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# **Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep: A Bridge to Dream Yoga?**

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Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep is a holistic approach to lucid dreaming and conscious sleeping that I have created with Buddhist meditation teacher, Rob Nairn. This new approach is not just about learning how to lucid dream; rather, it is about how to use all areas of falling asleep, dreaming and waking up for spiritual and psychological growth.

Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep is comprised of three main practices: mindfulness meditation, lucid dream training from both Western and Tibetan Buddhist traditions and, conscious sleeping techniques called 'hypnagogic and hypnopompic mindfulness'. Our hope is that by combining Western and Eastern techniques, we can bridge the gap between often superficial scope of Western lucid dreaming practices and often inaccessible Tibetan dream yoga practices. Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep is for people who want to go beyond lucid dreaming into something much deeper.

## **Lucid Dreaming**

To start by clarifying terms, a lucid dream is a dream in which we are actively aware that we are dreaming as the dream is happening. However, do not be deceived by this dry definition. Lucid dreams are commonly described as among the most thrilling experiences to be had. A fully lucid dream is not a hazy, imprecise phantasmagoria, but a full-colour, high-definition and hyper-realistic experience. It can profoundly reconfigure our perceptions of reality.

Lucid dreaming is a form of mind training in which we learn consciously to recognize our dreams as dreams while we are dreaming. As with all forms of mind training, the aim is to be more aware and more awake, to switch off the autopilot and to wake up to life. To dream lucidly is to live lucidly. The term 'lucid dream' was supposedly coined by Frederick van Eeden, a Dutch psychiatrist, 100 years ago, but is misleading.

My workshop participants sometimes describe a particularly intense, vivid dream they have had and ask whether this could be classified as a lucid dream. My answer is always that if you should ask whether a dream was lucid, it probably was not. When you have had a fully lucid dream, you would not be left wondering if it qualified. To avoid this confusion, some have put forward the alternative term 'conscious dreaming'. But the word 'lucid' originally conveyed the meaning of 'having insight', rather than describing the perceptual quality of the experience. It is this element of insight that is the cornerstone of the lucid dream. In fact, it reveals the profound potential of the mind in a way that few other states of consciousness can, because through lucid dreaming we become aware of awareness itself.

This awakening of awareness within the dream state is not accompanied by any physiological awakening. To all outward appearances, we are still sound asleep and 'unconscious', yet internally, in our dreaming mind, it could be said that we are wide awake. Van Eeden commented, 'In lucid dreams the sleeper remembers his daily life [and] reaches a state of perfect awareness... Yet the sleep is undisturbed, deep and refreshing' (Eeden, 1913). It seems a contradiction to be both aware and asleep at the same time. This neurological paradox means that it was only in the late 1970s that lucid dreaming came to be verified by Western scientific means. More recently, studies from Frankfurt University's neurological clinic and the Max Planck Institute of Psychiatry have found that specific alterations to brain physiology appear once a dreamer becomes lucid. Using brain-imaging technology such as magnetic resonance tomography and EEG, scientists can now pinpoint the actual 'Aha! I'm dreaming!' moment of lucid awareness and its neurophysiological correlates. The researchers concluded that 'lucid dreaming constitutes a hybrid state of consciousness with definable and measurable differences from the waking state and from the REM [rapid eye movement] dream state' (Gesellschaft, 2012). They discovered that when lucid consciousness was attained within the dream, activity in areas associated with self-assessment and self-perception increased markedly within seconds.

This means the apparent paradox of being both aware and asleep, which had previously caused a lot of resistance and scepticism from the scientific establishment, was simply a failure to understand how two distinct brain regions could be activated simultaneously. The thing that surprises most first-time lucid dreamers is the fact that fully lucid dreams are not very dreamy at all. The lucid dream state both looks and feels real. It is a meticulously intricate

mental construct that often appears as realistic as our waking reality. It may, in fact, seem so real that we come to question our perceptions of waking reality and stand in awe of the creative aptitude of the human mind.

Since I started training, I have had hundreds of lucid dreams and yet am still struck by the infinite potential of lucid dreaming and its capacity to facilitate entire dimensions of 'reality' within our own minds. The lucid dream environment is often so meticulously realistic that some new lucid dreamers come to the audacious conclusion that it cannot be a dream at all and they must have travelled to another dimension. Indeed they have – a dimension within their own mind. Does this mean lucid dreamers stand to lose touch with reality? No, in fact quite the opposite – once we can penetrate the persuasive reality of the dreamscape and know it as an illusion, we become better equipped to recognize self-deception in the waking state. This makes us more grounded and more aware.

### **Dream Yoga**

Dream yoga is a collection of transformational lucid dreaming, conscious sleeping and what in the West we refer to as out-of-body experience practices aimed at spiritual growth and mind training. Lucid dreaming may form the foundation of dream yoga, but using advanced tantric energy work, visualizations of Tibetan iconography and the integration of psycho-spiritual archetypes or yidams, dream yoga goes way beyond our Western notion of lucid dreaming. If we translate the Sanskrit word yoga as meaning 'union', we get a clue as to what dream yoga is about: the union of consciousness within the dream state. It is a yoga of the mind that uses advanced lucid dreaming methods to utilize sleep on the path to spiritual awakening.

Within Buddhism, illusion and ignorance are two of the most unbeneficial mind states and there are thousands of practices that aim to transmute them. One of these is dream yoga. Once we are fully lucid in a dream, ignorance is challenged as we recognize that what we thought was real is in fact not real. At the same time, illusion is shattered as we recognize that the entire dreamscape is formed from a mental projection. As ignorance and illusion dissolve, two highly beneficial states of mind can arise in their place: insight and wisdom. Insight arises as we see clearly that we are dreaming, and wisdom dawns as we understand that our mind is creating our experience. Through dream yoga we can transmute ignorance and illusion while generating wisdom and insight, all while we are sound asleep.

### **Messing with the mind?**

One concern we should address at the outset is the fear that by lucid dreaming, we may be interfering with the integrity of the unconscious by bringing

awareness into an area of our mind that normally seems to function autonomously. Thankfully, this fear is groundless.

Rather than lucid dreaming polluting the pure message from the deeper part of ourselves, it allows that message to be heeded more easily, which I believe is exactly what the unconscious mind wants. The unconscious enjoys lucidity, because finally a line of direct communication is being set up between it and the conscious mind takes joy in dealing with greater awareness and greater consciousness. Finally, it can talk to us face to face. With every dream, the unconscious mind is offering us a hand of friendship. But far too often this is an offering we ignore, either by not remembering our dreams or by failing to acknowledge their value.

Once we become lucidly aware within the dream, however, we are extending a hand towards the unconscious mind and finally making friends with it. As Rob Preece says in *The Psychology of Buddhist Tantra*, 'When we are willing to take the psyche seriously, and listen to its symbolic expression, we can gain greater clarity and insight into the forces that influence us. We will no longer be victims of the unconscious' (Preece, p. 107, 2012). This is one of the core benefits of lucid dreaming: making friends with ourselves. We do not get lucid so we can try and control the unconscious mind or boss it about, we get lucid so that we can make friends with it, commune with it and finally start listening to it.

As with any friendship, we must learn to accept our new friend on equal terms, not censoring or arguing with them, but listening to them with an open heart. This is the most important friendship we may ever have, and it is a friendship that will spill over into our waking state, too, in sudden bursts of creativity or spontaneous insights which let us know our new friend is always with us – even when we are not dreaming. Although this friendship may be on equal terms, the unconscious has been running the dream state for much longer than we have been having lucid dreams and so it will always be the stronger force. We are not talking about taking some drug that compels the unconscious mind to accommodate lucid awareness, but a process by which the dreaming mind opens the door and allows lucidity into its domain. This means that if it does not like what we are doing in the lucid dream it will simply block our attempts to do whatever it is, so to think that we can 'mess with the unconscious' just because we are lucid is to ascribe an inflated degree of influence to our conscious mind.

### **Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep**

Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep is essentially about bringing mindful awareness into all stages of our sleep cycle, allowing us to make use of the full 30 years we spend asleep, rather than just the six years we spend dreaming. By developing our training across all phases of sleep, rather than just within the

lucid dream state, we can offer a far more holistic and wide-ranging system with benefits that extend well beyond our dream world into our waking life.

Much like lucid dreaming, Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep may sound like a paradox, because we are so accustomed to thinking of dream and sleep as unmindful processes. However, it is possible to be aware during most periods of dream and sleep, and this awareness will paradoxically lead to more refreshing and beneficial sleep. The final aim is to allow mindful awareness to gently infuse all stages of our sleep cycle. This leads to a deep deconditioning process that will also permeate our waking state, allowing us to 'wake up' to life with more awareness and to live as we dream: lucidly.

Fundamentally, Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep is about 'knowing what is happening as it is happening' and developing the power of recognition in all states of sleep and dream. With this in mind, let's take a moment to learn about the land in which we spend a third of our lives. These days, most sleep scientists break sleep up into four sections or stages.

### **The Journey into Sleep**

We don't just fall asleep. Sleep is a cyclical journey, from waking-state drowsiness to the depths of deep sleep and then up into the realm of dreaming.

Let's look at our sleep road map. When we first fall asleep, the initial progression from stage 1 to stage 3 takes about half an hour or so. After hanging out in deep sleep for another 30 minutes or so, we travel briefly back up into stage 2, but then, rather than continuing back to stage 1 hypnagogic, we enter REM and begin to dream.

Our eyes display rapid movements (REM), our body becomes paralysed and we experience the succession of imagery, narrative and emotional experience that we call dreaming. As we learned earlier, dreaming is an active sleep state – we are not resting while we dream.

Our first dream period is only about 10 minutes long, and so the whole cycle, from the hypnagogic state to the end of our first REM period, usually takes about 90 minutes. We repeat this 90-minute cycle multiple times throughout the night, but with each cycle we spend increasingly more time in REM and less time in deep sleep. As our REM periods get longer, the last two hours of our sleep end up consisting almost entirely of dreaming.

The last few hours of our sleep cycle are also when we enter dreams most easily from the waking state. This makes it prime time for lucid dreaming. While you can have lucid dreams in the first few hours of your sleep cycle, the dream periods will be short and your mind may be quite groggy. However, in the last few hours you will not only have longer dream periods but also a fair few hours

of sleep under your belt, so your mind will feel fresh and ready to engage lucidity.

When you wake up (at any point in your sleep cycle) you always pass through a state called the hypnopompic. This much-overlooked state of consciousness is the gateway from sleep to waking, and, if we can harness it, holds some of the highest rewards.

**Stage 1:** Hypnagogic - This is the first stage of sleep: the hypnagogic state. It is very light sleep, experienced by many as more of a heavy drowsiness than sleep, and it is often accompanied by alpha brain wave patterns of relaxed wakefulness. The most recognizable aspect of stage 1 sleep is the hypnagogic imagery: the dreamy hallucinations that flash and fade before our mind's eye as we drift off.

**Stage 2:** Light, dreamless sleep: Most people experience this as a light but dreamless sleep. We have now moved from the semi-conscious hypnagogic into the blackout stage of sleep, but we are yet to start dreaming.

**Stage 3:** Deep sleep: We now fall much further into sleep as our brain begins producing delta brain waves and we enter the deepest level of dreamless sleep. Stage 3 is restorative sleep. It's the state in which we release HGH (human growth hormone), repair our cells and recharge the batteries. If you manage to wake somebody from the deep, delta wave blackout of Stage 3, they normally feel groggy and disorientated.

**Rapid eye movement (REM):** This is the stage where our body becomes paralysed, our brain becomes highly active and we dream. Although some dream imagery can occasionally seep into all stages of sleep it's REM in which we dream most abundantly.

Most people have about four or five 90-minute sleep cycles per night, with REM dreaming being a feature of every one of these. That is about four or five dream periods a night, which become almost 1,800 dreams per year and well over 100,000 dreams in a lifetime. That's 100,000 opportunities to get lucid!

### **What are the benefits of Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep?**

There are so many benefits to this practice but in a nutshell, once you become conscious *within* your unconscious mind you can (much like through hypnotherapy) make lasting changes to your body and mind while you sleep.

A few of my favourite benefits of the practice are:

- Psychological healing (phobias/trauma)
- Spiritual practice while you sleep
- Conscious sleeping
- Treatment of PTSD and nightmare integration

- Preparation for death and dying
- Lucid living and waking up to your full potential

## **Lucid Living**

One of the key components of the Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep Approach is that of lucid living: interacting with daily life with a bit more mindfulness and lucidity.

For thousands of years Buddhism has proffered that although we believe that we are awake, our waking lives are spent sleepwalking through a dreamlike illusion that we mistake for absolute reality.

In waking life, however, most of us are still not aware that much of reality is a dreamlike illusion and so we feel separate from and threatened by everything that we perceive to be not us. This perceived threat leads to fear and we become afraid of ‘the other’ and barricade ourselves in against the shock of mistaken dualism.

In a lucid dream, however, we become aware that we are dreaming and ‘wake up’ to the illusion that what we once thought to be a solid, permanently existing reality is just a projection of our own mind. Once we have experienced this awakening, we begin to relax and enjoy the show a bit more in our waking life, because we are aware that it is not quite as solid and inflexible as we have been led to believe. Every time we lucid dream we are experiencing a new perception of reality, one in which we are the co-creator, and the more we experience this, the more we may also perceive waking reality in a similar way. Each time we do this we are creating a habit of recognition. It is this habit of seeing through illusion that forms the crux of lucid living.

Meditation is one of the original methods for lucid living and so forms a central part of our training in Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep.

It may seem a rather paradoxical method: we think that we will keep ourselves awake by constantly doing things, but one of the best ways to wake ourselves up is to do nothing – the intentional and very active nothing of mindfulness meditation. Meditation brings us into direct contact with our inner environment and through this we come to know ourselves better and so become better equipped to know when we are on autopilot and when we are truly awake. Meditation is also a form of mind training in which we make our mind stronger, more flexible and healthier. Just as it’s impossible to get fit without doing any exercise, so it’s impossible to wake up and live lucidly without exercising our mind. Mind training is like going to the mind gym; it’s about flexing the muscles of our mind to give ourselves the strength to become lucid. Researchers at Harvard, Yale, and MIT have found conclusive evidence that regular periods of meditation can alter the physical structure of our brain

in favour of clarity and lucid awareness. There is no greater tool on our path to lucid living than meditation.

But perhaps the most powerful way to lucid living is to regard waking life as a little bit more dreamlike. Intentionally looking out for life signs will help this shift of perception to take place. This is the foundation of a Tibetan Buddhist practice called Illusory Body yoga, which is used in conjunction with dream yoga to help the practitioner realize the dreamlike nature of reality. Be careful not to turn all this into some sort of ego trip, though. Everybody is part of the same dream, so you are no more the central protagonist than anybody else.

## **Conclusion**

Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep both incorporates and goes far beyond the primary goal of simply lucid dreaming, with aims of more holistic and spiritual benefit. It includes a combination of transformative Western and Tibetan Buddhist dream-work techniques set within a framework of mindfulness meditation and awareness training. By combining Western and Eastern techniques, we can take the ancient power of the Tibetan Buddhist approach to dream work and make it accessible to Western practitioners without any homogenization of the two traditions. It is only once we are lucid, that the divergence between the lucid dreamer and the dream yogi occurs. The actual techniques used to reach lucidity can come from either tradition.

Mindfulness of Dream and Sleep practices aim to train our mind's awareness during all stages of dream, sleep and wakefulness. Rather than just focusing on lucid dreaming, we focus on strengthening lucidity in all areas of life, just as the original dream yoga teachings recommend.

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