

Fading Light and Sluggish Flight: A Two-Dimensional Model of Consciousness in Lucid Dreams and Out-of-Body Experiences

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by

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I want to start my presentation with the story of a repeated event in my life—one that has nothing to do with dreaming, but which provided me with an anomalous waking experience that seems to support the hypothesis that I will share with you today.

Several years ago, the vitreous fluid in both of my eyes detached from the back of my eyes. Now, whenever I am relaxed, a white, glowing, lava-like shape descends from the top of my visual field, and then flows back out of view. This is referred to as “vitreous traction.” However, whenever I become aware of it, and focus on it, it promptly disappears, and will not reappear until my mind wanders away from it. Even when I pretend not to be looking for it, it will not reappear until I am truly distracted. I have since concluded that my attempt to focus on it inhibits it because unlike most things that I study that are “out there,” the luminous shapes are subtle interactive effects within my eye itself, and are registered, if you will, on the very surface that registers stimuli from the external world. And so, whenever I try to “see the light,” my attention somehow overrides the perception. If the visual phenomenon is a function of a more relaxed or distracted focus, my deliberate attempt to concentrate on it paradoxically defeats my ability to perceive it. Please keep in mind that none of the optometrists or ophthalmologists I have interviewed cannot explain this inhibitory effect of focused awareness on the perception of vitreous traction. But perhaps the hypothesis that I will raise concerning two distinct modes of awareness operating in waking and in sleep will shed some light on this puzzling phenomenon.

The scientific study of dreaming represents a marriage of empiricism with subjectivity. From the discovery by Aserinsky and Kleitman that REM sleep is correlated with the subjective experience of dreaming, to the confirmation by Hearne (1978) and La Berge (1980) that lucid dreamers could signal their consciousness awareness from within the confines of unequivocal REM sleep, laboratory researchers have relied on dreamers to map the contours of dream sleep and its measurable physiological correlates. More recently, researchers have determined that waking and dreaming involves parallel cognitive processes and mechanisms. For instance, Kahan and LaBerge (1996, 2010) have established that parallel metacognitive processes are evident in both waking and dreaming, lending support to the continuity hypothesis between waking and dreaming. In a similar vein, a close connection between the neurological correlates of mind wandering and dreaming has been established by Fox and Domhoff (2015) by paralleling first-persons reports with simultaneous brain activation. They say, “A strong reliance on first-person reports of subjective experience has guided much research on both mind wandering and dreaming, and led to breakthroughs in the understanding of their respective neural correlates.” Given the similarity of the activation patterns during mind wandering and dreaming, these researchers point to a singular neurological substrate for both experiences, referred to as the default activation network, or default mode network. (Domhoff and Fox, 2015; Fox, Nijeboer, Solomonova, Domhoff, & Christoff, 2013), which comes online when a person is distracted by fantasy or mind wandering, or during dream sleep. The increasing focus on the default network reflects a growing interest in understanding dreaming consciousness from the standpoint of large-scale networks (Spoormaker, Czisch and Dresler, 2010) rather than localized brain structures and functions. Hobson’s reference to the sleeping brain as “a unified system whose complex components dynamically interact so as to produce a continuously changing

state” (Hobson, et. al, 2000) exemplifies this large-scale, systemic orientation to brain function during distinctive states of awareness such as dreaming, lucid dreaming, and mind wandering.

In the interest of correlating subjective dream experience with emergent models for dream sleep such as the default network, I raise the following hypothesis: *A variety of anomalies occurring in lucid dreaming and out-of-body-experiences indicates that there are two distinct modes of awareness available in the lucid state, one which is focused and objectifying, and another which is immersive and relational, and further that these distinct modes impact the phenomenology of the lucid experience in clearly observable ways.*

Now let’s look at some related anomalies that support this hypothesis. In his seminal study of his own dreams, Frederick Van Eeden once conducted an interesting experiment:

On Sept. 9, 1904, I dreamt that I stood at a table before a window. On the table were different objects. I was perfectly well aware that I was dreaming and I considered what sorts of experiments I could make. I began by trying to break glass, by beating it with a stone. I put a small tablet of glass on two stones and struck it with another stone. Yet it would not break. Then I took a fine claret-glass from the table and struck it with my fist, with all my might, at the same time reflecting how dangerous it would be to do this in waking life; yet the glass remained whole. But lo! when I looked at it again after some time, it was broken.

Van Eden’s bewilderment is by no means unusual for those who have experienced frequent lucid dreams and out-of-body experiences (OOBEs), during which the perceived objects and characters can be considerably resistant to manipulation. Or conversely, the dream objects may transform, fade or disappear when focused upon. In Van Eden’s particular dream, his state

of awareness can be described as focused and objectifying. That is, he stands apart from the dream as an observer, focuses on an object in the dream, and attempts to modify it. For the purposes of my presentation, I have labeled this type of awareness, “focused, objectifying awareness,” or FOA.

In *The Projection of the Astral Body*, which was published in 1929, Sylvan Muldoon distinguishes between “passive or imaginative will” and “active will.” From this perspective, Van Eden expressed active will in his “experiment” with the claret glass. Muldoon believed that this form of intention was self-defeating in the lucid state, whereas passive or imaginative will was the secret to moving about freely, and modifying the dream forms if so desired. He says,

...imaginative Will to project the astral body is one of the big secrets of projecting. You can call it a process of mere imagination if you wish, but it is not mere imagination, but imagination plus Will to do that which is imagined. You can never force the passive Will successfully, for the instant you try to force passive Will, it becomes active Will...Now he (the projector) wishes to move to his neighbour's house, but he makes no effort to do so. Instantly he begins to move forward-apparently everything coming toward him, through him, passing him. He is conscious, he realizes what he is doing, but he is not using his own motive power (Muldoon and Carrington, 1929, p. xxx)

It is important to note that Muldoon does not mean to equate passive or imaginative will to the state of ordinary non-lucid awareness, but rather views it as an orientation or attitude that the lucid dreamer can adopt as an alternative to focused intention. This raises the question of whether there are two distinct modes of awareness within lucidity itself.

From the evidence of these early researchers, we can see that the difficulty of directly exerting oneself in the LD/OOBE state. Similar to Muldoon’s experience, my own OOBEs point

to two distinct modes of consciousness in the LD/OOBE state—FOA and another mode that I have termed, “immersive, relational awareness,” or IRA, which coincides with Muldoon’s passive will. I will briefly describe the ways that FOA 1) overrides or diminishes the perceptual intensity and richness of the experience, while 2) increasing the physicality or “hardening” of the phenomenal realm with a commensurate loss of freedom. I will then suggest that IRA, in contrast to FOA, increases the perceptual intensity of the experience and renders the three-dimensional qualities of the experience less rigid, enabling the dreamer to fly effortlessly, modify forms, and move through walls and other barriers more freely during the experience.

My principal objective in my early work in lucid dreaming (Sparrow, 1974; 1976), was to meditate in the dream, and to see the light whenever it would appear to me. My first lucid dream was an unforgettable, ecstatic experience of illumination that prompted me to seek to experience the light whenever possible. Back in the 70s, I was fortunate to locate a translation of ancient Tibetan Buddhist texts referring to lucid dreaming as a form of yoga (Evans-Wentz, 1958). Consequently, I came to regard the orbs of light appearing in my lucid dreams as manifestations of the highest reality, or the dharmakaya (i.e. “body of truth”). As I nurtured a relationship with this ineffable Reality, I soon discovered that meditating before going sleep—or better yet, in the middle of the night, and even *during* lucid dream—seemed to facilitate the light’s appearance as well as my openness to it.

In some lucid dreams, the light appeared as a nebulous orb of white light that would hover above me, and approach me. Whenever I expressed eagerness, however, the orb would retreat, as if awaiting another mode of awareness or intention. Then, when I would finally turn away and not look at it, the light would often approach and suffuse my consciousness with radiance and ecstasy.

On other occasions, I would observe objects in the dreamscape that seemed to be lit from within. As I would focus on the shimmering objects in an attempt to experience the light within them, the light would usually fade out, and the object would assume a dull, ordinary appearance. Thus my focused intention seemed to have a withering effect on the otherwise luminous dream forms. On one occasion, a woman approached me and offered an explanation for my fruitless efforts. She said, simply, “You must first learn to love the form before you can see the light within it.” In a few words, the woman seemed to be saying that the light could not be “extracted” from the dream objects, only experienced as a consequence of relating to them.

My lucid dreams decreased in frequency in my early 30s to the point where I only had one about once a month or less. But an altogether new phase commenced about five years ago after I began combining my middle-of-the-night practice of meditation with the ingestion of the naturally occurring supplement galantamine, an extract of the snow drop lily. Since then, I have been able to have lengthy LD/OOBes, as long as I get enough sleep beforehand, and have a good meditation in the middle of the night.

My current LD/OOBes often begin without a break in consciousness soon after returning to bed; that is, they are “wake-induced lucid dreams,” or WILD. After I become aware of a distinctive vibration and sound, I find it’s easy to move out of my body. At that point, I fly upward through wind and complete darkness. I sometimes feel someone beside me, supporting my flight by taking my hands as I move into the total darkness. I usually spend some time praying and meditating, until I emerge into a brightly lit, exceedingly detailed, and internally consistent world. Then on some occasions, the accompanying guide appears beside me as a unknown person, and usually a woman.

As I stabilize my presence in the LD/OOBE experience, it often seems that I am with beings on a different planet in a distant star system, and sometimes it seems that I am in a world that is parallel to our own. Regardless, my main intentions have remained consistent during this recent chapter of exploration: to commune with the light, and to understand the true nature of the beings I encounter, and the purpose of our relationship.

In my search for the light during this most recent chapter in my exploration, I have discovered that my relationship with it is still governed by the quality of my awareness and intention. Almost without exception, any exercise of FOA has a withering effect on any light source that I gaze upon directly. Just two nights ago, for instance, I became lucid while inside an ancient stone building with windows overlooking brilliant landscapes and horizons. I became aware of three separate sources of white light. At first, I looked off the side so that the sources of radiance would continue. Then, I looked directly at the largest light source. As I did, it remained bright for a few seconds, then slowly faded from brilliant white to dull yellow-brown, until there was only a slight afterglow.

Similarly, whenever I ask direct questions concerning the identity or nature of the people that I encounter, I find the more effort I make to understand what they are saying, the more their responses seem distorted by the sound of wind, which blocks out most of their words. Again, my intention to extract something from the dream seems to result in a distortion of the dream character's words. In other cases, when I am able to hear their answers clearly, the answers they provide are frustratingly indirect and inconclusive. For instance, in one experience, I encountered a woman standing behind a podium in a brightly lit room. I asked her, "Are you real?" She laughed and began morphing into a young girl in a white dress, who runs from the room giggling.

In another, I am sitting with a female guide in a park-like setting, observing the people around me, and I ask her, “Are you a part of me?” She says, “Kind of.” Then I ask, “Are you my anima?” Again she responds, “Kind of.”

More recently, it is as if the beings I encounter are less patient with these attempts to extract a clear definition of their true nature. In one experience, in which an unknown man is guiding me through the experience, I turn to him, and ask, “What is your name?” He smiles, leans over, and blows air into my ear as he mouths the word, “Puff.” And in another experience, in which I am guided by a woman for whom I feel a timeless connection, she remains veiled to me in spite of our deep mutual love.

There are two other ways that FOA appears to defeat dreamers in the LD/OOBE state—when one tries to fly, and when one tries to pass through walls and other barriers. In both cases, the more I am in FOA mode, or expressing “active will” as Muldoon refers to it, the more difficult it is for me to fly or to pass effortlessly through walls and objects. It is as if the empirically oriented FOA inadvertently restricts the range of possibilities by implicitly ratifying the laws that govern three-dimensional reality. It goes something like this: The harder I try to fly, the more I believe in gravity, and thus the more I am likely to fail because flight is impossible. While Van Eden should have been able to break the claret glass under normal conditions, inability to break the claret glass dramatizes the almost perverse manner in which the phenomenal realm of the dream seems to simultaneously exaggerate its physicality and resist the dreamer’s focused intent, making it far less possible for the dreamer to move about freely and to modify existing forms. That is, FOA “firms up” the physicality of the observed phenomenal realm, making it difficult to manipulate ordinary physical laws.

I think these examples demonstrate that FOA sets about to isolate and extract something from the dream, and by doing so, it overrides or provokes resistance from a process or level of consciousness that seems incompatible with, or unwelcoming of its hard edge. Note that in the effort to commune with the light, or to identify the nature of my companions, FOA is not so much bad as it is an expression of ordinary, empirical inquiry. That is, by viewing the light source or the person as something the dreamer is isolating and objectifying for his own purposes—much in the way that the conscious self identifies, tracks, and processes stimuli received through the sense organs—he inadvertently defeats himself and remains on the outside looking in.

In normal waking perception, FOA facilitates the processing and construction of experience on the basis of afferent stimuli entering awareness through sensory receptors. As such, the process of waking perception moves from outside to inside—from specific external stimuli to internal representations. But in the dream state, the observer perceives internally constructed events generated, not from afferent stimuli, but from some activating source that relies on the default activation network for its canvas. As I have articulated elsewhere, the emergent dream content seems to depend on the observer's consciousness for its specific appearance, much in the way that a quantum event partakes of an observer interfacing with indeterminate quantum potentials. Similarly, the mere act of observation in our ordinary dreams seems to influence and co-create the resulting experience (Sparrow, 2013; Sparrow and Thurston, 2010). However, FOA can apparently take this co-creative process too far, thus unbalancing the relationship. The heavy-handedness of FOA effectively dims the intensity of the dream's illumination and distorts verbal communication, and 2) precipitates a further "hardening" or materializing of form, thus limiting the dreamer's capacity to transcend or modify

normal physical laws in the dreamscape. In regard to the distortion of visual and auditory signals, it is intriguing to note that these sensory domains are especially active in the default activation network (Fox,), so any disruption of the default network would presumably distort visual and auditory perceptions, which we have seen in the examples I have provided.

In spite of the disruptive impact of FOA, there are also examples of intention facilitating an intensification of the perception of light and an ability to move about in the dreamscape with greater freedom. What explains the differences in these dichotomous outcomes? In addition to Muldoon's description of two distinct forms of intention, Leslie Farber in his book, *The Ways of the Will*, divides volition into the "first" and the "second" will. Farber's "first will" corresponds to Muldoon's "active will," and his "second will" approximates Muldoon's "passive will." Farber argues from a psychological standpoint, that while the first will is active in virtually all of our practical, goal-oriented pursuits, it cannot do the work of the second will, which relates to the deeper directions of one's life—to love, and to purpose.

Based on Muldoon's and Farber's models pertaining to two forms of volition, and my own observations as a lucid dreamer, I propose a two-dimensional model of consciousness based on FOA and IRA to denote restrictive and facilitative stances, respectively, during the lucid state.

FOA is, of course, essential to life itself. During what neuroscientists call the "orienting response," we compare and contrast novel phenomena with prior experience, and eventually incorporate it into an expanding data base of prior knowledge. This state of mind effectively sets us apart from what we are contemplating, in order to comprehend and categorize our sensory experience.

FOA in the lucid dream state is what the orienting response is to the waking state: It results in a temporary heightening of focus in order to grasp and incorporate a novel event. In

contrast, IRA corresponds to a less focused, more immersive experience of the environment, much in the way that a meditator might experience the flow of thoughts and feelings without isolating them, nor identifying them with language. Just as the orienting response is not necessary for a person to remain conscious in the waking state—nor desirable during moments of immersive, relational experience—lucidity does not depend on focused awareness for its continuation in the dream state either. While FOA may appear to be a “higher” expression of lucidity, it may actually interfere or suppress other important aspects of the dream experience.

As we know, the normal state of waking awareness involves a hodgepodge of focused moments, habitual low-reflective functioning, as well as a significant amount of mind wandering, thus partaking of at least two modes or networks of consciousness—one corresponding to FOA and its commensurate network of brain activation, and the other with IRA and the default activation network. We have all experienced the jarring impact of FOA intruding upon the immersive experience of the present moment, whether in the form of unwanted conversation, questions, or labeling. Similar to his distinction of active and passive wills, Muldoon referred to a largely automated form of awareness in the OOB as “crypto consciousness,” or the “subconscious mind” in contrast to normal waking awareness. He observed that the crypto consciousness would seem to know things, and do things without really questioning them. One might consider this level of awareness as the distinctive product of the default activation network, which traditionally has been considered as necessarily deficient in self-reflectiveness. One might ask, can the lucid dreamer remain lucid without interfering with, or overriding the sensory intensity and flexible emulation of the default activation network? Countless anecdotes of lucid dreaming indicate that the answer is yes, but one might ask, What is the ideal state of awareness for the lucid dreamer? Is it possible to enter into the dream without

imposing a withering effect on the dream? If we view lucidity as capable of shifting back and forth between two modes of awareness, and one of these modes as more aligned with the functioning of dreaming, or the default network, I think the answer is definitely “Yes.”

In contrast to the experiences in which FOA appears to 1) override and diminish the perceptual clarity and intensity of luminous forms and verbal communication, and 2) impose physical laws contrary to the dream-like quality that we expect to encounter in dreams, I have had numerous experiences in which I have been able to suspend FOA and enter into a perceptually rich and intensified experience of the dream, by practicing IRA.

For instance, after recently experiencing the dimming of light sources in several successive OOBes, I decided to meditate at length in the middle of the night in hopes that I could view the light source during subsequent OOBes without having it fade away. After meditating for almost an hour, and then lying down, I soon felt/heard the familiar pre-OOBE vibration, which the Buddhists have referred to as the “gift waves.” Knowing I was then free to separate from my body, I sat up and flew upward through the darkness without the accompaniment of a guide, and emerged into a bright outdoor setting. As I walked along a path, I became aware that the sun was shining brightly overhead. I turned my gaze upward, and entered a meditative state, letting go of any particular intention. The orb of light continued to shine brightly, and even intensified, as I stared at it directly.

Similarly, in several recent experiences, I have practiced maintaining IRA while flying and passing through walls by shifting away from focused intention to imagination and desire. In order to remain in this facilitative state, I have to *believe that I can do what I want to do, but I have refrain from actively trying*. That is, instead of “trying to fly,” I have imagined the pleasures of flight, and the ease with which I expect to do it. When I achieve this level of

unfocused intent, I am able to fly with complete ease. Going through walls is also a matter of letting go, and believing, rather than exerting myself. As Van Eden discovered in his ordeal with the claret glass, the harder I try to master or dominate the physical aspects of the OOB, the more impervious the barriers become.

Muldoon would refer to the facilitative state of awareness as passive will. But I think immersive, relational awareness, or IRA, is a better term; because the state of awareness isn't so much passive as it is fully immersed in the experience without imposing a narrow agenda. That is, the perceiver enters into a contemplation of the object without imposing objectifying language or thoughts to describe it, nor pursuing any agenda other than relating deeply to what he contemplates.

In terms of contemporary research, this is where my observations seem to coincide with and support the idea that there is an optimum state of awareness that aligns itself with the functioning of the default activation network (DNA). As for the neurological mechanisms that account for lucidity in general, and IRA in particular, Spoormaker, Czigler, Dresler suggest that there is a separate network that accounts for lucidity, and that "when the attention system is more 'active' the organism's attention is shifted to external stimuli, and conversely, when the default mode is more active the attention shifts inwards, e.g. to mental imagery (memory reprocessing or future imagination)." According to this model of shifting attention, it's possible that FOA represents a failure of the lucid dreamer to shift away from empirical, sensory channels toward a state of mind that is more congruent with the functioning of the DNA. If so, we can imagine that the lucid network interfaces with the DNA, and either aligns with it, or disrupts it depending on the level of focus, or intention. Regardless of the network(s) that may account for lucidity, the range of phenomenal experiences I have cited suggest that the optimum lucid state is not a

focused, objectifying mode or awareness, but rather an immersive, relational mode that works with the virtual emulation of the default network without disrupting it. Indeed, the ideal lucid dream awareness may consist of a state of mind that avoids isolating and objectifying what one perceives, toward what could be misconstrued as a “lower expression” of lucidity.

This “higher and lower” designation is based on seeing lucidity as one variable on a continuum, rather than a faculty with two distinct modes. By equating lucidity at its height with non-situated awareness (e.g. the ability to think of what happened before), and the ability to focus and objectify one’s experience, we may have contributed to the perception that lucidity was somehow set apart from, even antithetical to dreaming. This idea may have led Foulkes’ in his original conception of lucidity to basically state that it was incompatible with normal dreaming. As recently as 2014, one can still see the way this thinking influencing the way we see volition as incompatible with the default activation network, in a statement by Domhoff and Foulkes:

...participants only reported dreams if they also reported a loss of volitional control, whatever the sleep-onset stage, which is noteworthy because loss of volitional control appears to be another condition necessary for dreaming to occur (Foulkes & Domhoff, 2014, p. 170)

If we substitute Muldoon’s concept of “active will” for “volition” in the above statement, then Foulkes and Domhoff align fully with the idea that intention—as we usually think of it —disrupts the dreaming mechanism, or the DNA. However, in time we may come to see that what some people refer to as “high lucidity” could be an expression of FOA, and that “low lucidity” could be an expression of IRA, which instead of overriding the phenomenal output of the DNA, adjusts to its requirements and enters fully into a relationship with it. It may be that the ideal

form of lucidity is a hybrid state that combines the somewhat automated and situational aspect of the default network while bringing certain “facts” of non-situated awareness into the complete experience of the dream ego. Instead of awakening, and wondering why we didn’t realize, for instance, that Dad was actually dead as I spoke with him, we might consider that the misconception could have served a different priority—to be fully present for the encounter.

In summary, I believe that a variety of phenomenological features of LD/OOBES indicates that the observer shifts back and forth from two distinct modes of awareness, each of which has its strengths. By observing the consequences of these two modes of awareness on the lucid/OOBE state, we may revise our views of what constitutes an ideal state of mind, and we may arrive at a more sophisticated view of lucidity that aligns itself with the functioning of the default activation network and the integrative function of dreaming without overriding it with an excessive empirical, and objectifying focus.

Before I end my presentation, I would like for you to recall the experience that I shared at the beginning of my talk, in which my ability to perceive light effects in my eye was defeated by my attempt to focus on it. I believe that this anomaly supports the idea that there are two distinct modes of awareness in the waking state, as well, but that shifting from one to another does not usually appear to override the other, as it does in dreams. That is, if I shift from a focused state of awareness to daydreaming, I am still able to hear the sound of my spouse talking without actually listening to what she’s saying: She doesn’t disappear while I am mentally elsewhere. And yet, in the case of the disappearing light effects in my eye, we see that even in the waking state, focused, objectifying awareness can override subtle perceptions. It may be that these modes are always inhibiting each other in both states of mind.

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