

Letter From Scott Sparrow

published in the *Lucidity Letter*, 1987

On the Advisability of Widespread Lucid Dream Induction

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I agree that it's time we tackled the question of the advisability of promoting widespread lucid dream induction. It's somewhat surprising that a more heated debate hasn't sprung up before now. But now that lucid dreaming has been established as a legitimate focus of research enquiry, and has been found to be available to a large percentage of the populace, it's certainly time to ask, "What is the appropriate context in which to encourage lucid dream induction?" With regard to this question, I'm going to share some ideas without going back to arrange them. I know if I try to do that, I'll never find the time to finish a letter to you. So please forgive the disjointed nature of this response.

One reason I haven't participated much in the lucid dreaming field over the last few years is that I ran into some unpleasant experiences in the late 70's following a period of almost nightly lucid dreaming. I didn't want to assume that it was lucid dreaming per se that was acting as a catalyst for these experiences—maybe it was unique to my situation that my pursuit of lucidity had inadvertently thrown me off balance. In any case, I found I had to

back off from the pursuit of lucid dreaming until several years later, when I again resumed a more concerted and less ambitious meditation and dreamwork regimen. I realize now that this strange time was a period of growth; but there were times I was quite anxious about what was going on. Fortunately, the whole ordeal left me feeling grounded and seasoned. In fact, it seems to have contributed to my ability to empathize with others who are passing through destabilizing, albeit developmental, periods.

From my reading of the Tibetan literature, which is the only sophisticated historical source I'm aware of on lucid dreaming, there is every reason to assume that lucid dreaming (yoga of the dream state) is a dangerous pursuit, especially when the seeker does not practice meditation. "The expounders of Tibetan yoga emphasize that the Path of Form [the six yogas, including dream yoga] . . . can be dangerous and is more difficult than its companion Path Without Form, the Mahamudra [meditation]" (Evans-Wentz, 1958, p. xxxv). Further, aspirants without a guide are encouraged to pursue the meditation path, rather than the path of the six yogas. One reason for their concern was apparently due to the powerful energy (kundalini) which was activated through the six yogas (and through Mahamudra to a lesser extent), which has to be managed very carefully if it is to promote development, rather than mental illness.

The Tantric principle of the equivalence of consciousness and energy (prana) is central to the Tibetan system. It implies that when we manage to increase one, the other is sure to

follow. My own observation that the kundalini (experienced as powerful electricity-like energy coursing through my body) often awakens during my lucid dreams supports this Tantric principle at least at a subjective level. Gopi Krishna's autobiographical account of his difficulties with the kundalini provides ample reason to approach with great care any consciousness-enhancing technique that arouses this psychophysical force (Krishna, 1971).

Even if we choose to ignore the Tantric wisdom because it presumably bears no relevance to our Western tradition (a highly questionable assumption, considering the universality of various transpersonal experiences), we would still have a hard time justifying our ignorance of the time-tested tenets of psychodynamic theory. Even Wilber, who has gone out on a limb in describing an evolutionary framework leading to oneness with God, places great emphasis on the pre-personal stages of development, and the consequences of repressing the typhon (the body-self) and the shadow (Wilber, 1979). Freud's contributions actually survive quite well in Wilber's more comprehensive system.

Although I don't think we should try to prevent healthy individuals from discovering their repressed complexes and other pre-personal issues through lucid dreaming (after all, what is therapy if it isn't, in part, awakening to these issues), I strongly believe that we need to inform and prepare individuals for the possible ordeal of meeting autonomous

repressed aspects of the unconscious through the widened aperture of the lucid dreamer's awareness.

I believe there is no sure way to obtain informed consent from a prospective lucid dream induction subject. Moreover, I believe the desire for lucidity is, to some undetermined extent, insincere. Why? To the extent that one has continued to repress the awareness of unresolved, possibly painful pre-personal memories and issues (and that probably fits most of us to varying extents), the statement "I want to become lucid," implies a paradox. It seems to say: I am willing to become aware of what I've been unwilling to become aware of. How can we know ahead of time what we will suddenly perceive through our wide-open dream eyes? How can we know if we're ready for it?

It is possible that lucidity alone confers the strength needed to deal with the enhanced awareness of heretofore repressed aspects. Maybe lucidity is another name for the readiness to deal with the unknown. One friend of mine suggested that lucidity arises to the degree that one is willing to tolerate inconsistency in one's life. If this is true, then we need not fear the lucid state. But when I look at the lucid dreams of my clients, as well as many of my own, I have observed that lucid dreams are, on occasion, quite overwhelming.

A client of mine reported that she had to take a day off from work two weeks ago after having a lucid dream. True, it was "wonderful" from my standpoint, but it shook her to the foundations of her self concept. In short, she found an old flattened doll beneath a pile of rubbish, picked it up and precluidly thought, "If I was this doll, I know what I'd like." She began hugging and stroking the doll, and it came to life! As it dawned on her that she was dreaming, she nonetheless felt deeply disturbed to realize that this "doll" was indeed alive in some sense. One can appreciate the significance of her finding out that her abused child (very abused) was still alive, but it was a fact that went against her ego definition. Wonderful facts can be devastating from the standpoint of a well-fortified ego. Knowing this woman, I feel that she was fortunate to be in therapy when such "good" news became conscious to her.

Perhaps not all of us possess repressed pre-personal issues; does that make the lucid dream a comfortable experience? Not necessarily. Even transpersonal reality can be quite disturbing to the ego (e.g. Tart's research on the fear of psi). Once again, Wilber is a help here. If it's pre-personal material, it can be disturbing to the extent that the ego will not include it inside its boundaries. If it's transpersonal material, it's disturbing as long as the ego does not wish to be included in a larger whole. To the ego, these fears feel quite similar!

While the example of my client's dream represents one way that lucidity might leverage an uninformed person (and who isn't, ultimately?) into disturbing, albeit valuable, realizations, I have a more serious reservation concerning the indiscriminate promotion of lucid dream induction. Quite simply, I feel that it is easy for persons to experience the freedom and power it bestows without having to develop a commensurate willingness to surrender old ways. One can easily escape from or destroy a dream figure. Such actions, while far from the endpoint of our growth, often fit into a developmental continuum as intermediate accomplishments (Rossi, 1972). As the therapist, I serve as one who encourages the dreamer not to get stuck in such intermediate stages, and to continue working toward dialogue, reconciliation and integration. I'm concerned that many individuals, who do not have someone to urge them onward, may get caught up in the power of the lucid dream, and provoke the "retaliation" of largely autonomous, repressed unconscious content.

Wilber might say that lucid dreaming can easily become an "Atman project"—an ego preserving pursuit that masquerades as real change—because of its Eros-potential, or its promise as a cornucopia of personally gratifying experiences. As long as we promote lucid dreaming as a blank check for ego-enhancing experiences, I believe we hide a greater truth from a person's view—that lucid dreaming is inescapably a form of yoga which demands the most of us, including eventual surrender of power and status quo-

preserving urges. As researchers, do we wish to promote a scintillating but potentially dangerous half-truth, or a less attractive but more complete view?

In my own life, I found that at the height of my lucid dreaming I ran into a brick wall of sorts. Lucid dreaming had become evidence of my evolution, a merit badge of sorts. Of course, I thought I was handling it okay; but I had no idea what I was repressing. Who does? Well, all kinds of very angry people began showing up in my dreams, and turning rather demonic to boot. A black panther walked in the front door and would not go away no matter how much I told him he was only a dream.

Maybe it's inevitable that we all embark on the Path encumbered by adolescent dreams. Maybe we need to fly, then crash, then pick up and pursue the Path with more sobriety. There's a lot of evidence to support the notion that a "dark night" is an unavoidable course correction in our path to wholeness (Underhill, 1911/1961), or that at least it's hard to avoid failure in our early efforts at transpersonal evolution. (e.g. Robert Johnson's analysis of Parcifal's quest in He). If so, we need to normalize a broader range of experiences so that individuals will not conclude erroneously that they are failing just because they are in pain. How I wish there had been someone around me in late 1977 who could have known enough to say, "This is part of it. Pick yourself up, and you'll make it through okay?" It would have made the path a lot more meaningful (if not easier to tolerate).

Herb Puryear has said that the only thing more dangerous than meditating is not meditating. I believe the same is true of lucid dreaming, psychotherapy and other fertile approaches to growth and transformation. I'm not going to stop pursuing it, and I don't expect others to. Even so, I feel we have an obligation to let others know that lucid dreaming can usher them into the darkness as much as into the Light. And both are necessary experiences, I believe.

I hope these ideas can be helpful in the ongoing dialogue regarding the cost vs. benefits analysis of lucid dream induction.

## References

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[Editor's Note: Scott Sparrow is the author of one of the classic books on lucid dreaming,

*Lucid Dreaming: Dawning of the Clear Light.*]