

from CONSCIOUS MIND, SLEEPING BRAIN:

Perspectives on Lucid Dreaming

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Without a Guru

An Account of My Lucid Dreaming

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As I came out of the jungle I approached a missionary bungalow. I seemed to be in either India or Africa. I told the couple who came to the door that I was only dreaming and wanted to know where I was before I woke up. They said nothing. I went into the house and looked for maps that might indicate where I was. I found some maps, but they were inconclusive. In another room, I found two old friends to whom I told my problem. They did not respond. I thought at the time, "You know, I can just open my eyes and make you disappear." Soon I woke up.

That, in 1975, was my first lucid dream. The experience of knowing I was dreaming interested me, and I recorded it. I had never heard of lucid dreams and had no notion of their significance or potential. I was 41. My wife, Charlotte, and I were American Baptist missionaries teaching at a theological college in Jorhat, a small town in India about 50 miles from the Burma border. As an ordained clergyman, teaching the history of religions (Hinduism, modern religious movements in India, and major religions of India) along with some Biblical courses, it did not occur to me to give the dream and the ones that followed any religious significance.

I saw lucid dreaming as an opportunity to study the nature of dreams. So after five lucid dreams I began to plan experiments to carry out when I knew I was dreaming. By planning and carrying out experiments in these earliest dreams, my pattern of approach to lucid dreams was established for years to come. I planned the experiments while awake, so that for every lucid dream I had an experiment ready to carry through if I could recall it. As my memory is poor

All examples of dreams are taken from the writer's journal. *Dreamer's progress: A record of experiments made while dreaming.* Unpublished manuscript.

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while dreaming, I frequently did not recall the experiment. As I normally realized I was to do an experiment, when I could not think of the right one, at times I planned another spontaneously. The spontaneous experiment often made little sense as I cannot think very rationally while dreaming. I carried out each planned experiment in as many dreams as it required for me to feel satisfied with the results. Critical analysis after the dream has always been important to me. I felt an obligation to record every dream in detail. Occasionally while dreaming, the thought that what I do would be recorded has influenced my choice of action.

My earliest experiments included willing things to appear or disappear or to be changed. For example, in a dream I was running on air about a foot above the ground down a street from my childhood. People passed me but did not seem surprised. Then I realized from my being above the ground that I was dreaming. I had planned to find a house to make changes in but I didn't remember that. I chose a child dressed in white to change into a child's small wagon. I probably thought of red. I tried hard for perhaps half a minute, and all that happened was that the child's feet became round white wheels. I then woke up or dreamed something else.

In the early days, it did not occur to me to question whether the manipulation of dreams might defeat the purpose of having dreams. I had no idea of anyone else having such an opportunity to study dreams from the inside, and I felt it was important to do this. Besides, once lucid, I am to some degree detached from dream events, and I cannot proceed in any ordinary manner with the dream. I cannot imagine that I have ever spent more than 15 minutes at the most in a month in experimentation.

My lucid dreams became more frequent toward the end of 1976 and have since tended to occur at an average of five a month. By June 1986, I recorded 500 lucid dreams. In preparing some statistics on my first 282 lucid dreams, I saw that I either did not or probably did not wake up immediately after 8% of them. Of those for which I recorded a time for waking up afterward (207), 58% occurred between 5 and 9 in the morning,* 28% between 3 and 5, and 13% between midnight and 3. I have tended to go to bed about 10:00 P.M. Twice I had a lucid dream while napping in the afternoon. I do not often nap in the afternoon.

I could not say how I came to know I was dreaming in at least one-third of the dreams. Either I forgot how, or I came to know with no apparent cause. Sometimes I came to know by noticing that something in the dream was false or inconsistent or not possible, as when I saw my grandmother and remembered that she had died. Frequently, I recognized that what I was doing was common to my...

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*Van Eeden, in his account of his lucid dreams, said that, without exception, his lucid dreams occurred after 5 in the morning. (van Eeden, F. A study of dreams *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 26:431-461, 1913. Reprinted in C. Tart (Ed.), *Altered States of Consciousness: A Book of Readings*. New York: John Wiley, 1969.)

I questioned whether I was dreaming and tested to find out, for instance by trying dreams, as when I found myself wandering from room to room. Some few times to fly or by trying to pull someone in half. I have even realized I was dreaming by false reasoning. When I felt a book store did not have as many books as it had the last time I had been there, I thought that was an inconsistency and realized I was dreaming. However, upon waking reflection I realized that I had not been in the bookstore earlier.

In February 1977, after 17 lucid dreams and more than a year had passed since my first, I saw in the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* under *dream* a reference to two men who told of knowing they were dreaming—Frederick William Henry Myers, founder of the Society for Psychical Research, and Frederik van Eeden, the Dutch poet and medical doctor. Their lucidity was not discussed at length in the article, but I believed that the reference must be to what I also had experienced. This was the first I knew of such dreams happening to others.

As I knew nothing of any literature on lucid dreams, I developed my own understanding of them and my own vocabulary for discussing them. I called them "known dreams." In August of 1977, soon after moving to the city of Hyderabad in South India to teach in an ecumenical seminary there, I found in a bookstore in the city Ann Faraday's *Dream Power*. For the first time, after 48 "known dreams," I found a discussion of lucid dreams. It was not until we arrived in the United States in the summer of 1979 and more specifically until I responded to Stephen LaBerge's article on lucid dreaming in *Psychology Today* (January 1981) that I came in touch with more literature on the subject and those who write it. My lack of familiarity with what was being said and done in the field of lucid dreams during those first five years of lucid dreaming resulted in an independent approach to understanding and dealing with them.

EXPERIMENTATION IN LUCID DREAMS

My experiments remained my focus of interest in lucid dreams. I tried changing the location of the dream, recalling a friend's address, which I had forgotten while awake, recalling where I was sleeping, composing brief portions of poetry, praying the Lord's Prayer, and putting into alphabetical order objects I saw while dreaming. While awake, I planned the plot for a dream that I would try to carry through when I knew I was dreaming. That included planning what I would do, what the dream environment should be, and what another person in the dream should do. I tried counting from the time I knew I was dreaming through the waking-up process in order to examine the continuity of my consciousness through waking up. I stopped my activity in the dream to watch what would happen when I became simply receptive. I examined objects in the dream

for authentic duplication of waking objects. I tried to picture in my mind my grandmother's house, while keeping the ongoing dream environment in view. When I heard that other lucid dreamers had difficulty in repeating their name in a lucid dream, I tried repeating mine. In different manners, I tested the solidity and nonsolidity of dream objects. And finally, I tried to eliminate the process of dreaming while remaining asleep.

As I found my intended experiment often difficult to remember while dreaming, I occasionally used a system to help bring it to mind. When going to sleep or when falling back asleep in the middle of the night, I would repeat to myself silently something like, "I'm going to sleep. I will dream. I will realize I am dreaming. Then I will test solidity." The purpose of this was more to bring to mind the experiment should I discover I was dreaming than to encourage lucid dreaming itself, but it appeared to be as effective in encouraging lucidity. When I discovered I was dreaming, I would try to bring to mind the cue as to what I was to do. If I could bring to mind a phrase such as *test solidity*, then I remembered somewhat clearly what I was to do.

Normally I awaken from a lucid dream quite unwillingly and without having been lucid very long, though frequently long enough to carry through some experiment. It has often been a concern of mine during a dream that I not wake up. However, when I first experimented with the continuity of consciousness between dreaming and wakefulness, I unexpectedly had a problem waking up. When I realized I was dreaming, I began counting aloud (aloud in the dream), "1, 2, 3 . . ." at about the speed of one number per second. As I had a problem waking up, eventually I was counting in the 280s and finished with 300 soon after I awoke. It would seem I had counted for about 5 minutes except for some flaws in the experiment. While I counted, many things happened. I was in a beautiful old hotel listening to M. complain about something. I felt that it was about my counting continually. After I passed 100, I began counting again at 1, as I do when running in place during the day for exercise. Somewhere in the middle of the second hundred I stopped counting, possibly when I told someone I was counting until I woke up but that I couldn't wake up. Realizing I had stopped counting, I tried picking up counting again where I had left off. That way, I may have missed counting some numbers. Somewhere in there, my aunt asked my mother when we were leaving our house. Another time I came to a pond and thought for a moment that I would walk through it but decided it might feel too cold. I became conscious of counting very loudly and was afraid I might be heard by those awake. After the second 99, I began with 100, 101, and so forth, and remembered that it should be 200, 201, and so forth. Other events may have been forgotten.

I woke up gradually. I did not lose my pace of counting. Gradually I lost the feeling of my body's position in the dream and became aware of my body lying in bed. Gradually I lost the feeling that I was saying the numbers aloud and found myself only thinking them. When I knew I was awake, I thought to count a little

more to be sure I had counted well into being awake. There was no discontinuity in the rhythm of my counting as I woke up. I noticed no "gap" or "bump" in my awareness, no moment of awakening, as I normally do when I wake up. The transition had gone smoothly. But I was left with the question of why I had trouble waking up.

Most of 1980 was spent with what I called my solidity experiments. Objects in dreams normally feel as they would when I am awake. This I called the "reality effect." When I intended to put my hand through an object, my hand usually went through it without resistance and without the object changing shape. But I always felt its texture. It was somewhat as when I pass my hand through water. My hand moves easily through, but I feel its substance strictly within the bounds of the object. I called this the "liquid effect." At times when I manipulated objects with the intention that they become pliable, I found them to have what I called the "putty effect." They lost their shape. They could easily be molded or stretched, often forming strings as with stringy cheese. I wanted to see whether I could pass my hand through something without feeling it at all. This I would call the "immaterial effect."

In November 1980, I did my last solidity experiment. I dreamed I was in another time and another place. I walked up a narrow cobblestone street. At the end of the street I entered someone's house to pass through to another street. Then I realized that I would not enter another's house when I don't know the person! Then I realized I was dreaming. Remembering the experiment, I looked around what seemed to be a small, stone-floored kitchen. A large square loaf of freshly baked bread, golden brown, sat on a stool. Using the loaf for my experiment, I felt it firmly with both hands. It felt a little springy like fresh-baked bread and firmly real. For the next part of the experiment, I passed my right hand through the loaf. I felt the loaf as my hand passed through it. It was the liquid effect. I thought of my desire to pass my hand through while feeling nothing at all. The bread puffed up a little before I tried. Then I passed my hand through but felt the liquid effect as before. Determinedly I passed my hand through several times more, but I always felt a texture to the loaf. Then I woke up. I reviewed the dream in the light of previous tests and felt that I had tried enough and always found that I felt the substance of what my hand passed through. The immaterial effect remained only theoretical. Things usually felt realistic. When I expected them to yield to my hand, either the putty or the liquid effect resulted, apparently determined by whether I expected to reshape the object or pass through it.

RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF LUCID DREAMS

My lucid dreaming still did not have any particular religious significance for me. Even when praying the Lord's Prayer, though it was a sincere prayer, its primary function was as a test of rote memory. Because it was planned ahead, it

lacked spontaneity. I also could not relate the words to reality because of my lack of memory of my current life situation.

As an ordained minister and a teacher of courses on the Bible and on Indian religions, I was familiar with Christian and Hindu theological concepts. I was particularly interested in the writings of Indian Christian theologians who discuss Christianity in Indian terms and such people as Swami Abhishiktananda, the French Benedictine monk, who as a Christian, found spiritual insight in the Upanishads. As I had been in India 20 years, my own theology had been formed in the Indian Christian context. It was natural that in November of 1980 I gave more attention to a Hindu concept that had interested me for years.

The earliest Upanishads speak of three states of consciousness—the waking state, dreaming, and dreamless sleep. Dreamless sleep, according to the Upanishads, is the state in which the delusion of both waking and dreaming is eliminated. In dreamless sleep the experiencer desires no desire and sees no dream. He knows nothing within or without, for there is no second thing for him to experience. Dreamless sleep is the state of nonduality, the experience of *brahman*, ultimate reality. The phrase *dreamless sleep* intrigued me. By then I had analyzed to my own satisfaction what the elements of dreaming were, and I felt that when I became lucid I could, through various means, try to eliminate dreaming while remaining asleep. It would not be true to say that I literally accepted what the Upanishads had to say or even that I really understood what was being spoken of. I wanted to see whether I could, in fact, produce dreamless sleep. This was not a religious quest. I had no idea what to expect. As it happened, my lucid dreams gradually moved into an entirely new direction.

My first attempt was to be the elimination of the nonbody dream environment. After 2 days, I dreamed I was at a restaurant table with Charlotte when I realized I was dreaming. I first thought of making some kind of test on a woman I saw at another table. Then I remembered the experiment I was to do. I closed my eyes. It became dark. I remained very much aware of sitting on a chair with my feet on the floor and leaning on the table. I wanted to remove these perceptions also. I pushed the table away, then raised my feet off the floor. I was hesitant to push the chair from under me. I willed the chair away. I remained with my legs raised and became unaware of the chair. I was first floating, then spinning, very much aware of my body. Charlotte came along and thought we should leave. So I got out of the chair. We gathered our things and left the restaurant. Then I woke up.

Eventually, in one dream, I did eliminate my awareness of all objects including of my dreamed body. I reached the point where nothing was left except my own consciousness in darkness, though I have no memory of maintaining that state. I was satisfied that I had reached the point of dreamless sleep, but I saw the state as literally only that—sleeping without dreaming. I did not see religious or philosophical meaning inherent in the experience.

Through the years that I worked on eliminating dream elements, many other

novel experiences happened also, which I recognized as phenomena described in mystical literature. My intellectual ability was limited. I felt myself rise and float in the air. At times I felt myself projected at great speed involuntarily. I have often felt vibrations, occasionally heat, and once expansion of myself. I have seen impressive scenes, patterns of light, disks of light, and fullness of light. I have felt devotion and joy and “awareness” of the presence of God in the full light. But in my waking, critical reflection on these experiences, I saw them as dream experiences without theological or philosophical meaning. I could see these events in their dream context, explainable by talking about dreams. As, from the beginning, I had tried to analyze every lucid dream critically, this analytical attitude to these experiences was natural. I did not feel that I could suddenly forgo critical analysis just because these experiences began to include religious feelings.

THE EXPERIENCE OF LIGHT

At times I had seen areas of light that made me think I was waking up into the light of my room, but I would wake up in the dark. I also saw an occasional disk of clear light, which had no particular meaning for me. The habitual analytical attitude toward what were to me “only” dreams determined my earliest reaction to a greater experience of light, which, out of a dream context, would have been to me a rather startling incident. That first experience of the fullness of light was in January 1981, in my 254th lucid dream. I dreamed that I was in front of my childhood home. I wanted to show some people a high jump. When I jumped high in front of the house, I realized I was dreaming. I was far above the people. I descended. It became a fall. I remembered that I can fall in a dream without fear. I fell, not expecting to land on the ground. I just stopped below. Then I was flying again. I remembered to close my eyes and eliminate the visual environment. I did not remember to do any more. I remained floating with body awareness. I saw a bright light to my left. I remembered that a bright light does not need to mean that I am waking up. I was then surrounded by light. I seemed to float in the light and began to contemplate prayerfully what I was doing and might see. I called “Father” spontaneously, meaning God. I remained some time in this attitude and then woke up.

While dreaming, I accepted what was happening unquestioningly as an experience of God. Upon waking reflection, although I recognized the event as having the characteristics of a mystical experience, it did not occur to me at all that it had been an actual experience of God. In fact, in my journal, I recognized in this dream two breakthroughs—that I could fall in a dream without crashing or waking up and that I could become aware of a light in a dream without figuring that I must be seeing the light of my room and waking up, as had been my usual response.

By chance, the next day I was loaned Gregory Scott Sparrow's *Lucid Dreaming: Dawning of the Clear Light*. This book presented the experience of light in lucid dreams as more mystical than I was willing to accept. As there came more experiences of full light, never exactly the same, but always with the brightness and color of the sun and accompanied by varying degrees of devotional feelings and joy, the conflict grew between my assurance of God's presence that I felt during the light and my waking critical analysis. Meanwhile, I continued to feel that my first duty within a lucid dream was to continue my attempt to achieve dreamless sleep, not to experience the light which in any case I could not bring about.

Concentration came to play a large part in my attempts to eliminate dreaming. I recognized that my methods were influenced by my understanding of the methods of yoga. Concentration plays an important part in classical yoga's process for stopping the fluctuations of the mind. However, I never studied yoga other than through reading. I had begun regular exercise in 1976 with yogic postures in addition to Western exercises but only as exercise. I did not practice meditation and never studied with a guru. In fact, I felt that I should not study meditation because I did not want it to influence my dream study.

I am still wary about associating lucid dreaming with mystical meaning. All the extraordinary phenomena that have accompanied my lucid dreaming, even the religious feelings and awareness of God, no matter how self-validating they appear to be, can be explained in terms of dreaming. I feel that any belief that there is ontological or theological meaning in even "an experience of God" is a matter of faith, not of self-evidence.

I did, in fact, slowly reach that point of faith at which I accepted my experiences in the fullness of light to be what they appeared to be—experiences of God. I recognize that this faith is based on the insight of my intuitive self and not my rational self, for I will always be able to explain it away. Because of my devotional experiences in the light, because of my belief that phenomena described in mystical literature are explainable in terms of dreaming, particularly lucid dreaming, and because I see a relationship between meditation and lucid dreaming, my interest in lucid dreams has become largely religious. I had not intended that it become so. Now I use my lucid dreams for times of worship—prayer, praise, and singing. I cannot produce or predict the appearances of light, in which my devotion becomes more spontaneous and uncontrollable. As a dreamer, I cannot but uncritically accept what happens. Upon awaking, I still cannot but be the critic of both the dream and the dreamer. I am happy with this arrangement. As long as dreamer and critic can respect each other, the conflict is minimized.