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Dreams: Gateway to the Godhead

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The States of Being and Accessibility

There are ways to try to reach the infinite. One of them is through learning to understand the purpose of dreams in reaching that state of transcendence. The Upanishads have many explanations of the states of being and their hierarchy. There are four states of being; waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep, and the transcendent state. This last is the Godhead, *turiya*.¹⁵ These four states are also levels of awareness of the truth, each one becoming closer and closer to the Godhead. The Godhead is the Atman manifest, the *turiya*, without the outer shell of the *prana*, or the vitality of the body. It is the universal soul. The waking world is false, an illusion, and therefore is on the bottom of the hierarchy. Dreams are next in the hierarchy because they are constructed based off of what we experience in the waking world. Our dreams, however, are a doorway into the next level, which as mortals, is the closest we can currently get to transcendence. Dreamless sleep is the level at which the mind is truly clear; there are no interruptions from the waking world, whether it is from the conscious or unconscious mind.¹⁶ The dreamless sleep is devoid of desire or fear and is a pure form of being.

So what is the purpose of the dream? Why not simply bypass it and go straight to dreamless sleep? The Upanishads have an answer to this question. As mentioned earlier, each state is a stepping stone to the one above it. The dream is the bridge between the waking world and the world of dreamless sleep, or the world of Atman. As Dange explains, the soul, *purusa*, has two states: this world and the other world. The dream state brings them together. The soul of the world is trapped within the body, but the soul within the dream can leave the body and drift into the other world, the realm of Atman, and comes back to have a dialogue with the bodily soul about what it has experienced. The dream is the bridge between the two worlds. Therefore, it is unwise to wake someone from a deep sleep, as it can cause great dissonance if the wandering soul has yet to return. This simply reinforces the fact that “soul” is a western term used to describe the inner being, as it isn’t a singular entity, but a truth, and a truth is not susceptible to finite limitations. However, if able to disassociate the western connotation of soul, then it can be used in a Hindu context. The soul is “two birds that stay on the same tree,”¹⁷ those two birds being the conscious and unconscious, and the tree being the dream that holds them both.

But this again comes back to the question: if the dream is part of the conscious mind, how can it possibly reach to something beyond it? Here, the dream must be

15 Wendy Doniger, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (1984): 15.

16 *Ibid.*, 17.

17 Sadashiv Dange, “Dream, Myth, and the Hindu Context.” 79.

seen as a projection of the waking reality. It acts like a cinema. The content is false, produced and created by some director, however the projection onto the screen is real, and the process of seeing the movie is also real. The director is the god who created reality, Vishnu, and the dream is the projector.¹⁸ The viewer is the soul that is able to leave the body to reach into dreamless sleep and report the information back to the soul tied to the body. The dream itself isn't real, but the experiencing of the dream is. In order to decipher a deeper meaning in the film, the viewer must study film aesthetics and analysis in order to understand what certain images mean and decipher the importance of the scenography, costuming, etc. The same approach must be taken to deciphering dreams. There is a deeper meaning behind what is being projected in the mind, and the dreamer must remove themselves from the role of a participant in the dream and become an observer. In this one step, the conscious is now being used to aid the dream in deciphering what is within the dream. We become aware that the reality of the dream (just as reality in general) is an illusion, and there is a deeper meaning trying to poke through the surface in subtle ways.

The dream, in a sense, is the only attempt at creation of which a person is capable. As the everyday reality is the dream of Vishnu, the reality within the conscious mind is projected in the dream. God emits the universe from his subconscious mind, just as we emit dreams from our subconscious mind. Even though we are only able to project things from the apparent reality, this ability to dream is a connection to the divine. As Vishnu dreams, so do we. In learning to control and understand the dream state, we reach another level of being that is one step closer to the Godhead. After learning to master dreaming and in realizing that it is merely a stepping stone to the next state of being, reaching a dreamless sleep is attainable. Going back to the movie metaphor, the dreamless sleep would be like becoming a director, and realizing all of the tricks and techniques used to create a motion picture. In understanding how to do this, the viewer is disenfranchised with the fantasy that the film offers, and sees it as a method of pushing a message across to an audience. Dreamless sleep is a result of this understanding of the way the dream operates. The dreamer is no longer prisoner to the realm of the dream because the dreamer is no longer subject of the dream, but the objective observer. Instead of waking up from the dream, there is a gained ability to stay aware while still asleep. It is a light sleep to be sure, however it is one that is not interrupted by the unconscious mind because there is nothing pressing against each other. There is an equilibrium that is al-

¹⁸ Wendy Doniger, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities*. 15

most akin to peace. The binary is dissolved, and the next step is able to be taken. Consciousness is elevated.

The dream here is not necessarily the higher state, but it is a method to reach a higher state. What I found odd about the concept of dreamless sleep in particular, however, is that it demands that the sleep be light in order to remain aware. I find that the best sleep I get that is dreamless is when I'm in an incredibly deep sleep, practically dead to the world. Those sleeps come after a day of vigorous physical activity and low stress situations. This is telling, however, regardless of the lack of awareness. My conscious mind is exhausted because my physical body is also, therefore as soon as I enter into sleep, everything shuts down to recuperate from the day before. In my own dreamless sleep, my conscience is quiet, and therefore the unconscious mind, too, remains silent because it has no soul to report back to. It can go off to the state of the other world without the conscious mind interfering. Therefore, the lack of communication causes dreamless sleep, though in my case, not really a higher state of consciousness. In order to do that, I'd have to participate in intense mental training.

Practices to Reach Higher States of Consciousness

Madhu Tandan writes about a Himalayan *ashram* (a secluded monastery) where the disciples use dreams to reach higher states of consciousness.¹⁹ The article describes the process through which these disciples learn to access a state beyond the one they're conscious of, and that begins through learning to understand dreams.

The first step is to understand that dreaming is another state of consciousness, which is tied to the person. The way in which the process of realizing that the dream is part of the conscious state is analogized to a window at night. The light coming from within the room shows the reflection of the looker in the window, however, this reflection blocks the viewer from seeing what is outside. Outside is the Brahman, the absolute truth, and it is blocked by the everyday reality that consumes our waking thoughts.²⁰ This creates the divide between the other world and our own reality, a reality that is material and full of distraction. Within the dream, however, there is an opportunity to create a gateway, to destroy the threshold between these two realities, but it takes practice and patience. In order to create this gateway, the dreamer must begin to analyze these dreams as an outside observer

19 Madhu Tandan, "The Role of Dreams in Accessing Higher States of Consciousness as Practiced in Contemporary Indian Ashram." *The Indian Night: Sleep and Dreams in Indian Culture*. New Delhi: Rupa & co. (2009): 192.

20 Ibid., 195.

rather than a participant in the dream.²¹ This begins by interpreting the dreams where the dreamer is still a participant. Symbols must be identified, such as repetitive images or numbers that, upon deep reflection, have some kind of meaning. Then, the dreamer must figure out what deep truth this dream is divulging through these symbols.

This process can be difficult, therefore the next step is to meditate in a wakeful setting in order to rid the mind of chatter and fear and projection. These three things act as a barrier as much as being awake and being asleep. The cause ripples in the surface that muddle the image trying to be seen.²² So, the disciple must learn to break down these barriers. Through meditation while awake, the disciple trains his mind to reject the chatter created by worldly desires and the untrue reality around him. He practices being awake and aware while emptying his mind of things that are of the reality he is trying to leave behind. This takes the disciple out of the realm of the participant and into the realm of the observer, eventually transferring this awareness to his sleep. It becomes something similar to lucid dreaming, only it is more observational and less participatory. The dreamer doesn't try to control the dream, but instead tries to understand it.

Once this state of "meditative consciousness" is reached, then the disciple can begin to differentiate between what is part of his perceived self and what is his true self, his Atman. The light from outside is brighter than the light from within, making the reflection in the glass disappear and what is outside more visible. In order to stay in this state, the dreamer must train himself to sleep lightly, so as not to lose his awareness. He must also conquer the fear of what he will find about himself, the fear of finding out the truth of his inner self. This puts the dreamer into a state of metanoia, which in Greek means "transformation of the mind."²³ The dreamer's mind has been trained to be conscious within the subconscious realm of the dream. At this point the dreamer starts to determine the difference between the perceived "I" and the observed "I," where the perceived is the participant in the dream, the person that is shaped by the everyday, fake reality. The observed "I" is blurry at first, as it takes time to gather enough information from dreams to put that "I" together. The objective is to revert back to a state that is not socialized by the world around us and to reach a more universal level of understanding.

In other fields of study, searching for the root of identity is a common practice. For example, in literature, the sense of self is constantly explored in poetry and

21 *Ibid.*, 197.

22 *Ibid.*, 193.

23 Joël Dor, Judith Fehe Gurewich and Susan Fairfield. *Introduction to the reading of Lacan: the unconscious structured like a language*. New York: Other Press, (1998): 32.

fiction, and in psychology it is observed through the stages a child goes through in understanding their independent view of themselves in the universe. Jacques Lacan's Mirror Stage theory strives to describe the moment an infantile child comes to understand that its perceived self is different than the self that it sees in the mirror.²⁴ However, in this case, the perceived self is one not yet defined by any outside stimuli. The perceived self is created by nothing other than what the baby is born with. Granted, the conscience is part of the body, so whatever the baby thinks of himself is still an illusion. However, the state that the baby is in before seeing himself in the mirror is closer to the meditative state the disciples strive to find, as it is unclouded by the chatter of the everyday world. The disciples are literally trying to forget their reflections and move past them to see what truly lies beyond what they can see with their eyes. It is a regressive process, going back to the time when we didn't know what we looked like, only what we thought our true selves to be. A baby, though, is prone to the desires and fears clogging their minds, and therefore is not really at this meditative state of consciousness.

The point of this meditation and dream mysticism is to try and find that fourth state of being. Dreams are a step in the right direction, being after wakefulness in the hierarchy. It's difficult to empty the mind of things that you aren't aware are clogging it, and as modern psychology has come to explain, the dream is a projection of the subconscious. Therefore, in understanding the purpose of a dream and accepting the truth behind it, the disciple is able to understand a truth of his unconscious mind, bringing him one step closer to that fourth state of transcendence. The goal is not necessarily to reach a point of complete severance from the world, but to understand the world in the context of the universe, and in turn, to have the universe create your understanding of self.

The methods used at the *ashram* sound like something from a Hollywood film depicting a man floating above his body in some astral plane. In those scenarios, the disciple is able to separate their consciousness from the physical body and float around the cosmos. The separation is the part that is flawed. As mentioned previously, there is no way to detach the consciousness from the body, as it is technically the sixth sense, so as long as a person is alive, there is a connection to their consciousness. What the disciples at the ashram are trying to accomplish is to bridge the waking with the dreaming and even dreamless sleep. Separation is not going to help reaching higher; each level of awareness is a stepping stone to reach the ultimate level of being, the Godhead. Each step simply has a lock that the disciple must unlock in order to pass on to the next level. Separating the two

24 Ibid.

selves is not the objective; rather, it's to try and find a way to break down the barrier between the participant in the illusion and the observer, the Atman, the truth.

I particularly liked the analogy of the window that Tandan uses to explain this other state of being. Not only is it vivid and accurate, but it makes it easier for an average person to attempt to practice such awareness. I had a dream last night in which I saw a polar bear swimming at the beach, and I called the police to report it, only to have them tell me that the polar bear has been there for years and I shouldn't worry about it. If I take the approach of a disciple, I would analyze what the setting of the dream was (which was a fictional version of my home town) and then peel back the layers of what was going on. Why did I call the cops? Why was there a polar bear and not a grizzly bear? In understanding the choices made by my subconscious mind during the dream, I understand deeper truths about myself that cannot be revealed in my waking everyday life, in part because of the chatter that runs through my mind that distracts me from the true self within.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is apparent that there is more to being than meets the eye, and even more to being than what meets the mind's eye. The only way to bridge the gap between the conscious and unconscious, the everyday world and the other world, the illusion and the truth, is through creating a channel between them, and the way to do this is through dreaming. There are steps to take in order to make the dream a passage way, and they can be taken through deep meditation and reflection as well as through creating an awareness that exists both in the waking world and the world of the dream. In understanding the dream, the dreamer comes to understand the self, and after a while, the true Self can be seen, if only a glimpse. For dreams may not take the dreamer directly into the true reality, but it takes them one step higher.

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