

**Life is But a Dream:
Dream Yoga in Tibetan Buddhist Tantra**

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The thesis of my paper – evolving out the abstract submitted months ago – is that our lingering ethnocentric reification of “dreaming” as not just distinct from but the opposite of “waking” – dream consciousness versus waking consciousness – elides and occludes much power and value in and across mental states that include dreaming. There is arguably a strong connection if not continuum across mental states that may include waking thought projections, day dreaming, somnolence, and states of lucid consciousness that can include dreaming, spirit possession or shamanism, and the impact of externally induced hallucinogenic visions and experiences. Especially when viewed in comparative cultural context, there is frequently a productive if not conversational continuum across diverse types and states of consciousness. While this is a simple and obvious point – and one that psychological anthropologists have been at the forefront of making for many years, it can be useful to reassert and rediscover it in our current context of dreams and dreaming. Like the critique of the Western split between mind and body, as well as that between mind and brain, critiques once made don’t preclude the scholarly tendency to reproduce them over time, reinforcing their continuing limitations of perspective. Like other constraining Western reifications and polarized conceptualizations, that between waking daytime consciousness and the nighttime consciousness of dreaming can be productively reconsidered.

Perhaps iconic of this divide is the challenges faced by Stanford Psychology PhD Stephen LaBerge when he attempted to convince the academic community that lucid dreaming existed at all. Roughly put, lucid dreaming is the ability to be conscious and aware of your dreams – and potentially in control of them – at the same time that you are, fact, still dreaming. The standard psychological and lay skepticism here has been that you simply can’t be both asleep and awake at the same time; these are considered mutually exclusive neurophysiological states. It’s a bit like the idea that you can’t be both dead and alive at the same time. (That distinction, by the way, is also now being thrown into question by the prolonged state of being kind of but not fully dead among tantric adepts who have permanently stopped breathing and have no pulse but remain with subtle brain activity and no sign of rigor mortis or bodily decomposition

for days or even weeks, including in a hot South Asian climate. This liminal state, known in Tibetan Buddhism as *tukdom*, is also associated with advanced dream yoga and lucid control of dream-like projections. But that is another story.)

From a young age, LaBerge was blessed – or cursed – with a distinct ability to not just remember but be consciously aware of his dreams while he was having them. His dreams were often and uncommonly lucid. Lucid dreaming seems to be an ability that is quite pronounced in some people but not in the bulk of us. It is highly developed and cultivated among advanced Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, but by no means uniformly so. The current Dalai Lama, for instance, reportedly says that he does not and has never had much capacity for lucid dreaming – despite spending on average four to five hours a day in meditational contemplation and in the cultivation of other self-aware mental states. On the other hand, as LaBerge has described in his books and in his Lucidity Institute work, lucid dreaming can be facilitated, practiced, and reinforced through a range of relatively simple mental techniques of rehearsal, projective intention, oneiric recognition, and dream recall reinforcement.

As reported by long-term associate and colleague B. Alan Wallace, LaBerge's capacity for lucid dreaming became somewhat dormant when he was a teenager and got absorbed in alternative mental interests. But he re-cultivated lucid dreaming as a graduate student in psychology, knowing from personal experience that the assumed mutually exclusivity between waking and dreaming was false.

LaBerge's found a way to experimentally prove retention of waking conscious while dreaming by going to sleep in the lab with sensors that registered his eye movements. During physiological and neurological states that indicated he was indeed dreaming in REM sleep, he was asked questions to which he could respond in a kind of Morse code way by moving his eyes to acknowledge, and answer, questions that were posed to him. This empirically proved the overlap and, shall we say, the conversational continuum between waking and dreaming. To extrapolate a bit, it was as if, from a Freudian point of view, the waking superego and the repressed subconscious id could be not just in contact but in mutual conversation with each other. Jung, among others, would probably have been quite delighted and excited. Takers of naturally occurring hallucinogens such as DMT per ayahuasca, psilocybin per magic mushrooms, or mescaline per peyote would not be surprised.

Significant as the experimental proof of lucid dreaming was, there has been little revolution or even interest in the scientific or the psychological or counseling community in registering, investigating, or productively exploring the significance and capacities of dream consciousness, or of the empirical connection and continuum between waking and dreaming. William James and others long ago recognized the importance of using mental introspection – first-person mental empirics -- as a valuable tool of psychological exploration to triangulate *with* sociobehavioral and physiological indices -- rather than simply be reduced to them. But this potential remains surprisingly underutilized. This includes in neuroscience and in empirical and processes otherwise studied by psychologists – and psychological anthropologists.

In anthropology, we have our own baggage of conceptual reification and polarization, including with respect to newer conceptualizations that are easy to assume are better and completely supersede older ones. In the case of dreaming, we can consider the early work of E. B. Tylor, Anthropology's first Professor. To extrapolate a bit, Tylor's view of primitive animism tended to assume – or, more accurately, was perceived in retrospect to presume – a murky primitive world of dream-waking conflation or confusion, against which modern man and modern civilization provided the advance and the triumph of secular rational thought. Then there was Levy-Bruhl's work on primitive mentality, and Lévi-Strauss' on the savage mind – or wild pansies, the other meaning of *La pensée sauvage* – along with his work on primitive mechanical versus modern statistical mentality, and lingering Anglo-American interest in such issues into mid-20th century anthropology, including by scholars such as Robin Horton and Stanley Diamond.

The tendency to distance such perspectives from our present more refined and decolonized sensibilities is underscored by the power and importance of appreciating the hard-won cultural relativity and progressivism of anthropology as this has expanded in recent decades. Nonetheless, this distancing carries its own risk, often implicit, to be sure, of making rational instrumentalism and objective functionality, including in therapeutic behavioral and social outcomes, an ultimate litmus test for the value of introspective understanding. Psychological anthropologists exemplify key and important exceptions and alternatives, of course. But there remains a tendency as psychological anthropology shades into medical anthropology and the importance of *doing* something therapeutic, to overly privilege behaviorist results and to overly instrumentalize chains of logical and rationalized connection presumed to produce them. These easily become something of a gold standard of academic understanding, an understanding *about* subjectivity rather than *of* subjectivity. The value and power of what I would call subjective empiricism, the rigorous cultivation of introspective ethnography, combining and cross-cutting first person and third person perspectives, including our own, seems underdeveloped.

In LaBerge's case, lucid dreaming, even when proven, was considered "interesting" only in a sidelight and token kind of way; it never seems to have had much impact or exploration in series studies of therapy or even in sleep research itself. Though LaBerge's work was published as a novel curiosity, including in *Psychology Today* in 1981, it became rather inconsequential, including because it has not easily demonstrated objective therapeutic value. LaBerge himself never got a tenure-track job. The structure of specifically *Western* patterns of sleeping link with the enormous modern influence of regular and routinized and so-called 'normal' sleep deprivation. The impact of sleep deprivation in obscuring and obstructing the potential of waking-dream co-cognizance has hardly even been noted. Internationally famous sleep and dream researcher Mathew Walker, in his prizewinning and widely-read book, *Why We Sleep, Unlocking the power of Sleep and Dreams*, published in 2017, makes no mention of LaBerge's work. The author claims, and this in passing, that lucid dreaming was scientifically substantiated only in 2013.

Despite championing the creative power and restorative importance of sleep and dreaming on a number of other fronts, Walker sloughs off lucid dreaming almost entirely. He writes (p. 232), “You can understand the skepticism. ...[T]he assertion of conscious control over a normally non-volitional process injects a heavy dose of ludicrous into the already preposterous experience we call dreaming.” He concludes, “It remains unclear whether lucid dreaming is beneficial or detrimental, since well over 80 percent of the general populace are not natural lucid dreamers. If gaining voluntary dream control were so useful, surely Mother Nature would have imbued the masses with such a skill.” The proviso he adds seems even more reductive and problematic: that is, that if lucid dreaming is to become significant or generally useful, it will have to be selected for genetically in differential reproductive success in future human evolution (p. 234). Is the only hope of subjectively cultivating the potentials of our own mental states really just the possibility that the genetic die-off of many humans -- by means of catastrophic global warming, for instance -- could select among the remainder for an improved genetic restructuring of the human brain?

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In Tibetan Buddhism, what we call lucid dreaming is an extension and specific application of the cultivated expansion and intensification of mindful awareness. As here can only be summarized, this draws on a range of yogic as well as tantric practices of visualization, mantra recitation, and focus on clarity and awareness of internal states. A simple example is the cultivation of relaxed and yet luminous awareness, self-awareness, as taught in basic meditation training in the West: one deeply relaxes in turn, progressively, one’s body, one’s speech or wind/respiration, and one’s mind. This last, the calming effects of mental relaxation, includes the auto-induced reduction of mental tightness and the calm letting go and decrease of impulsive thought-production. Along with this, and facilitating it, is increased mental observational awareness of thoughts and feelings, being aware of them as if from outside of their grip. This increases one’s ability to witness thoughts and feelings that do arise without cognitively fusing with them -- without identifying with them as intrinsically related to and reflecting of a reified sense of self or ego.

The general and intended result in Tibetan Buddhist mindfulness is the cultivation of deeply eudamonic mental and psycho-physiological states -- sometimes considered to produce a triumvirate of bliss, emptiness, and non-conceptuality -- all the while retaining rather than relinquishing conscious awareness. This condition is intended and cultivated to create a greater sense, experience, and understanding of self-conscious awareness, including the relativity and constructedness of that thing we call our “self.” This includes when one is off as well as on the cushion, and, ultimately, when one is asleep, as in lucid dreaming -- that is, being aware that one is dreaming even as one continues to dream. More generally, the goal in this orientation is not just *being* aware, but cultivating and retaining, as if in a background program of meta-awareness, a continuing awareness that one IS aware. In Vipassana and so-called higher meditative states of *samadhi* or *mahamudra*, this meta-cognitive consciousness is experienced to fuse and become one with a sense of being, a beingness, that is not reified and hence unbounded with respect to one’s normal sense of self or ego.

Regardless of whether one cottons to or agrees with the idea that such states actually can and do exist – notwithstanding their difficulty of discursive description – it's not a large leap, from a first-person phenomenological point of view – to link up these mental-state cultivations with the intentional cultivation of lucid dreaming that LaBerge developed and experimentally substantiated from an entirely secular non-Buddhist point of view. Further, if one is meditating for hours a day on specific deity forms and visualizations, it would not be surprising that, like other substantive waking experiences or phenomena, these contents of mental orientation will also emerge in dream imagery during sleep, including and especially if one is self-consciously reinforcing this process via the cultivation techniques of lucid dreaming.

In practical terms, including for moderate rather than high-level practitioners, lucid dreaming and dream yoga can have benefits. Lucid dreaming affords the ability not just to be aware during a dream, but to alter and control its narrative and outcome. A simple example recounted by Alan Wallace is of a female Buddhist practitioner who was confronted in a dream by a burly man menacingly wielding a knife against her. Because she was lucid in the dream, she simply plunged the knife into her own gut – and nothing happened. The assailant in the dream had no recourse and simply faded away. Being able to disarm potential nightmares and turn them into peaceful victories and beneficial slumbers is odds-on to increase the restorative and rejuvenating benefits of a good night's sleep.

A more pedestrian example is from my own novice attempts at lucid dreaming. By mental rehearsing the desire to recall my dreams and, as needed, set an alarm to wake me up temporarily early in the morning when I would be apt to be having them – REM sleep being more intense and active near dawn – I realized that my dreamsigns, the content that is frequent in my dreams, often concerned professional anxieties. These – as perhaps some of you can resonate with -- included being late to a class I am teaching and not being able to find the room; being criticized brutally and absurdly for my publications; showing up naked at a lecture I am supposed to give; being still a student who has forgotten one of my courses and is now needing to take an exam though not having been to any of the classes; and showing up for an exam that has radically different content from what I thought the course was about. I remember one of my colleagues in graduate school who dreamed she showed up for her prelims in cultural anthropology to be handed a set of laboratory slides and given a half-hour to analyze them under an electron microscope.

Over the years I that I have been meditating and intermittently focusing on its carry-over to my dreamlife, my intensity of anxiety in such dreams has decreased. Of course, this could be a false positive; as my career has matured, I have less objective reason to fear repercussions from academic failure. This said, I perceive that the occurrence of my professionally anxious dream content does not necessarily correlate with objective conditions – for instance, I have not been a student for many years but still have dreams of stressing out as a student in courses. But I also perceive that the severity of stress generated by such dreams has been greatly reduced by mindfulness meditation during the day and that, at least on occasion, I approach the lucidity of being able to laugh off the stress during the dream itself and transform it into a farce or a

humorous burlesque that has no negative consequence – either in the dream itself or in my emotional response to the content of the dream.

In Tibetan Buddhist understanding, dreams and associated dream yoga constitute one of six transitional states or “bardos.” The bardo most widely known by Westerners, often taken as synonymous with the term *bardo* itself, is the transitional or intermediate state after death until a presumed reincarnation or rebirth. This, to be crude, is the bardo of the terrifying but also potentially wonderful and enlightening dream-like hallucinatory images as described in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. If one is able to be lucid and conquer even *these* literal death images, and to rehearse this in the waking state prior to death itself, it would give one a fearlessness about death itself – and an ability to live one’s life with a reduced sense of anxiety and fear of ultimate demise.

In addition to this liminal state projected between death and rebirth are five other bardos, or transitional states, which encompass the rest of human life. This makes sense from a Tibetan Buddhist view: from a perspective in which everything is always changing and impermanent, all of human existence is “transitional” one way or another. Hence there is the bardo or transitional state of meditation – during which is neither in waking consciousness nor dreaming – as well as the bardo of dreaming. The bardos of what we might in a general way call death are themselves divided into three – the bardo of the dying process itself, the bardo of awareness – a state of *tukdom* -- during images believed to occur following the stoppage of breath and death in a clinical state until the culminating experiential awareness of clear light emptiness – and then the bardo of what we might call recycling or rebirth, in which the mental continuum is believed to be searching for and eventually finding a new bodily form to be reborn as and into.

Within this six-fold panoply of life-transitioning experiences of consciousness, there is a strong analogy made between the ephemerality of the bardo of dreaming and the bardo of the normal waking state. For our present purposes, this connection is especially important. In the same way that we experience dreams as really real, only to wake up and realize they are a delusive illusion, so, too, it is argued, our daily waking state immerses us in the reification of projected daily states, *samsara*, that we take to be really real but which, from a higher perspective of meta-awareness, are only transitory projections and reifications and constructions of our own mind. This does not mean that the external world does not exist. It merely means that we can only know it through the projected and fabricated reifications of our own subjective experience. Our self-awareness of this is not escapist or simply transcendent, however. And this point is important. Rather, our self-awareness allows and indeed cultivates the capacity to meaningfully and productively re-engage with the phenomenal world – informed by core Mahayana principles of compassion and loving kindness for other sentient beings. This not because human actions are believed to be truly or objectively virtuous in relation to a world that exists inherently outside ourselves, a world that we presume to know as it is outside of our own perception and projection. Rather, action can be valuable and productive *because* our waking world *is* taken as real by others. Insofar as we have compassion for this perceived reality – and the suffering that this perceived reality causes -- we are encouraged to act in

skillful and helpful accordance with its presumptions and strictures. It is a bit like if you were lucid in a dream but other people in your dream were not lucid, you might want to help them in the dream – even though, being lucid, you know that this “help” is itself of a transient and not inherently and ultimately or absolutely real nature.

In Tibetan Buddhist terminology, then, it is important to “wake up” not only from the dreams and delusions of night-time projection, but to wake up from the projective delusion that our daytime reifications and projections, including of ourselves – our own selfhood – is an enduring reified entity rather than a set of projected reifications. A simple analogy or metaphor in this regard is to ask where your “self” is located. Is it in your vision; no, you could be blind and still be yourself. Is your “self” in any part of your body? No. Perhaps in the brain. But there is no evidence that some neuroanatomical material substructure of self-hood will ever be found or findable. Self is an idea, as immaterial – and also as relatively real – as information, as bytes, 0 and 1. From a cultural or psychological anthropological perspective, it is as if the deeper reality of the constructedness and relativity of culture becomes self-aware in relation to the radical constructedness of one’s own core subjectivity itself.

As I’ve discussed elsewhere, in more advanced levels of Mahayana Tibetan Buddhism – both in Tibet and in its more recent incarnations and disseminations in other world areas, including Europe and North America – the visualization and recitation and self-consciously projected experience of alternatively constructed or meta- or transcendent self-hood is often associated with “generation stage” meditation and yogic practices. These often include liturgies and practical methods by which one cultivates, imagines, visualizes, and channels the potential for identifying and imbuing one’s subjectivity with the virtues and potentials of various divine states or deities or *yidams*. Building upon this, further so-called “completion stage” practices – often highly esoteric or secret – are presumed to actually alter one’s psycho-physiological constitution permanently to embody and infuse oneself to ‘become’ these capacities, both mentally and corporeally. In essence, one is perceived to be able to permanently and through intentional design fundamentally transform one’s mental and bodily being.

In the Gelug sect of Tibetan Buddhism – that of the Dalai Lamas – completion stage practices associated with the manipulation and transformation of physical bodily energies can only be appropriately engaged after many years of intense training and practice in more preliminary practices. In the traditions of the Kagya sect, there is more intense and somewhat earlier cultivation of attaining states of alternative consciousness through *prana* work and physical conditioning in relation to mind-training, including dream yoga. In the Nyigma or “Old School” tradition, the presumably quick path of direct awareness of one’s own core pristine nature is more strongly emphasized as both the original and also the ultimate state of mental apotheosis and enlightenment. This is taken as the self-evident reality of each person’s own Buddha nature, however clouded or occluded or warped the misunderstood acting out *against* this deeper potential might be in behavioral practice. In the Nyigmapa highest *yana* level Dzogchen tradition, the spontaneous actualization and realization of what may otherwise appear or seem to be dream-projection states is believed to fuse with egolessness to manifest

and reveal pristine awareness or *rigpa* from the subject position of one who is no longer self-reified in the sense of no longer being a normal waking sentient being.

Rather than risking flight into esoteric and largely nondiscursive clouds, we can see that the capacities and opportunities of lucid dreaming and dream yoga – even if only in the minds of practitioners and adherents themselves -- pose an interesting methodological and epistemic challenge as well as an enlarged empirical and subjective content for anthropology and specifically psychological anthropological exploration. If as Freud reportedly said, a non-lucid dream is a form of temporary psychosis, then being aware and lucid about dreams could and should have an analogous function for auto-communicated convergence and understanding between different levels of conscious and unconsciousness, including of the kind that deep therapy counselors and psychotherapists cultivate with their patients and clients. That shamanic and spirit possessive and hallucinatory curings draw upon, cultivate, and apply these potentials in various permutations across cultural time and space seems somewhere between obvious and self-evident. However, the subjective empiricism of what actually informs and produces and results from these states is still arguably in its infancy from an anthropological perspective. Tibetan tantric dream yoga seems to be a particularly developed and elaborate form of this expression. Dream yoga promulgates an active linkage and transduction dynamic whereby the intentional desires and conscious motivations of waking consciousness infuse and inform dreams and active dream-life – while reciprocally reacting and intentionally responding to the spontaneous feelings, images, and thoughts projected in non-waking dream consciousness.

Dream yoga may not be a panacea for the widespread transformation of consciousness, as Matthew Walker caustically reminds us. But the more our different levels of awareness and experienced consciousness are understood, including through the benefits of first-person introspection and understanding, the greater the capacity would seem for awareness that productively harnesses the interactive capacity and cross-fertilization of alternative states of experienced subjectivity.

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