

A Non-Dual Perspective on the Question of Dream Control

Refereed chapter for publication in *Lucid dreaming: New Perspectives on Consciousness in Sleep*, Hurd, R. and Bulkeley, K. (eds.). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014.

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Introduction

Perhaps the most controversial question in the field of lucid dream research is, “To what extent should we try to manipulate our dreams?” This issue begs to be considered once a person can achieve lucidity with some degree of regularity. For after all, the expanded sense of freedom unleashed by lucidity permits the dreamer to engage in efforts to create, alter, dismiss, or destroy the dream characters and scenarios, or conversely to accept them as they are as inherently meaningful and valuable. Some embrace an “anything goes” approach, believing that the dreamer alone should decide how to treat the characters and phenomenal reality of the dream. Others espouse a cautious approach, and cite various reasons why ungoverned experimentation can create psychological and moral hazard. Thus, while the question is obvious, the answer is not.

In his seminal work on lucid dreaming, Van Eeden (1913) opened up the topic of dream content manipulation by reporting a dream in which he tried to destroy a dream image.

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. It broke all right, but a little too late, like an actor who misses his cue. This gave me a very curious impression of being in a fake-world, cleverly imitated, but with small failures. (Van Eeden, 1913)

Van Eeden's conclusion that he was in a "fake-world" reflects an assumption about dreams that traces its origins to ancient Greece—that dreams simply mimic everyday life, but have no independent life of their own. In such a world, one presumably can do whatever one wishes without consequence. However, Van Eeden goes on to recount another lucid dream in which he arrives at a wholly different conclusion about the nature of the perceived content:

I saw Prof. van't Hoff, the famous Dutch chemistI went up to him, knowing very well that he was dead, and continued my inquiry about our condition after death....I asked first why we, lacking our organs of sense, could arrive at any certainty that the person to whom we were talking was really that person and not a subjective illusion.

Then van't Hoff said:

"Just as in common life; by a general impression."

"Yet," I said, "in common life there is stability of observation and there is consolidation by repeated observation."

"Here also," said van't Hoff. "And the sensation of certainty is the same." Then I had indeed a very strong feeling of certitude that it was really van't Hoff with whom I talked and no subjective illusion.

Van Eeden concluded that it was really Prof. van't Hoff on the basis of his own "sensation of certainty." While some may accept this criterion as sufficient, it underscores a significant problem in developing an approach to dream content manipulation that does not hinge on a momentary subjective impression. If the dream imagery is entirely subjective and self-generated (i.e. "fake"), then it is reasonable to believe that the dreamer can manipulate it without concern of psychological or ethical repercussions. But if the dream imagery mediates, at least to some extent, actual exchanges between persons or objective aspects of the inner self—then the dream ego would do well to treat it respectfully; for, to do otherwise might reap the kind of moral and psychological hazard that we risk whenever we are tempted to manipulate waking relationships. Further, treating the dream characters disrespectfully might instill patterns of relating that would fail to translate into ethically defensible waking behaviors (Bulkeley, 1988).

The problem is further illustrated when a dreamer's "sensation of certainty" gives way to a completely different conclusion in the same dream. For instance, a friend of mine once shared a lucid dream in which he was walking beside his girlfriend and talking to her about their lives in a very intimate and meaningful way. But then, the dream companion abruptly turned to him with a cold blank stare, looked deeply into his eyes, and said, "Sleep, sleep..." as if she was trying to

hypnotize him. He awoke feeling afraid—worried that his girlfriend had suddenly become strange and demonic. He subsequently asked me, “Was it really my girlfriend, or just an image of her?” My answer, which seemed to satisfy my friend, was that she was perhaps both: that the initial soul-to-soul encounter had devolved into a confrontation with a distorted image of her due to his inability to remain open, or transparent to the experience. Unbeknownst to both of us at the time, he had significant unresolved psychodynamic issues with his mother, whom he regarded as excessively selfish and controlling, which wrecked havoc in his marriage years later.

My purpose in this chapter is not to take a hard and fast position on manipulating dream content, nor to venture an opinion whether some dream characters are ultimately “real” or not, but to present a developmental view of the dreamer-dream relationship that preserves the importance of lucidity while respecting the mystery and autonomy of the dream imagery. My first inklings of this integrated solution, which permits a sophisticated answer to the question of dream control, came to me in a lucid dream many years ago. In the dream,

I am lucid and looking for the light. Everything around me is glowing, but as soon as I concentrate on a particular glowing object—hoping that the form will dissolve into light—the object loses its luster, and appears in its ordinary physical state. As I am growing progressively frustrated at my inability to see through the forms of the dream, a woman walks up to me and says simply, "You must first learn to love the form in order to see the light within it."

This dream may well contain all that we need to know about the question of whether we should control our dreams. But let me retrace my steps through 40 years of involvement in the lucid dream field, in order to arrive again at a similar conclusion.

The Beginnings

In 1974, on a sunny day in south Georgia, I sat on the back porch of my apartment near West Georgia College and began writing on a legal notebook what may have been the first masters thesis on lucid dreaming (Sparrow, 1974). I was only 23, and very little had been written on the topic at the time (Brown, 1936; Faraday, 1972; Fox, 1962; Green, 1968; Tart, 1968; Van Eeden, 1913). Supported largely by Jungian theory, I hypothesized that lucid dreaming represented no less than a significant evolutionary step in the dream state that paralleled the emergence of the nascent ego in the waking state thousands of years ago. I also suggested that lucidity conferred the same advantages and risks of that monumental achievement.

My thesis turned into a little book, *Lucid Dreaming: Dawning of the Clear Light* (1976), which was the first book on lucid dreaming published in North America. After Hearne (1978) and LaBerge (1980) independently established lucid dreaming as a true REM sleep phenomenon, lucid dream research became a legitimate field of its own. There were three main prongs during the initial decade of inquiry: induction studies spearheaded by LaBerge; inquiries into the relationship between lucidity and various personality characteristics led by Gackenbach; and first-person treatises addressing the psychological and spiritual value of lucid dreaming, such as Kelzer's *The Sun and the Shadow*, as well as my own book. During this fertile decade,

Gackenbach's tireless commitment to the scholarly treatment of lucid dreaming launched the *Lucidity Letter*, which from 1981-1990 served as the flagship for the lucid dream community.

Division in the Ranks

Controversy arose during the late 1980s concerning the potential hazards of lucid dream induction in general, and the pros and cons of controlling one's dreams in particular. There were two schools of thought: a group who espoused a values-free, experimental approach to lucid dreaming (LaBerge, 1985, 1987; LaBerge and Reingold, 1990; Malamud, 1991), and a group that recommended a more cautious approach because of the possible psychological hazards (Gackenbach, 1987; Lewis, 1990; Sparrow, 1988), the loss of the dream's clarifying value (Bonime, 1990), and the absence of a sophisticated ethical stance (Bulkeley, 1988).

The Argument for an Anything-Goes Approach

The first group operated under the reasonable assumption that the dream was a private, interior, "self created" experience. They thus believed that the dreamer alone should decide what to do in the confines of the dream state. LaBerge and Reingold (1990) captured the spirit of this approach in the popular book, *Exploring the World of Lucid Dreaming*:

If fully lucid, you would realize that the entire dream world was your own creation, and with this awareness might come an exhilarating feeling of freedom. Nothing external, no laws of society or physics, would constrain your experience, you could do anything your mind could conceive. (LaBerge and Reingold, 1990, p. 14-15)

LaBerge and Reingold were not alone in their enthusiasm for a values-free, experimental orientation. Another lucid dream pioneer, Judith Malamud, urged her psychotherapy clients to treat dreaming as a state that is

...totally free and totally safe and therefore permits one to be maximally creative in whatever way one wishes. . . .The dream state can become an arena for trying out or discovering what your inner wishes and fantasies might be. You can sleep with people that it would be totally unacceptable to do that with in waking life, and discover what pleases you in a safe, private environment. (Malamud, 1991)

This self-governed, experimental approach has wide appeal for obvious reasons: It offers an avenue into levels of freedom and creativity that is often lacking in ordinary dreams; and, it appeals, as well, to research-minded individuals who are interested in finding out just what *is* possible in the lucid dream state.

Arguments for Caution

There have also been those who have questioned the wisdom of tampering with the dream's mechanism and content. From a psychodynamic standpoint, this makes sense, because the dream content has been viewed as a disguised compromise of blatant hedonistic impulses that depends for its expression on a deficiency of ego awareness (Freud, 1900). While the deficiency theory has been largely discredited (Kahan, 2001; Kahan and LaBerge, 1996; 2010; Purcell, Moffit and Hoffman, 1993), the idea that the unconscious contains disturbing memories and/or autonomous forces that threaten to destabilize the ego's integrity is not unique to Freud and his followers. For instance, Jung believed that dreams can depict powerful "complexes" that threaten the ego's one-sided views. He viewed a complex as "a certain psychic situation which is strongly accentuated emotionally and is, moreover, incompatible with the habitual [or one-sided] attitude of consciousness" (Jung, 1970, p. 201). A complex thus develops whenever the ego adopts an untenable, one-sided view, and thus threatens to undermine the conscious status quo.

Jung also argued that each individual's "calling" or individuation urge was to make the unconscious conscious (Edinger, 1984), which on the surface seems to lend support for the quest for greater awareness in the dream. But Jung also observed that the ego's premature incorporation of archetypal forces can inflate and destabilize the ego. Thus from a variety of psychodynamic angles, manipulating dream content could feasibly tilt the tenuous balance of power in the psyche toward unconscious domination.

From the East, the Tibetan Buddhist literature on dream yoga, as found in *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* (1968), seems to support both views. On one hand, the devotee is encouraged to become lucid and to trample upon the images of the dream to assert one's freedom from illusion. And yet, in another passage, the same text asserts that lucid dreaming is a form of yoga associated with the accelerated and energetic "path of form," and that to be done safely, it requires the seasoned oversight of a guru.

Still others have argued that lucid dream behavior should come into alignment with the best ethical standards that govern the waking state (Bulkeley, 1988). After all, lucidity ushers the dreamer into what appears to be real-time, vivid encounters with persons whose ultimate natures—subjective, objective, or some combination thereof—can never be conclusively determined. Even if dream characters are ultimately products of the dreamer's mind, exploiting them could establish untenable, even dangerous precedents for waking state relationships. While Robert Waggoner's book *Lucid Dreaming: Gateway to the Inner Self* (2009) offers a multi-leveled, integrated view that regards dream characters on a continuum from mere "thought forms" to beings with independent agency, one can argue that in the absence of absolute

knowing, one should always treat the dream character as a separate being. But I will address this later.

Controversy Erupts

In the December, 1987 issue of *Lucidity Letter*, letters from Jayne Gackenbach and Stephen LaBerge articulated the differences between the two positions on lucid dream induction and dream control. As a backdrop to this dialogue, there had been some reports of dreamers having unsettling experiences in their pursuit of lucidity. In response to these concerns, Gackenbach (1987) suggested that lucid dream researchers and authors might, at least, provide information about the potential downside risks of lucidity, upon which readers and participants could then make informed choices. She stated unequivocally, “we are at fault if we do not routinely caution audiences about abuse or even dangers in accessing an incredibly powerful state of mind.” LaBerge (1987) disagreed, asserting, “I believe it is premature and inappropriate to ‘routinely caution audiences’ about supposed ‘dangers’ that have not yet been convincingly demonstrated. I do not really believe that there is cause for alarm.”

In the following issue, several letters from well-known lucid dream authorities continued the debate. I supported Gackenbach’s cautious position (Sparrow, 1988), saying that frequent lucid dreaming had temporarily corresponded with a destabilization of my emotional and psychological well being. Trowbridge (1988) and MaGallon (1988) chided Gackenbach and myself for operating “out of fear,” and expressed the belief that injecting fear into an otherwise positive pursuit could become self-fulfilling. Bulkeley (1988, 1989) took the position that LaBerge had failed to take ethics adequately into consideration in his wholesale promotion of lucid dreaming. He argued that LaBerge’s ethical stance amounted to nothing more than ethical

egoism, (i.e. if it *feels* good, then it *is* good). LaBerge's (1988) heated response to Bulkeley's assessment (1988) left an impact that can still be felt even today, 25 years later, even though Bulkeley (1989) expressed hope that “that such a debate will make positive and constructive contributions to the enterprise in which we are all engaged, namely the exploration of the experience of lucid dreaming.” While many of the principals in this debate may have privately resolved this conflict, I do believe that this controversy represents a clash of paradigms, and will continue to raise its head as lucid dreamers continue to favor one of these orientations over the other.

Toward a Solution

I think the only way to resolve this conflict, and to answer the question concerning the issue of dream control, is to examine it in the context of the individual and collective evolution of consciousness. As I argued in my master's thesis, *Lucid Dreaming as an Evolutionary Process* (Sparrow, 1974), lucidity can be seen as a more evolved level of self-awareness that represents as much of an advance in the dream state as the ego self must have represented in the waking state when it began to emerge thousands of years ago. After all, the lucid dreamer is not only capable of experimenting with alternative responses in the dream, but is able to access memories and facts usually not available in ordinary dreams (i.e. "nonsituated" awareness), as well as to pursue presumed higher states of consciousness through meditation and yogic methods. But whether one is talking about the waking state or the dream state, various theorists have argued that further differentiation in consciousness always runs the risk of negating or dissociating from the previous dominant mode of consciousness, as well as from the body and feelings.

In *The Next Development in Man*, Whyte (1962) argues that a distinctly Western development in consciousness that he calls the “European dissociation” accounts for such collective disasters as the National Socialist movement in Germany. Simply put, the dissociation that Whyte alludes to is the ability to suppress or postpone one’s immediate impulses and feelings. Drawing on Whyte’s thesis, Wilber (1996; 2007) traces the damage done in Western culture by the ego’s penchant for dissociation of this type, which in its most extreme expression permits an individual to commit cold blooded murder after being moved to tears by a soaring operatic aria. Taking his lead from Hegel, Wilber suggests that the function of each new level of consciousness is to differentiate itself from the earlier level without dissociating from it, and then to incorporate the old structure of consciousness into a new inclusive whole rather than leaving it behind. This process permits development without reaping the disastrous consequences of the European dissociation.

Other voices of caution have weighed in since this initial clash of positions. Most notably, and relevant to our discussion here, Hurd's *Sleep Paralysis* (2012) suggests that there is a correlation between lucidity and a wide range of disturbing phenomena, including sleep paralysis and nightmares. Hurd shows how embracing the challenge of the "lucid nightmare" can lead to deeper and more sublime levels of consciousness, but he is virtually alone today in acknowledging the darker side of lucid dreaming.

In addition to the cautionary perspectives laid out by Jung, Wilber, Tibetan sources, and Hurd, perhaps the greatest evidence that the lucid dreamer should never wholly underestimate the autonomy and power of the dream content, nor endeavor to dissociate from it, can be discerned in the feedback from the dream itself. This was never more true than in my own case.

A Rude Awakening

My initial lucid dreams were simply glorious—full of light and ecstasy. Admittedly, I was less entranced by lucidity per se than by the brilliant light that often appeared to me in the dreamscape, and which I often experienced inwardly as well. I came to see lucidity, not as an end in itself, but as a platform upon which I could consciously seek the highest experiences available to the dreamer. In reading *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* (1968), I learned that “dream yoga” is considered one of six that comprise the “path of form”—which offers an accelerated avenue into communing with the Light. I also learned in reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (2008) that the Light arises in all of its brilliance at the moment of death, but is usually overlooked by the deceased soul, who presumably remains in a non-lucid swoon during the moment of death and progressively thereafter until the soul reincarnates. The Tibetan texts assert that learning to become conscious and recognize the Light in our dreams is not only an excellent practice for communing with the divine source during our lifetimes, but also the best way to prepare to be awake in the after-death state, thus transcending the need for rebirth. Once discovering this connection between dreaming and the afterlife encounter, I set about on a mission—to “pierce the veil” of illusion of my dreams, and to commune with the radiance that resided behind the apparent reality of the dream images. However, because some of my early lucid dreams were deeply disturbing, I eventually began to favor a less ambitious, meditative approach to lucid dream induction, realizing that lucidity and the quest for higher consciousness can awaken unresolved psychodynamic conflicts and powerful archetypal forces, as well. A Jungian analyst voiced this perspective when, after hearing about my ambitious exploits in the lucid state, she said simply, “I hope you have your circle of fire around you.” I thought that she

simply didn't understand, but I soon discovered that it was I who didn't fully understand. A couple of examples should suffice to convey what began to happen.

The first evidence that my quest for the light would awaken deep psychodynamic conflicts occurred in what I have called my "coming of age dream." About a week before my 21st birthday,

I realize that it is time to reveal my purpose in life to my parents. It is just before dawn as I ask them to follow me out onto the driveway of my childhood home. I raise my hands over my head and begin to chant. Lightning archs across the dark sky, and when I lower my arms, it strikes the ground nearby.

I repeat this gesture several times, becoming lucid as I do, and all the while wondering what is going on! Meanwhile, my parents are cowering behind me, obviously disturbed by the demonstration. Suddenly, my father hurls a lance into my back, and I drop to the ground dying. They bend over me with fear and alarm in their eyes. I say, "I was really your son. But I am the son of the unborn son, who is still to come."

My parents in this dream bore little resemblance to my kind and supportive biological parents. However, whatever the dream parents represented, they clearly overpowered my agenda. Thus I began to consider that lucidity and the quest for the Light could not be pursued independent of acknowledging powerful countervailing forces within me.

Years later, I came to see this dream as describing the inevitable fall from initial spiritual heights articulated in Underhill's classic book, *Mysticism* (2012) in which she describes how the newly awakened mystic inevitably falls into psychological turmoil and real-life conflict—an abrupt suspension of the previous spiritual bliss that we have come to know the dark night of the

soul. While it feels like a curse, Underhill shows that the dark night is not only necessary, but eventually facilitates a more stable and complete union.

To understand the divergent positions articulated by the lucid dreaming community in the *Lucidity Letter* exchanges, let us consider a "lucid nightmare" of mine that appeared in *Lucid Dreaming: Dawning of the Clear Light* (1976) and was later included in Laberge and Reingold's book, *Exploring the World of Lucid Dreaming* (1990). I believe that this dream takes us back to the historic moment in which two approaches to lucidity were clashing. I will use this lucid nightmare, and two more, to develop my premise—that lucidity as a new level of consciousness confers the capacity to transcend the dream content, but that transcendence is an insufficient solution. Further, an important function of dreaming is the integration of unresolved conflict and emergent potential into an evolving structure of consciousness, and that lucidity can facilitate this only through relating to the dream content as a legitimate, independent "other" that is not always, nor necessarily self-created. My "lucid nightmare" is as follows:

I am standing in the hallway outside my room. It is night and hence dark where I stand. Dad comes in the front door. I tell him that I am there so as not to frighten him or provoke an attack. I am afraid for no apparent reason. I look outside through the door and see a dark figure which appears to be a large animal. I point at it in fear. The animal, which is a huge black panther, comes through the doorway. I reach out to it with both hands, extremely afraid. Placing my hands on its head, I say, 'You're only a dream.' But I am half pleading in my statement and cannot dispel my fear... (Sparrow, 1988)

In my support of Gackenbach's letter to the *Lucidity Letter* readers (Sparrow, 1988), I concluded that "...even lucidity can prove inadequate to cope with the encounter with threatening

dream content." I discovered later that LaBerge and Reingold quoted this dream, but argued a different point. They said,

Here the dreamer uses his lucidity to try to make his frightful image disappear. There is little difference between this and running from dream monsters. If, upon reflection, Sparrow had recognized that a dream panther could not have hurt him, the thought alone should've dissipated his anxiety. Fear is your worst enemy in dreams; if allowed to persist it will grow stronger and your self-confidence will diminish. (LaBerge & Reingold, 1990)

A careful study of dreams will quickly confirm LaBerge's and Rheingold's contention that fear in a dream tends to escalate the perceived threat, and make it more difficult to exercise creative responses. However, the position from which they were operating in their assessment—that fear is unwarranted because it is “just a dream”—is an unsupported premise. Just because an experience occurs in the confines of sleep doesn't mean that it is harmless. Rather than discounting the dreamer's sense of alarm, one might say instead that the dreamer encountered something that seemed more powerful than he was, at least in that moment. Holding this view of the dreamer's reaction respects the dreamer's phenomenological experience, and acknowledges the limits to our knowledge even as we may try to counsel a less fearful and more inquiring response. But more importantly, accepting the independent agency of the dream content eventually forces the dreamer to enter into reciprocal exchanges with an inherently mysterious other, which Tarnas asserts is the prerequisite for a true relationship (1993). We do not see this process unfolding in this particular dream, but it will become evident in later examples.

It may seem that I am denigrating the position that LaBerge has taken (LaBerge, 1985; LaBerge and Reingold, 1990), but actually, I was initially in the same camp. We were both on a

transcendent quest. While he was extolling the virtues of lucidity as a means to greater creativity and freedom, I was more intrigued by lucidity as a means to access the experience of ecstasy and radiance in the lucid dream state. Regardless of our different goals, both of us were minimizing the intrinsic value and independent agency, at least functionally, of the dream content.

Before I share another lucid nightmare, it is important to consider the possibility that fear may serve to "re-tether" emergent dream ego awareness to the emotions and to the instincts, and to offset any tendency toward Whyte's "European dissociation" (1962). Indeed, it is conceivable that the nightmare serves to keep the dream ego from "colonizing" (Boznak, 2011) the dream state. From another angle, McNamara and Szent-Imrey (2007) argue in their "costly signalling" theory that distressing dreams—when shared—serve to communicate a member's vulnerability to the community, thus making the member more approachable from those who might otherwise distance themselves from potentially threatening members. So from various theoretical perspectives, fear of the dream may have its benefits.

Let us look at another lucid nightmare that a 40-year-old man shared with me, which develops much further than my panther dream.

I am in a cabin alone, and the door opens. Three figures enter and stand abreast just inside the doorway: Dracula, Werewolf and Frankenstein. I am alarmed, but the strangeness of event convinces me that I must be dreaming. Realizing that they are only a dream, and that I can make them go away, I say, "You are only a dream. Go away!" They disappear immediately. Alone again, I think to myself, "Maybe I should have surrounded myself with light instead." So I call out to them to return. The door opens again, and they come back in. I say to myself, "I surround myself with light." Instantly, a

pinkish white glow envelops me. As for the figures, I can barely see them through the bright haze.

Then I think, "Maybe I should invite them into the light." So I say, "Please come into the light." As they walk forward, the light fills me, and I experience an overwhelming sense of ecstatic love. Following the dream, I remained in a blissful state for several days.

In this remarkable dream, we can see that the alarmed dreamer was immediately prompted to use his lucidity to dismiss the unwanted dream characters. The ethical stance of this dreamer basically reflects an ethical egoistic (Bulkely, 1988) position (i.e. if it *feels* bad, then it *is* bad). Operating from a survival mode, the dreamer reacted as I had reacted toward the panther, but unlike me, he was successful in dismissing the three figures.

The dreamer doesn't stop there. The successful exercise of power over the imagery gives way to a new consideration—finding a way to coexist with the dream figures by establishing a protective boundary between himself and the original threat.

Dreaming as a Developmental Process

One can argue that this second solution would not have been possible if the dreamer had held to the original notion that the images were "just a dream." Indeed, it appears that the dreamer actually passed through several stages in his relationship with the nightmarish characters: He first had to become aware of them, then alarmed by them, then capable of dismissing them, then willing to coexist with them. Finally, he welcomed them into his personal space. This developmental sequence may be the key to reconciling the pro-control and anti-control perspectives. That is, they are both "correct" at different stages of the dream ego's

development toward integrating the dream content. Rossi (1972) was the first to describe this developmental sequence. From his perspective, a dreamer must first become aware of the disparate elements within the psyche. This creates an initial crisis and a veritable birth in consciousness. After trying to elude the perceived threat, the dreamer eventually gains power over the dream characters and defeats them before finally pursuing dialogue and integration. As a psychotherapist, I frequently celebrate a dreamer's capacity to fight back and to defeat a dream character, especially when I am aware that the dreamer has suffered significant relational trauma. I know that, in due time, if a client is supported in exercising power, he or she will shift toward more creative responses, eventually adopting a conciliatory position.

Most victims of trauma will try to suppress the memory of the original events, thus forestalling the process of integration. According to Rossi's continuum of development, victims of trauma who are arrested in their healing process are still trying to elude the threat, and have not progressed to the point of gaining power in relation to the original incident. In spite of the waking self's efforts to avoid further recollection, the autonomous dream mechanism seems intent on reproducing the original traumatic memory, thus establishing a "bidirectional response" to trauma, as noted by Punamaki (2007). Various cognitive interventions have been developed to attenuate the distressing nightmares associated with PTSD, including Imagery Rehearsal Technique (IRT) (Germain A. & Nielsen, 2003; Krakow, Hollifield, Schrader, Koss, Tandberg, and Lauriello (2000), which involves having trauma victims imagine a more desirable ending to PTSD-related distressing dreams. IRT thus represents a waking state version of dream content manipulation that has obvious therapeutic benefit.

Embracing a developmental model such as Rossi's (1972) casts a different light on the debate of whether or not one should control one's dreams, and would explain the efficacy of IRT as a stage-specific, developmentally appropriate response. Given this framework, instead of answering "yes" or "no" to the question of whether one should try to control one's dreams, one would instead ask, "Where is this individual in the developmental process of toward healing and integration?" If the dreamer is arrested in his or her resolution of unfinished business—or, conversely, resisting the positive potentials within the psyche—and exhibiting a chronic, contextually inappropriate response to the dream content, then we might feel concern regardless of the response. I have argued elsewhere that any chronic behavior in the dream becomes problematic (Sparrow, 2010), and that to arrive at a useful assessment of a given response, one must take the time to explore the dreamer's psychological and relational history.

Acknowledging the Independent Status of the Dream Characters

Regardless of whether a dream behavior is "developmental" or not, one thing becomes clear: The compelling "otherness" of the dream imagery facilitates, rather than impedes, the developmental process. Regarding the above dream, the dreamer's decision to invite the threatening figures back and to erect a boundary between them is predicated on the implicit assumption that the dream images are imbued with independent power and agency. It is clear that the dreamer believes this new "solution" permits coexistence with the threat, as a new way of relating to powerful and unknown entities.

Then, the dreamer goes even further: By inviting the characters to come into the light with him, the dreamer affirms that they are not just powerful, but also possess something of

intrinsic value. One can detect a sense of compassion for the figures that had been previously overshadowed by the dreamer's initial alarm and urge to defeat them.

The intriguing change in the dreamer's stance toward the dream characters—from a summary dismissal of them toward a willingness to welcome them—did not come all at once: It came in stages, all of which were founded on the dreamer's belief in the independent power and agency of the dream figures. Far from dissociating from the dream content, this respect for the compelling otherness of the dream characters kept the dreamer from dismissing them entirely, even if they were briefly invisible to him. Thus, the “realness” of the encounter created the conditions for engaging the dream content through various stages in the process of development.

Let us examine another dream—one of my own—which reveals the exact same progression: from the perception of a real threat, to lucid dismissal, to defensive coexistence, and finally to reapproachment and integration.

After my friend Benny's death in 1973, I began dreaming about him on a regular basis. In every dream, he would appear demonic, intent it seemed on hurting me or killing me. I would run from him, and often I would become lucid and try to awaken. I found it difficult to remain awake, as if the dream would pull me back into it. I would finally awaken in terror. After several such dreams, I finally became lucid.

He appeared in front of me, holding a knife. He said, devilishly, "I want to show you my new knife." Suddenly, I realized that I was dreaming! I knew what to do then. At least, I thought I did. I said, "You are only a dream. May the light of the Christ surround you."

Nothing happened, and Benny crept closer. He was obviously amused by my ineffective

tactic. Without wondering how I obtained a knife of my own, I began doing battle with him until I eventually disarmed him -- an unlikely outcome, since Benny was much larger and faster than I was in real life.

Then came the culmination of the dream series. In the final dream, the conflict is resolved: Benny had me pinned down, pummeling me with his fists. I knew that he would eventually kill me if I didn't free myself. I managed somehow to free one arm. Instead of hitting him back, however, I reached up and gently stroked his shoulder. Looking back, I don't know why I thought this would do any good. But he stopped hitting me immediately, and he began to cry. His tears fell into my face, and he said, "I only want to be loved."

Except for when the dreamer briefly attempted to dismiss Benny as "dead" and thus not real, the developmental process proceeded on the basis of an ordeal between real persons. Significantly, the acceptance of the independent agency and value of the dream character(s) initially presupposes a duality between the dreamer and dream. This problem of dualism can be reconciled, as Jung did, by viewing the "otherness" within a framework of psychological, rather than ontological dualism. This functional or provisional dualism requires the dreamer to treat the dream characters as one would treat actual persons, thus supporting reciprocal exchanges that reflect the same relational and ethical considerations that govern waking state relationships. Even if the perceived independence of the dream characters ultimately proves to be a convenient fiction in some later culminating episode, it nonetheless facilitates the dream ego's movement toward relational competency by avoiding the error and isolation of solipsism and ethical egoism. Indeed, having to consider the dream character's capacity to feel, to love, and to hurt us,

establishes the dream encounter as a true relationship, thus furthering the process of personality development in the dream state (Rossi, 1972).

In contrast to this view, the dismissive belief that the dream is “only a dream,” hides a pernicious dualism that enshrines the dreamer ego and devalues everything else. This is an age-old dilemma in various spiritual traditions. When the early Church fathers were trying to defuse the influence of the gnostics, who viewed the world as illusory, even evil, they accused the gnostics of “blaspheming the creator by disparaging the creation” (Chadwick, 1986). The gnostics attempted to resolve this problem by concluding that an archon or demiurge, not God himself, created the world of form; but regardless, you can see the problem. If one strives for transcendence, then there is a risk that the phenomenal realm becomes a mere burden or a trap, rather than something from which we can derive benefit. Regardless of the historic context, the form of dualism predicated on dismissing the independent legitimacy of the dream content effectively eliminates an inherently mysterious and animated other to whom the dreamer can and must meaningfully relate. There is no conceivable way to resolve this error, without the autonomy of the dream characters asserting themselves to the point where the dream ego is brought to its knees. Hence the possible “re-tethering” function of the nightmare.

The Problem with Transcendence

The quest for lucidity or the light, or anything higher or better, inevitably pivots off of what is considered less desirable: Any quest for transcendence invokes a duality by leaving the lower, the forgotten, or the untouchable behind. This, as many teachers have said, is the self-defeating paradox of the spiritual quest: One can never completely arrive if anything is left behind. Treating the dream as self-created also effectively “de-animates” the phenomenal realm,

similar to the unanticipated effect of Newton's solving the problem of planetary movement (Tarnas, 1993). By reducing the sacred mystery of the wandering stars to mathematics, Newton effectively removed God from the equation. We were suddenly alone in the universe for the first time.

Again, the dream that I shared at the beginning of my talk contains, in my opinion, the whole story in a single sentence: "You must first learn to love the form in order to see the light within it." These words succinctly capture the spirit of what has been called alchemy in the West, and tantricism in the East. That is, she conveyed the idea that the highest spirit co-inheres with, and animates all forms.

This non-dualistic position was honored by Jung and his followers, in particular, especially in the concept of "shadow work," (Johnson 2009), in which wholeness is accomplished only by understanding and accepting the apparently unredeemable aspects of the self. Jung was not alone in the West in upholding this alchemical view that the highest resides in the lowest. Rilke espoused a similar view when he stated in many different poems and prose passages the essential value of all that we normally despise, when saying,

...we should not only refrain from vilifying and depreciating all that belongs to this our world, but on the contrary, on account of its very preliminary nature which it shares with us, these phenomena and things should be understood and transformed by us Within us alone can this intimate and constant transformation of the visible into the invisible take place. (Govinda, 1969, p. 82)

In Mahayana, this truth is expressed in different ways. We have, for example, the doctrine of the five sheaths (Govinda, (1969), in which the highest spirit is regarded as penetrating

outward and downward, as it were, into the progressively grosser forms of reality, leaving nothing beyond its reach. The Psalmist's exclamation, "Lo, though I make my bed in hell, behold, thou are there" (Psalm 139:8) expresses this inclusive philosophy in a form that poetically compels assent, even though it challenges the foundation of much of what is propounded by conventional Western religion.

One of the most sophisticated and refined expressions of this philosophy, through which one might respect the transcendence and creativity of the lucid mind while honoring the value of the phenomenal dream world, is the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness, or non-duality. Simply put, it is based on the principle that because nothing endures, it is thus empty. Instead of supporting a nihilistic view, however, the doctrine of emptiness inspires the seeker to treat everything as a legitimate path in the grand journey. Ultimately, nirvana, (which translates as the "blowing out" of karma or attachment), and its customary antithesis samsara (usually translated as the wandering of the soul in the world of form), are considered as two aspects of this non-dual perspective, and thus both equally legitimate paths.

Summary

What we arrive at through these various philosophies is a tension between emerging consciousness (e.g. lucidity) and the world of form (e.g. dream content), such that both are regarded as equally valuable and necessary components in an evolving, relational synthesis. As we consider these various expressions of a non-dual perspective, then trying to become more lucid or amass more experiences of ecstasy carries the taint of a dualistic perspective that dishonors the ordinary form of our dreams, and of our lives. Rather than trying to accumulate more lucid dreams or more experiences of ecstasy—a pursuit that can further distance us from

the presumed lower forms of expression—we might do well within an encompassing non-dual paradigm to concentrate on relating to the particular forms of our dreams with respect and compassion, and to use lucidity as a platform for a dynamic and deepening relationship with everything that is “other” in our lives.

Through this inquiring stance, the spirit that inheres in all forms might be revealed to the dreamer, and the forms that manifest in our dreams can be freed to evolve and transform into more subtle and pristine expressions. Instead of pursuing a transcendent goal, our goal becomes meaningful engagement with the dream as it manifests to us, giving way to a flowering of a myriad of creative forms and possibilities.

If we return to our dream examples, especially the two in which the dreamer progresses through a series of stages toward the integration of the once-abhorrent dream characters by "loving the form" of them, we see a non-dualistic perspective emerging somewhat paradoxically out of an initial stance of treating the dream characters as real and powerful—as worthy adversaries. Such dreams promote an alchemical or tantric view of the dream, in which the forms are seen as imbued with independent agency and power, but offering an avenue through which one might eventually experience ecstasy and integration.

With that in mind, I believe that this non-dualistic paradigm is not only a theoretical stance that can resolve an age-old conflict, but is also a highly functional model in the dream state. It involves several key premises.

- It accommodates Rossi’s view (1972) that the dreamer is involved in a developmental process, in which disparate responses can be viewed as “correct” based on the particular stage of one’s development.

- It treats the dream content as having autonomy or independent agency, at least from a provisional perspective, and as inherently mysterious.
- It also renders the negative intensity of the dream as purposeful--as a way that the dream provokes the dreaming self into wakefulness, and re-tethers emergent awareness with the emergent novelty of the dream.
- It supports the analysis of dreams from a relational perspective in which dreamer and dream evolve in an interactional field toward integration (Sparrow, 2013a; Sparrow and Thurston, 2010).

For those of us who are psychotherapists, the non-dual model supports an attitude that we can bring to our therapeutic work with dreamers who want our help in understanding their dreams, and resolving lifelong wounds. Most of the dreams that I hear from clients are ordinary, unpleasant, non-lucid dreams, but they do contain the seeds of the highest potential. For example, after doing dream work for several months with a client who had been molested as a child, the client dreamt that she awakened in bed, and saw rats dropping onto the bed through holes in the ceiling. Terrified, she got up and ran out of the room, down the hall, and up the stairs. As she approached the top stair, she turned around to see if the rats were still following. One of them was climbing the step just below her. She looked at it closely and was suddenly intrigued by the lustrous texture of its fur. Drawn to its beauty, she reached down and touched the fur. At that moment, the rat transformed in a beautiful snow leopard. Startled by the change, the dreamer awakened with a sense of profound peace, and--in time--a deeper acceptance of her own sexuality. The dreamer was immediately able to see that her response was critical in facilitating the transformation of the dream content. By teaching clients to alter their responses to the

denizens of their dream in contextually appropriate ways, we can thus assist them in accelerating the process of healing and integration.

In conclusion, we can see that the debate that arose in the lucid dream community in the 80s pitted two valuable, but arguably incomplete positions against each other. If, today, we frame the conflict as containing the seeds of a non-dual perspective, in which the opposing arguments are equally valuable positions in the process of engaging the phenomenal reality of the dream, then we may create a bigger tent for the lucid dream community—one that accommodates those who aspire to greater heights of freedom and creativity, and those who are concerned about the potential abuse of the dream, and the psychological destabilization of the dreamer. By introducing a developmental framework, as well, we can affirm either perspective as needed, depending on the developmental needs of the dreamer.

This conversation is evident at the lowest and highest reaches of our evolutionary path. At the dawn of consciousness and thereafter, the self rose to greater and greater heights at the risk of dissociating from the body and relationships. Dreams may have effectively re-tethered the liberated mind to the world of form. At the highest reaches, the quest for transcendence and enlightenment is counterbalanced by a need to incarnate fully, and to participate in a relational, transformative process.

As for the ultimate answer to the question about whether we should endeavor to control our dreams, or to pursue lucidity as an end in itself, I believe that a willingness to surrender our preferred orientation lies at the end of the ego's quest and at the beginning of the soul's authentic journey. In the spirit of the dream woman's message, "You must first learn to love the form

before you can see the light within it,” it is arguably true, as well, that one can never love the form until one can feel the light within it. I am reminded of a dream that I once had in which my lover and I both aspired to reach heaven. She elected to meditate as a way to transcend the attachment to this world. I, in turn, decided to reach heaven by embarking on a journey through a dark wooded area. I playfully wagered that I would reach heaven before she did, and greet her upon her arrival.

Some of us are drawn to the path of transcendence, and regard lucid dreaming as a way to rise above the illusion and turmoil of our lives. Others of us will plunge, lucid or otherwise, into the challenges that arise in the unpredictable, soulful realm of the dream. Along the way, perhaps, we will discover that we need both paths, and that the lover who espouses transcendence is merely our other half who keeps us from losing our way, and the one who prefers the wooded path is the partner who keeps passion and compassion alive within us.

In the final analysis, I believe that Patricia Garfield puts it best when she says,

...Many of us, I believe, can benefit from controlling our dreams from time to time. We can confront and conquer our enemies, negotiate with them, befriend them. We can question dream characters. You know, we don't always have to tell them what to do. We can ask them, we can embrace them, we can love them...(Garfield, 1990).

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