, in turn, led to his foundational research at Stanford University. Western explorations of lucidity quickly diverged from the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of course, but with the growing interest in our culture in both contemplative traditions and lucidity in dreams, perhaps it is coming full circle. As I've tried to show in this chapter, return to the source could open new worlds of exploration. May it be so!

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Notes

1 Wangyal, *Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep*, 22.

2 Ibid. 138. Readers allergic to the word *spiritual* in this passage may substitute *powerful* or *transformative* if that enables them to continue reading with an open mind.

3 Mahamudra (great symbol) practices are considered the culmination of the path in the Kagyu lineage; Dzogchen (complete perfection) is the culmination of the path in the Nyingma lineage. Many Tibetan teachers hold both lineages, and teach students accordingly. For teachings on Mahamudra see, for example, Dorje, *Mahamudra: Eliminating the Darkness of Ignorance*; and Namgyal, *Mahamudra: Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*. For Dzogchen see, for example, Kunsang, *Perfect Clarity*; Norbu, *Cycle of Day and Night*; and, Norbu, *Supreme Source*. For both together see, Ponlop, *Wild Awakening*.

4 Tainer, Talk, June 1997.

5 Particularly accessible examples of the three-yana approach to teaching can be found in two early books by Chogyam Trungpa: *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, and *Myth of Freedom*. I have also used this approach in teaching a university class, see, Rosch *Buddhist Psychology*.

6 The Theravada Buddhism of Southeast Asia is the only surviving sect of the first 500 years of Buddhism. For more on early Buddhism and modern Theravada see, for example, Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*; Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*; and Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters*.

7 Rosch, "Grinch Who Stole Wisdom;" and Rosch, "Birthright or Pottage."

8 The chain of karma/habits is called *pratityasamutpada* (dependent origination), pictured as a wheel (the wheel of life) composed of 12 interdependent links that perpetuate rebirth into samsara moment after moment and life after life. The role of interdependence in making habits resistant to change is perhaps the most readily understandable aspect of this teaching for Westerners. For more on the teaching as a whole see, Tharchin, *King Udrayana and the Wheel of Life*, and Fremantle, *Luminous Emptiness*

9 For more on Mahayana see, for example, Shantideva, *Bodhicaryavatara*; Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*; Sprung, *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way*; and Trungpa, *Training the Mind*.

10 For a historical exposition of the roots and development of Tibetan Vajrayana see, Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*. For Vajrayana itself see, Trungpa, *Crazy Wisdom* and the books recommended in notes 3, 5, 11, 13, 14, 16, 19, and 20.

11 For a history and exposition of the shentong/rangtong disagreement see Hookham, *Buddha Within*.

12 It is important to know about this because the head of the Gelug lineage is the Dalai Lama. Westerners generally assume that pronouncements by a Dalai Lama on any topic represent the views of Tibetan Buddhism as a whole, but this is no more the case than that having a Catholic president of the United States would indicate all American Christians are Catholics. The Gelug order was founded in the 14th century as a fundamentalist reform movement in a time of strife. Subsequently it conquered much of Tibet, but remained in political and doctrinal conflict with the other lineages. The present Dalai Lama is an exemplar of goodwill and compassion who has made great strides in reconciling his lineage with the rest of Tibetans, partly by acknowledging the right of the other lineages to their teachings. However, while he may occasionally speak or write of shentong views as philosophy, he never actually teaches from that perspective. This is also true when he discusses dreaming. (For a clear and succinct statement of the different philosophical positions see, Gyamtso, *Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness*; and for the Dalai Lama on dreams, see Dalai Lama and Varela, *Sleeping, Dreaming, and Dying*.) Westerners would do well to be alert to these lineage differences so that they can better understand the teachings they have received as practitioners or the effects they are researching as scientists.

13 For descriptions of the Tibetan yogic inner energy body, see the works cited in notes 14 and 16, and also Wangyal, *Awakening the Sacred Body*. For a description of the Tibetan equivalent of Hatha Yoga accompanied by accounts of the rationale for the postures in terms

of the energy body see, Norbu, *Yantra Yoga*.

14 Chang, *Six Yogas of Naropa*; and, Mullin, *Six Yogas of Naropa*.

15 The effects of tummo are readily apparent not only to practitioners, but also to outside observers. See, Benson, *Beyond the Relaxation Response*; and Cromie, "Meditation Changes Temperatures."

16 Gyaltrul, *Meditation, Transformation, and Dream Yoga*; Norbu, *Dream Yoga and the Practice of Natural Light*; and Wangyal, *Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep*. Wangyal is actually a lama in a small fifth lineage called Bon. Bon is the descendent of pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion, but has adopted teachings and practices almost indistinguishable from the Nyingma, while maintaining some shamanic practices from its past. It is only recently, as part of the Dalai Lama's program for unifying Tibetans, that Bon has been given full status as a lineage.

17 LaBerge and Rheingold, *Exploring the World of Lucid Dreaming*.

18 See the references in Notes 13, 14, and 16.

19 Dharma Shri, "Releasing Oneself from Essential Delusion," 87.

20 For accounts of the death process see Sogyal, *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*; Coleman, Jinpa, Dorje and Dalai Lama, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*; Thondup, *Peaceful Death, Joyful Rebirth*; and Fremantle, *Luminous Emptiness*.

21 For discussion of this issue see, Rosch, *Psychology of Dreams*.

22 Nofzinger, Maquet, and Thorpy, *Neuroimaging of Sleep*

23 The most up to date and complete coverage can be found in, Ostafin, Robinson, and Meier, *Handbook of Mindfulness and Self-Regulation*.

24 Rosch, "The Emperor's Clothes."

25 Kelly and Kelly, *Irreducible Mind*; and, Tart, *End of Materialism*.

26 Rinpoche is a title; the literal meaning is *precious one*. It is used both as a term of reference and a term of address.

27 LaBerge and Rheingold, *Exploring the World of Lucid Dreaming*, 67. Note that this story and attribution did not appear in LaBerge's earlier book, LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming*.