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Waking To The Dream:
An Introduction



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There is a common psychological misperception about dreams that needs to be addressed at the outset of our exploration of dreams and the dreaming life. This misperception is based in the belief that dreaming is primarily defined as an activity of mind in a state of sleep, that dreaming is a consequence of sleep. I would like to suggest that this is not the case and that, in fact, dreaming is a fully functional activity of mind (or psyche) awake, and even, mind illumined. The often expressed dichotomy between sleeping and waking is an artifact of an acculturated dualism that tends to associate the waking, rational, and pragmatic as opposed to the sleeping, irrational, and fantastic. This distinction is made as though these associated states are two distinctive modalities of consciousness. But consciousness, as I understand it, is not simply a set of particular phenomenal qualities; it is a flow, a stream whose “contents” are dynamically interactive, sharing processes with the body, other persons, the natural world, and a broad spectrum of cosmological influences that constitute a shared reality. And dreaming is woven, like fine gossamer threads of energy, throughout the entire spectrum of our on going awareness, awake, asleep, or illumined. Dream studies have tended to bracket dreaming to the sleeping mind because in that circumstance, dreams stand forth as memorable events that can impact dramatically our physical, emotional, and mental life. Dreams are memorable; they shake us, challenge us, frighten us, and promise possibilities not yet realized. But a powerful, dramatic dream is a dynamic content that we can easily carry with us in the waking state. The dream can shadow our day, our mood, our awareness of others, and create a context for self-reflection that can challenge our values or sense of identity. Those who have studied their own dreams over the years know how easily the dream can be woven into the context of the everyday, how the dream can be a source of creative action or hesitancy, how the influence of the dream can deconstruct our perceptions of the world around us. However, it is not simply the “night dream” that creates this dreaming awareness, it is also the “day dream” that sudden imagining that sweeps us into a new context of perception, that offers an alternate perspective or possibility. We all day dream and such dreaming is simply an expression of the dreaming aspects of mind, a reflection of the dynamics of consciousness creatively responding to the world around us. In this sense, mental poverty might be defined as an inability to dream in the waking state, a lack of creativity, and an absence of what is possible subsumed into collective norms. But dreaming is much more implicit in the waking state than in simple day dreams. Every time we try to plot a course of action and consider multiple alternatives, we are dreaming. Every time we reflect upon our personal relationships and consider how they might be different, be changed, modified, enhanced, we are dreaming. Every time we speculate, we dream; every time we consider the alternatives, possibilities, make choices among

those possibilities, we are dreaming. Whenever we are in a reflective mood, remembering the past, trying choices that require us to give something up in order to gain something else, we are dreaming. Every scientist who attempts to project the curve of his or her research toward a possible conclusion is dreaming; every artist dreams the work; every poet, dreams the words. And in the present generation, dreaming is linked to fantasy, novels, music, movies, entertainment in a grand scale - immersing us in dreams. We are in an age of dreaming, and we are waking into the dreaming context of mental and emotional life based on the rapid, even frightening, transformations of our age which is caught in multiple political dreams and nightmares, in religious dreams of holy war, in economic dreams of power and dominance, in global dreams of disaster and a future whose tentativeness hangs on the delicate threads of our dreaming hopes. Envisioning possibilities, alternatives, outcomes is a form of dreaming. There is a likely correlation between those who practice such envisioning as a normative part of their mental life and those who remember their dreams, particularly if the wakeful imagining is acted upon rather than simply fantasized and forgotten. Dreaming is not simply compensatory; it can be a primary source for creative intention, a capacity whose practice results in a vivid opening of a pathway that can be taken, enacted, and realized. Dreaming can be a template for what is possible, made actual through committed testing of the alternatives. In a more esoteric religious sense dreaming, that is, the vivid use of imagination as embodied in symbols and ritual, can be a means of empowerment. In a simple Eucharist celebration, the bread is the body and the wine is the blood, and this metaphoric conjunction is part of a communal dreaming whose purpose is to give blessings. Ritual action is a form of embodied dreaming. The rite represents the visionary world of the participants, their shared context, their cosmological presuppositions, as a dreaming whose purpose is to solicit a response meant to empower, to bless, or to give thanks. Artists dream their paintings, music, sculptures, dances, and costumes, often produced in a ritual atmosphere, as part of a greater dreaming that seeks to express a visionary world. A mathematical formula is first a dream, then a symbolic discourse, and finally, a dream woven into a theory of origins and ends, a cosmological dream of ultimate meanings. Dreaming is thus inseparable from consciousness; it is a creative fire threaded through the organization of sensory perception, emotional response, and mental reflection. We are all dreaming, all the time -- even the most pragmatic, unimaginative individual can recognize the play of alternatives in making choices, the necessity of applying creative insight in order to attain a desired end. Socially, we are inundated by dreaming propaganda, the constant allure of new products, external beauty, success, happiness, and a continual arousal, an induced erotic dreaming meant to create needs and desires for the profit of others.

Collectively, people surrender to dreaming propaganda and become dreaming consumers caught in a half-waking state, sharing values that are induced through the mechanisms of manufactured visions, through a vivid technology of electronic imagery, sound, and seduction. Consciousness takes in this sensory stimulus, the vibrations and energetic transmission of imagery, in-streaming it into the dynamic context. Culture is a dream-based reality shared by a multitude whose actions and values are shaped in dreaming together; divergence and diversity, contestation, denial, affirmation, marginality are all part of that dreaming. We are not all dreaming the same dreams, but we are all dreaming and trying to make reality and the dreaming an integral whole.

Gleaning the Dream

Dream knowledge does not usually come all at once, but bit by bit as we attend to all the disparate elements of our dreaming life, asleep, awake, or inbetween. The value of dreaming is not just the dreaming; it is also found in the knowledge we draw from the dream that we then transpose into a life well-lived. Dreaming is a creative power, an imaginative process through which we can explore and envision possibilities and alternatives to the life we actually live. In the spiritual sense, dreaming is a way to access our deeper potential and a resource that allows us to plot a course toward the illumined basis of human awareness. Without doubt, dreaming is crucial to spiritual development, and it is part of the process by which we define and redefine our human capacities. Dream knowledge has long been recognized in many spiritual traditions as a source of inspiration and guidance. This knowledge is part of our waking consciousness; it is intrinsic to our individual and shared awareness, and it is fostered by an attentive gleaning of what falls outside ordinary perception or the consensual mind. We must glean in the fields of play, in the spontaneity of dreaming images, in the sudden eruption of vivid signs and symbols, in the density of metaphorical relations, and in the nonsymmetrical expression of chaotic possibilities. But this gleaning, as a spiritual practice, is purposeful, not simply quixotic or in the service of superficial creative expression. The gleaning is a process of assembly by which the latent power of soul is enhanced through an affirmation that seeks to bring the whole of an individual being to its fullness. Dreams are built of images and feelings, of thoughts and symbols, whose content often reflects the unrealized potential and its inhibition by the world, by the undifferentiated dreaming that constitutes collective identity. The gleaning is a process by which the “bits and pieces” of self are gathered and assembled into a more coherent wholeness. Sometimes this is done through the process of incarnating the dreaming self into a spiritual worldview whose contents give direction and guidance to the spiritual seeker. Thus dreaming in a Buddhist context serves to reveal latent potentials of mind, in Tantra the dreaming process is developed through a conscious identification of the dreamer with the empowering sources of transformation.

In the Sufi context, dreaming can reflect a higher world, the *alam al-mithal*, the intermediary creative world of the soul's journey to God. In both Christianity and Sufism, dreams and visions can have a mystical basis in revealing a cosmological potential to the individual seeking unity with deep divinity. In such a case, the gleaning is a search for affirmations that correspond to the teachings of the tradition. But for those who are not part of any tradition, the gleaning is a process by which a visionary world is constructed. This requires clearing away the undergrowth and tangled roots of collective life. Even in a traditional context, dreaming remains a highly individual practice; mystics do not have the same dreams, visions, or realizations. And an individual who does not stand within a tradition is still influenced by a multitude of spiritual ideas, practices, and beliefs that flow into the dreaming process. In an archetypal sense, dreaming cannot be limited to the confines of any tradition; dreaming has deep roots that connect to the archetypes of many diverse traditions because the dreaming soul knows no boundaries in either culture or time. Visionary art, architecture, and sculpture all carry the dreaming weight of the past, reconstituted in new forms that shift our understanding. Memory itself is a form of dreaming, all that we remember is a virtual reconstruction of the past in a present laced with dreams, just as the past itself was shaped by collective dreaming patterns. All history is a form of dreaming about what once was, shaped by present dreaming, and made into artful narratives for the future. All we truly have is the dreaming of the present, this moment, now passing away, and yet being constantly carried in the streaming forth of consciousness seeking its own origins and inner potential. These flowing currents of past, present, and future represent a dreaming context, our imagined species history as embedded in various spiritual traditions or teachings. Each of us as a dreamer, must embrace the challenge to glean from our dreaming a real world that images our true potential.

An Alchemy of Dreams

The creative task is not simply to glean the elements of dreaming, which are the primary elements that constitute the “dark soil” of the psyche, but to also distill, purify, and combine those elements into a new synthesis of identity. Dreaming is a medium that can induce transformation if we can work intelligibly with its contents and energies. Gathering and reflecting on the diverse elements of the dream is only a first step; the flow of consciousness can be altered and made more coherent and harmonious through an assimilation of these elements. But these elements must be refined and subtilized through understanding and insight that often requires significant change in the dreamer. Dreams are not an end in themselves, but a means, a processual reflection of psychic health that images potential and problems. The work of the dreamer is not simply “to make sense” of the dream, but to work with the dream alchemically, as an esoteric body of lore whose teachings, symbols, and

signs can enhance and expand everyday awareness. This means we have to work consciously with our dream lore, to keep processing it in the stream of consciousness, in order to draw out the luminous gold hidden in dark matter. This extraction or refinement is a spiritual practice because what is drawn out of the dreaming is then assimilated, digested, and absorbed, as a profound source of inspiration. Out-of-body journeys are a form of expansive dreaming; lucid dreams are an awakening to greater clarity in soul intent and purpose. We can develop our assimilation and application of dream knowledge. The metaphysical content of dreams is profound if the dreamer will allow the dreaming to carry the soul into the depths from which great dreaming comes. Visions are a doorway into this type of dreaming, ecstasy is a sign of a deep dreaming beyond body and ordinary mind. Revelation is a dreaming state, a call of the soul to awaken to a deep resonance with Mystery and Being. The alchemy of these deeper dreams is not based in an image or symbol, but in a condition through which consciousness finds its own ground in the primordial depths and brings back the resonance of those depths to a shared field of human relations. The supraconscious dream is an affirmation of Mystery at the heart of the world, it is a calling to the soul to fully awaken from slumber in ordinary mindfulness, to pass through the dream into Reality, into Immeasurable Depths. And this can be gleaned from the dreaming presence in waking life, be recognized through attentiveness to every dreaming aspect. As a spiritual discipline, dreaming is the context, but remembering, reflecting, distilling, and absorbing is the alchemy that leads to deeper knowledge. The alchemy of dreaming is an individual art, not a collective science. It has many stages and challenges shaped by the immediate, personal conditions of the dreamer. Success in such an alchemy is very challenging because it is based in an on going process of relationship to others, the world, and the many disjunctive alternatives that surround each of us. Different approaches can be taken, as illustrated in this collection of articles, all of which address dreaming as a relevant factor in human development. The alchemical aspect is encapsulated in the processes by which we extract deeper knowledge from the dreaming process, whatever our method. The spiritual goals of such a process are inseparable from the dreaming, from the visionary world inhabited by the dreamer, and from the processes of distillation by which the dream elements become an elixir that instills new life and awareness. The touchstone of this process is the soul of the dreamer, a soul led by dreaming to new vistas of insight and lucid awareness, not of dreams, but of the ground from which our dreaming arises. Layer by layer, vista by vista, the dreaming process can unveil the heart, open the visionary capacity, and reveal the co-creative nature of dreaming. In this sense, dreams are a theophanic medium through which Mystery and Spirit reveal the depths of our true visionary capacities to see and be more. Thus, dreaming is a crucial aspect of human development and our exploration of its many dimensions, an affirmation of its central importance in human spiritual life.

About the Author:

Lee Irwin is Chair of the Religious Studies Department at the College of Charleston. He has studied world religions intensively, with an emphasis on Native American religions, western esotericism, hermeticism, contemporary spirituality, and transpersonal religious experience — particularly around themes connected to dreams and visions. He is also the Vice President of the International Association for the Study of Esotericism, and gives frequent presentations at the SOPHIA INSTITUTE and at the Institute for Dream Studies. He is also an Associate Editor and a contributor to “Elixir: The Journal of Consciousness, Conscience, and Culture”. His books include: *The Dream Seekers*, *Visionary Worlds*, *Awakening to Spirit*, *The Gnostic Tarot*, and *The Alchemy of Soul*.

In his own words: I have had a life-long interest in religion, spirituality, and comparative phenomenology of religious experience. In pursuit of that interest, I have studied the world religions intensively with a strong emphasis on religious experience, such as visions and dreams, and comparative mythology. My area of specialization is comparative religions of Native North American (including Maya and Aztec) and shamanism of Asia and Siberia. I also have a very strong interest in eastern religions (MA thesis on Taoism) and Islamic Sufism. As a comparativist, I am interested in studying religious phenomenology in its typological and morphological structures throughout all world religions. I am also interested in the historical study and teaching of world religions. My most recent research and teaching has been in the area of Western Esotericism and contemporary Gnostic and Hermetic spirituality. I also teach Theory and Method in the history of religious studies as well as other topical courses in phenomenology.

<http://religiousstudies.cofc.edu/about/faculty-staff-listing/irwin-lee.php>

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