

# awakening to the dream

**B. ALAN WALLACE** explores the nocturnal landscape of  
lucid dreaming and Tibetan dream yoga.

**FOR CENTURIES**, people around the world have reported experiences of lucid dreams, in which they know that they are dreaming while they are in the dream state. But as recently as thirty years ago—a hundred years after the scientific study of the mind began—no scientific evidence existed that anyone could be conscious while dreaming, and most psychologists were still convinced that lucid dreams were impossible. There were philosophical reasons for such skepticism as well: after all, how could anyone be awake and asleep at the same time?

It just didn't make any sense, especially to those who never had a lucid dream and couldn't imagine anyone else having one.

Author and psychophysicist Stephen LaBerge was one of many people who had occasionally experienced lucid dreams since childhood, and as a young man it occurred to him that this would be a fascinating area of research. In 1977, he began his graduate studies in this new field at Stanford University, gradually developing methods for inducing lucid dreams and recording his

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own personal experiences, resulting in nearly nine hundred lucid dream reports over the next seven years. But how to persuade his scientific colleagues that we really can become awake in our dreams?

The challenge, he recognized, was to communicate from a lucid dream to people in the waking state. One obstacle was that during sleep, most of the dreamer's body is paralyzed, but psychologists had already discovered that the eyes move while dreaming and that the eye movements of a sleeping person correspond to the eye movements of the person within a dream. In one famous study done by Stanford University sleep researcher William C. Dement, a dreamer was awakened after making a series of about two dozen regular horizontal eye movements. When asked what he was dreaming about





at that time, he replied that he had been watching a long volley in a ping-pong game! This gave LaBerge an idea. If he could become lucid in a dream, while his scientific colleagues were monitoring his brain states and rapid eye movements to ensure that he was indeed dreaming, he could then send signals to them by moving his dream eyes in a prearranged way. Since his physical eyes would track in the same way as his dream eyes, he could provide objective evidence that he knew that he was dreaming. Ultimately, LaBerge was successful in providing such empirical proof of lucid dreaming. His work and other related studies have now been widely accepted within the Western scientific community, and scientific researchers in the field of lucid dreaming have devised a number of ingenious methods for helping ordinary people awaken to their dreams. [See “Wake Up!” page 55.]

An astonishing range of possibilities is open to the lucid dreamer who is interested in exploring the nature of the mind. You may use lucid dreams simply for recreational

purposes, with the range of possible events in the dream limited only by your imagination. Then, as you venture into more meaningful activities, you may learn to solve psychological problems in the dream or to explore the malleability of the dream by changing its contents at will. Or maybe you’ll choose to tap into the depths of your own intuitive wisdom. You may, for example, invoke your own archetype of wisdom—a Greek philosopher, a goddess of wisdom, or any figure that represents your ideal of sagacity. As you converse with that person in your dream, you are not accessing any outside source of knowledge but unearthing hidden resources within your subconscious to which you don’t normally have access.

**BEYOND THESE EXPLORATIONS** of the mind, lucid dreaming provides an ideal forum for examining the essential nature of dreams and reality and the relationship between the dreaming and waking states. According to recent scientific research, the principal difference

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*Suddenly It's Winter*, Phyllis Bramson, 2002, mixed media on canvas, 60 x 48 inches

between dreaming and imagination on the one hand, and waking perception on the other, is that waking experiences are directly aroused by stimuli from the external world, whereas imagination and dreaming are free creations, unconstrained by physical influences from the environment. According to Buddhist thought, however, Western science tells only half of the story. Buddhism and science both agree that although sights, sounds, and tactile sensations of the world around us seem to exist *out there*, they have no existence apart from our perceptual awareness of them. But Buddhism adds that mass, energy, space, and time as they are conceived by the human mind also have no existence apart from our conceptual awareness of them—no more than our dreams at night. All appearances exist only relative to the mind that experiences them, and all mental states arise relative to experienced phenomena. We are living in a participatory universe, with no absolute subjects or objects. With this primary emphasis on the illusory nature of both waking reality and dreams, Tibetan Buddhists formulated a system of teachings known as dream yoga over one thousand years ago that uses the power of

lucid dreaming to break down our illusions and unlock the door to enlightenment. [See “Night Moves,” page 56.]

In dream yoga, once you learn to recognize the dream state for what it is through lucid dreaming, you can begin to explore the nature of the psyche—your own conscious mind within this lifetime. At a more fundamental level, you investigate the nature of the substrate consciousness (*alayavijnana*), the individual continuum of consciousness out of which the psyche develops during gestation in the womb and into which it dissolves at death. In the highest stage of dream yoga, the ultimate, “clear light” nature of consciousness, or pristine awareness (*rigpa*), is revealed, the realization of which is central to the Tibetan teaching known as the Great Perfection (Dzogchen). Each stage of dream yoga practice leads to ever-deepening self-knowledge, finally resulting in Buddhahood itself. The Great Perfection teachings declare that the only difference between buddhas and ordinary sentient beings is that the former know who they are, while the latter do not.

The daytime practice of dream yoga centers on maintaining the awareness that everything we experience around us is illusory. Although things appear to be *out there*, independent of any perceiving or conceiving subject, everything is “empty” of such an inherent self-nature. Descartes’s absolute split between subject and object, which has exerted an enormous and lingering effect on Western science, is totally rejected in Tibetan Buddhism. All things, mental and physical, consist of dependently related events, with no absolute demarcations between subject and object, mind and matter, or outer and inner.

The nighttime practice of dream yoga begins with recognizing that you are dreaming and then sustaining that awareness. To achieve such attentional stability and clarity, it’s very helpful to train first in the practice of *samadhi*, or focused attention, both during the daytime and as you fall asleep. Once you’ve stabilized your awareness that you are dreaming, you progress to the second phase, in which you learn to control and transform the contents of your

## wake up! 5 methods for inducing lucid dreams

**1 Note events that are impossible in waking reality.** Something is odd—too odd!—and suddenly it dawns on you that you must be dreaming! One moment you’re in London, and the next moment you’re in New York. You’re engaged in conversation with an old friend, and a moment later he has turned into a poodle chewing on a bone. Or you may be in the midst of an outlandish nightmare, and as soon as you notice it’s just too bizarre to be true, you recognize that you’re dreaming.

**2 Prepare yourself by taking note of anomalies during the daytime.** Whenever they occur, ask yourself, “Am I dreaming?” If you ask yourself enough, eventually the answer may be yes.

**3 If you want to find out whether you’re dreaming or awake, find something to read.** Read and memorize a line, turn your head away from the printed material, then look at it again. Psychologists have found that when you are dreaming the material changes with the second reading 75 percent of the time. If you read it a third time, the chances of it changing are 95 percent.

**4 Induce lucid dreams by the power of “prospective memory.”** When awake, we can remember to do things in the future, like remembering to shop for groceries on the way home from work. In the same way, throughout the day, you can develop a strong resolve to recognize that you’re dreaming after you’ve fallen asleep. You can direct your prospective memory to recognize things or events in a dream that are too odd to occur in waking reality, setting them as cues that you are dreaming.

**5 Fall asleep without losing consciousness.** This is perhaps the subtlest method for inducing lucid dreaming; the trick is to maintain the clarity of awareness as you relax and drift off to sleep. Slowly, your physical senses shut down, and you may consciously pass through a phase of contentless awareness. This is the state of lucid dreamless sleep. From that vacuous state of consciousness a dream may suddenly emerge, and you may recognize it for what it is from the very beginning. The challenge now is to sustain both the dream and your recognition that you are dreaming, and this takes some practice. Once you have stabilized your lucid dream, the real adventure begins.

—B. A. W.

## night moves 3 dream yoga techniques from Tibetan master

### 1 Training

In the daytime, understanding the nature of dreams transforms whatever manifestations one has dreamed of during the previous night into various mental objects. Train the mind that all external manifestations are not real and look directly into the essential nature of who is doing the training. It is very important to leave whatever manifests in its naked essence, beyond any source or foundation.

Recognize that whatever manifests is one's self-manifestation, with no reference point, no existence, no foundation, and no identity. Training in a one-pointed way, one becomes familiar with this practice, and whatever phenomena appear concretely are only illusions, dreams arising in oneself, delusive visions of karma and karmic traces, and delusive attachments—all of which dissolve in their own nature. Also, while dreaming at night, one will not be distracted from this state. So, day and night one is never separate from the chakra of the real condition.

### 2 Transforming

For the method of transforming dreams, there are two subdivisions. The first is the essential point to

transform dreams into manifestations. For this purpose, during the daytime, utilize a mirror as a support. Train by transforming one reflection into another. For example, transform all manifestations into divine figures, etc. This exercise will assist you in transforming dreams during the nighttime, and gradually your capacity to transform will become more elaborate. For example, by beginning to reconfigure dream objects into animals within the Dream State, one will discover the capacity to transform whatever manifests into mandalas of deities, the pure realms, the eight examples of illusions, etc.

Next are the key points for transforming dreams into emptiness. As one continues toward mastery of the Dream State, the next principal technique is the mixing of daytime vision and dreams. One must constantly carry one's awareness into one's dreams. As soon as the dream arises, instantly be aware that it is unreal. One must also bring this same recognition of unreality to one's daily vision.

As we develop awareness of the dream nature, we may use dreams to deepen our meditative aware-

dreams. This is not just an ego trip, seeing how much you can dominate your dreams. Rather, it is a practical way to investigate the pliable nature of your dreams and to fathom more and more deeply how illusory they really are.

For example, you may set yourself the task of walking through walls. After all, the walls are made of the stuff of dreams, so why shouldn't your dream body be able to glide right through a dream wall without obstruction? But when you try this, you may find to your surprise that you move halfway through the wall and then get stuck! This shows that there's a whole range of degrees of lucidity. You may know that you're dreaming, but that knowledge hasn't yet sunk in enough for you to transform anything in the dream as you wish. (You still may be able to fly, one of the easiest paranormal abilities to achieve in a lucid dream.) In this second phase of dream yoga, like an infant exploring the world of waking reality, you investigate the world of dreaming by

interacting with your environment, discovering through experience how all objects in the dream arise in relation to the experiencing subject.

Sustained training in dream yoga is bound to stir up your subconscious, occasionally resulting in bizarre and terrifying dreams. These provide a special opportunity for learning how to overcome fear and gain insight into the illusory nature of dreams, the third phase of this practice. Whenever you feel threatened in a dream—perhaps from ferocious animals, roaring fire, or raging waters—deepen your awareness of the nature of the dream by asking yourself, "How can such illusory apparitions possibly hurt my illusory self?" Then allow yourself to be attacked by the marauder, incinerated by the fire, or drowned in the water. All this is like one rainbow assaulting another rainbow, and insofar as you recognize the illusory nature of everything in the dream, there is no way you can be harmed.

A lucid dream provides you with the perfect laboratory

## Chögyal Namkhai Norbu

ness. For example, a meditator who penetrates to the nature of the “vision” (of phenomenal existence) finds it void. This perception of the emptiness of vision can then be transferred to the dream. If, while dreaming, you are not only aware that you are dreaming, but also conscious that all vision is an illusion, you penetrate to the Void at its heart. Thus, a dream can be transformed into the knowledge of emptiness, *shunyata*.

### 3 Dissolving

Although awareness of the true nature of the dream may enhance one’s meditative awareness, there is also the danger that, by becoming skilled at the transformation of dream images, one may become attached. This attachment must be overcome. Without pride in the ability to train and transform, one cuts attachment through recognizing the nonreality and insubstantiality of all that arises.

The principal means of cutting attachment through the dream experiences are three: First, during the day, do not dwell upon the dreams you have had. Second, while actually dreaming, watch without judging, without pleasure or fear, regardless of whether the visions

seem positive or negative and thus might provoke joy or unhappiness—that is attachment. Third,

while dreaming, and then afterward, do not “clarify” what is “subject” from what is “object”—that is, do not consider which of the images that appear are real. By proceeding in these ways, you will find that complex dreams gradually simplify, lighten, and eventually may vanish completely. Thus, all that was conditioned will be liberated. At this point, dreaming ends. On the outside, one’s presence does not become attached to manifestation. On the inside also, one’s instant presence is not attached to the reflections that manifest directly. Without being conditioned by the concept of connecting the duality of manifestation and mind, totally beyond subject and object, one relaxes in the spacious radiant depth of the self-luminous *rigpa*, without mental fabrication of anything.

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for exploring the nature of the mind, for everything you experience in the dream consists only of manifestations of awareness. According to Buddhism, consciousness has two defining characteristics: luminosity and cognizance.

“Luminosity” refers to the capacity of the mind to create, or illuminate, appearances. As you investigate the nature of dream appearances, you begin to comprehend the luminous potential of the mind. Then, while retaining the awareness that you are asleep, you may let the dreamscape fade away, leaving only a vacuous state of consciousness with no object. Now you are left with nothing but the cognizance of consciousness—consciousness with no object other than itself. In the Great Perfection tradition this is understood to be the substrate consciousness, which is characterized by the three qualities of bliss, luminosity, and nonconceptuality. Penetrating the illusion deeper still, you will enter the deepest dimension of consciousness, known as *rigpa*, or pristine awareness.

According to the Great Perfection teachings, just as the world of dreams emerges from the relative space of the substrate consciousness, so do *all* worlds of experience ultimately arise from the nondual realm of primordial space (*dharmadhatu*) and primordial consciousness (*jnana*). Dream yoga provides one avenue for exploring and waking up to the depths of consciousness and its role in the natural world. When asked what kind of a being he was, a human or a god, the Buddha replied simply, “I am awake.” In our nonlucid dreams, we are mired down in the illusion that we are awake, and we suffer by grasping onto everything in the dream as being absolutely “out there.” In the same way, we are afflicted during the day by regarding ourselves and everything around us as being separate and disconnected. Imagine the bliss of becoming lucid at all times, perceiving all things as luminous displays of the deepest dimension of our own awareness. This is the truth that sets us free. ▼