



Lucid Dreaming as a Marker of the Evolution of Consciousness

by Jeremy Taylor, D.Min.

Lucid dreaming—the ability to recognize that an experience *is* a dream, rather than some sort of “strange” waking life event, *while the dream is still in progress*—has always attracted particular attention in all the religious traditions of the world. Like the symbolic experience of “vertical ascent” in a dream, lucid dreaming has been associated with increasing spiritual awareness in virtually all the world’s religious traditions.

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition in particular, has valorized the ability to distinguish dreaming from regular waking experience, on a regular basis while still remaining asleep, as the primary “spiritual skill” necessary to transcend the terrors and seductions of the “after death world,” (known as the “Bardo Thodol,” the “Bardo of Dying and Becoming”). The Tibetan Buddhists maintain that the ability to dream lucidly while alive and in the body prepares the individual to achieve the highest spiritual goal that any human can attain—*i.e.* postponing the personal achievement of Nirvana, and instead consciously and compassionately choosing a particular reincarnation that will contribute to the “relief of the suffering of all sentient beings,” rather than being driven to reincarnate by escalating fear engendered by the “nightmare” of the Bardo world, (as they believe virtually all other human beings are). Those who are able to accomplish this state of lucid awareness in the after-death-before-rebirth Bardo world are known as “bodhisattvas”—that is to say, “future Buddhas” or “Buddhas in training.”

Although Jung declared fairly early in his career that what we know as lucid dreaming was “an impossibility,” his later encounter with the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and with his own increasingly lucid dreams, opened his mind further to this extraordinary state of awareness. Those of us who do dream work with clients and patients will almost certainly have encountered their lucid dreams, (to say nothing of our own), as the dream world reflects increasingly successful achievement of

spiritual health and emotional wholeness. My own experience suggests that lucid dreaming is clearly on the rise among the increasingly open, curious, and self-aware dreamers with whom I work.

At the moment, the current definition of lucid dreaming employed by academic and laboratory researchers emphasizes the appearance of the word “dream” and the dreamer’s narrative. In order for a dream narrative to meet the current criteria of lucidity, the dream ego must articulate the clear thought: “this is a dream...” or “I am dreaming...” in order for the dream to be considered fully lucid. Any dreams that exhibit any lucid attributes without this clear linguistic marker are generally categorized and discussed as “pre-lucid.”

I have become increasingly convinced over the last couple of decades that this definition is limiting and fundamentally flawed, and is in fact blocking the path to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the natural, collective evolutionary implications of lucid dreaming.

Any image or element that appears in the narrative of a remembered dream, attains that status of memorability as a direct result of the *totality* of associations that it carries. There are of course, all the *personal* associations (both conscious and unconscious) that the individual brings and attaches to that element—and in addition there are all the *collective, cultural, archetypal associations and implications* that inhere in that image or element—whether or not the dreamer is directly aware of them upon awakening. Perhaps the most important piece of evidence that the archetypes are real, (rather than mere intellectual constructions), is that dreamers with no previous conscious exposure to the idea of archetypes or archetypal images regularly *dream* them—and exhibit “aha’s” of recognition when these archetypal associations and implications are pointed out and articulated.

Since this is the case across the board, it seems to me that this principle of “totality of association” must also be applied to the word “dream,” particularly as it appears as the primary marker for dreaming lucidity—and this is where the problem arises: to call someone “a dreamer” in ordinary conversation, (and not just in the Romance and Germanic languages), is *not* a compliment. It implies a weakness of intellect and a counter-

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productive unwillingness to face “the cold, hard facts” of reality by an irresponsible escape into bootless fantasy. This negative, disparaging implication is inherent in the word “dream” itself, and for this reason it is (unconsciously and inevitably) built into the current accepted definition of lucid dreaming itself.

A second, inescapable implication of the totality of associations carried inherently by the word “dream,” particularly as it applies to the technical definition of lucid dreaming, is that there are “two worlds”—the *real* world, and the *dream* world. As we know from all our dealings with unconscious material, the fact that we don’t *intend* such associations does not prevent them from being present, and playing crucially important, determining roles. The sole reliance on the appearance of some form of the word “dream” as the primary marker for lucid dreaming has tended to diminish the importance of dreams themselves (in the inevitable contrast it calls up to *the real world*). This disparaging contrast between “real” (serious, important, and mature) and “dream” (frivolous, unimportant, and childlike) tends to obscure one of the more important evolutionary developments that I believe lucid dreaming itself naturally tends to promote.

My own lucid dreams, and the lucid dreams of my dream work clients, increasingly impress me as being directed toward evolving the understanding that we do *not* live in “two worlds,” (e.g. the “real,” “serious,” and “important” world of waking life, and the “unreal,” “frivolous,” and “relatively unimportant” world of the dream), but rather that we live in *one* world—*unus mundus*—a single world which we experience and apprehend in deep and important ways both in the waking state and the dream state.

For these reasons, it seems to me that the time has come to expand our definition of “lucid dreaming,” and to shift our attention from the appearance of the word “dream” in the narrative, and begin to pay more attention to the full range of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the dream ego in the dream. I would place the appearance of spontaneous, conscious realizations of the *symbolic* connections between dream experience and waking life in the midst of the dream itself high on this list of criteria defining evolving lucidity in dreams.

Let me offer what I believe to be such an evolving “lucid moment” in a recent dream of mine, as a case in point. In the dream, dream-ego-me is moved to jump off a ferryboat into the frigid waters of Puget Sound to rescue a woman who appears to be attempting suicide by drowning. Once I am in the water, I see that she is actively and purposefully swimming downward into the depths. I swim down after her and realize quite quickly that I have begun to breathe easily and deeply, *even though I am under the water*. At this moment in the dream, I have the clear thought that, “this must mean that my efforts to face and experience more consciously the deep fears that I repressed as a boy must be meeting with some success, or else this wouldn’t be happening...”

This thought in the dream is born of my waking life experience as a dream worker that “water” in dreams is very often associated with feeling and emotion. When a dreamer is “underwater” and “drowning,” it is most often a symbolic indicator that in waking life the dreamer is being overwhelmed by strong emotion. When that same dreamer is “underwater” and suddenly discovers that he or she is able to “breathe,” it is a *very* reliable archetypal indicator of that person’s evolving emotional maturity; “the waters of emotion” in which the

dreamer “drowned” before are just as deep and potentially overwhelming as they always were, but the dreamer has developed sufficient emotional maturity to experience and negotiate these emotions and to “breathe underwater” without fear, panic, or denial.

In this dream, there is no conscious thought, “I am breathing underwater—*this must be a dream...*”; there is only a conscious appreciation of the symbolic implication of the act of “breathing underwater” in relation to my current waking life efforts to reevaluate my conscious understanding of my complex, less-than-fully-conscious memories of my childhood. It is an experience of *unus mundus*—the one world that I/we live in, dreaming and awake. To me this is not a “pre-lucid dream”—it is a lucid dream evolving beyond the limitations of dependency on language that is already supposedly fully known and understood.

If we can say anything with certainty about the dream world, it must be that it is a revelation of mystery—mystery which is never fully revealed to consciousness, no matter how deep our conscious explorations and understandings go - because, as Sandor Ferenczi pointed out, “dreams are the workshop of evolution,” and *the work of evolution continues* in all of us.

Lucid dreaming itself is a natural, archetypal, symbolic reflection of the evolution of consciousness in every individual dreamer who experiences it. As that evolution continues, the dreamer’s understanding and use of language also evolves. At some point, the word “dream” (because of the multiple ambiguous and even negative associations that carries from earlier states of consciousness) begins to dissolve into a more direct experience of the one world we live in, both consciously and unconsciously, all the time.

Just as Jung’s understanding of lucid dreaming evolved over the course of his career, our own conscious understanding of the nature and implications of our own lucid dreaming should also develop and mature to reflect the development of our own increasing self-awareness, individually and collectively. In order to do this, we must be prepared to re-examine and revise even our most basic definitions—even at the risk of being labeled as “revisionists.”

