

What Is a Lucid Dream?

“From the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, the way to make progress is to have a deeper understanding of our own mind, which amounts to understanding that the world and our perception of it are illusory.”

- Dzigar Kongtrul

“Lucid dream” is a term hinted at by the scholar Marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denys (1822–1892), but which was coined by the Dutch psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden (1860–1932).ⁱ In the West, lucid dream accounts go back as far as Aristotle, with the first Western lucid dream report written in 415 C.E. by Saint Augustine. A lucid dream is when you wake up to the fact that you’re dreaming, but you still remain in the dream—that is, you’re dreaming and you know it.ⁱⁱ The validity of lucid dreaming was scientifically proven in 1975 by the psychologist Keith Hearne at Hull University, and then independently by Stephen LaBerge in 1977 at Stanford.ⁱⁱⁱ LaBerge is arguably the father of modern lucid dreaming, and his books *Lucid Dreaming: The Power of Being Awake and Aware in Your Dreams* (1985) and *Exploring the World of Lucid Dreaming* (1990, coauthored with Howard Rheingold) are classics. Prior to these pioneering studies, the idea of “lucid dreaming” was mostly dismissed by the scientific community. How can you be awake and dreaming at the same time? LaBerge and Hearne proved that you can, and lucid dreaming gained a foothold in the West.

In that magical instant of awakening within the dream, everything changes. What just a moment ago had total control over you now comes under your control. Instead of being blown

around helplessly by the dictates of the dream, you now dictate the dream. You can do whatever you want, and no one can see you. You can fly, have sex with a movie star, or rob Fort Knox.^{iv}

Dreams are truth-tellers.^v They reveal our deepest unconscious tendencies, as any psychologist or dream interpreter can attest.^{vi} This same maxim applies to working with dreams on a spiritual level, as we will see throughout this book. The moniker for dream yoga in the classic texts is “the measure of the path.” Dream yoga will show you a great deal about who you are, and where you stand on the path.

Try this brief contemplation, and be ruthlessly honest: what would you do if you could become invisible? What might that reveal? Would you act selflessly or selfishly? Plato addressed this issue in *The Republic*, where he talks about the “Myth of the Ring of Gyges.” In this myth the shepherd Gyges discovers a magical ring that gives him the power of invisibility. Plato uses this myth to talk about morality—what would you do if you were invisible and nobody could hold you accountable for your actions? Would you work to benefit others (which, in Buddhist terms, would reveal an evolved being with a purified mind), or would you fulfill your wildest fantasies (which would reveal a normal being with a defiled mind). Gyges used his invisibility to fulfill his raw desires. Lucid dreaming gives you a chance to live the myth of Gyges, and to learn from it.

Lucidity is not an “all or nothing” affair. There is a spectrum ranging from barely lucid to hyper-lucid, and from the shortest flashes of lucidity to lucid dreams lasting over an hour. For example, being barely lucid might involve acknowledging on some level that you’re having a dream, but not acting with full comprehension. You might still flee from perceived danger, or treat dream characters as if they were real. Hyper-lucid dreaming would be full comprehension of the dreamlike nature of your experience in the dream, recognizing that even the sense of self

in the dream is being dreamt. Hyper-lucidity could also refer to colors and forms in the dream that seem more vibrant and real than anything in waking experience. You can also be non-lucid in a dream, become lucid to it, then drop into non-lucidity again.

The good news about lucid dreaming is that even though it may take practice to have such dreams regularly, it just takes one instant of recognition and you're "in." One flash of recognition transforms a non-lucid dream into a lucid one. I've been to many lucid dream seminars where people get discouraged by their inability to trigger lucidity, but then the next night it suddenly happens. That single instance is often enough to ignite a passion for lucid dreams. There's nothing quite like a lucid dream, and when you have one it's irresistible to want more. The following chapters will show you how to have these magical dreams.

Facts and Figures

Here are some general facts about lucid dreaming: Young children tend to have lucid dreams more frequently, an occurrence that drops off around age sixteen. Younger people in general are more likely to have lucid dreams than older folks. Lucidity occurs as early as age three, but it seems most likely to happen around ages twelve to fourteen.^{vii} On average, lucid dreamers have three to four lucid dreams each month, with the average length of lucidity being about fourteen minutes. Some 58 to 70 percent of people will have at least one lucid dream during their life.

The benefits of lucid dreaming are remarkable. Here's a sampling:

Lucid dreaming can aid with nightmares and depression. Up to 8 percent of adults suffer from chronic nightmares. In a study at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, participants

underwent lucid dreaming treatment (LDT), which included coming up with alternative endings to their nightmares. Those who were able to do so reduced their nightmares.^{viii}

Lucid dreams can boost your confidence, help you overcome shyness, manage grief, and give you the chance to rehearse things, like a performance or presentation. They can also prepare you for events you expect to be emotionally difficult, by giving you the chance to experience them in your dreams in advance of the actual worldly event. For example, a friend of mine was able to prepare for her mother's approaching death by having lucid dreams about that sad event and using those dreams as opportunities to practice letting go. This form of anticipatory grief can soften the blow of real grief.

Lucid dreamers may be better at solving problems, according to recent studies. In some problem-solving situations, people need to "step back from perceived reality, reflect on it, and evaluate the perceptual evidence," write the authors of this study. How does this connect to lucidity in dreams? The same authors continue, "For the insight that leads to lucidity, people also seem able to step back from the obvious interpretation and consider a remote and, at the time, implausible option—that it is all a dream."^{ix} In other words, new perspective can be innovative. The biggest problem of them all is samsara, which is the confused world of conventional reality defined by dissatisfaction and suffering, and lucid dreaming has the potential to solve even that.

Lucid dreaming has been shown to improve motor skills, which means it has the ability to help you with any physical activity, from playing the piano to athletic performance. It makes sense, because lucid dreams activate the brain in the same way as waking life. If you work on a math problem in your dream, for example, your left hemisphere is stimulated just as it would be during the day. If you sing in your dream, the right hemisphere is activated. If you do squats in a lucid dream, your physical heart rate increases. The extraordinary thing is that the effects from

your nightly activity continue into the day. Training your dream body can train your physical body. For those with no time left during the day to do things, it's like adding a night shift.^x

Lucid dreaming can facilitate healing. One doctor published a paper about a patient with a twenty-two-year history of chronic pain who cured himself overnight with a single lucid dream. "I'm no expert on lucid dreams," says Dr. Mauro Zappaterra. "But the man woke up with no pain. He said it was like his brain had shut down and rebooted. A few days later, he walks in the VA pharmacy and actually returns his medication—300 tabs of levorphanol. To me that's pretty convincing evidence."^{xi}

Lucid dreaming is becoming the latest rage. People are using it to get an edge on their competition. Researchers are working with it to treat PTSD. Sleep scientists in Germany are using it to enhance focus and performance in athletes. Actors, inventors, artists, writers, and musicians are increasingly practicing lucid dreaming to enhance creativity. The psychologist Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel writes, "The process of creation [is] accompanied by the capacity to communicate with the most primitive layers of the unconscious"^{xii}—layers of the unconscious that can be accessed in your dreams.

Dreaming in general has been connected to creativity for eons, and the literature is replete with examples. The German chemist Friedrich Kekule discovered the molecular structure of benzene in a dream; James Cameron's dream of a robot-man eventually became the movie *The Terminator*; Robert Louis Stevenson came up with the plot for his novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in a dream; and Paul McCartney's song "Yesterday" came to him in a dream.

The current popularity of lucid dreaming is both a blessing and a curse. We'll explore the blessings throughout this book. The curse is that dreams, as being unreal, are often not taken

seriously. Cultures that honor dreams are often dismissed as primitive. “It’s just a dream” is a trivializing comment, albeit one with provisional validity. But if we dismiss our dreams, and discharge lucid dreaming as just another virtual reality game, we will dismiss a profound opportunity to explore the nature of mind and reality. The truly primitive cultures may well be those that dismiss the power of dreams, and therefore ignore the unparalleled opportunities for growth.

In this book we’re going to talk about how to strengthen the world of dreaming as a way to weaken the world of daily appearance, so that worldly things don’t have as much power over us. In technical terms, we can almost say that we’ll reify, or materialize, the dream world in an effort to de-reify, or dematerialize, the waking world—until both are seen as equally real or unreal, and we awaken to the illusory nature of both. That’s where freedom lies, and that’s what “waking up” in the spiritual sense means.

We’ll have much more to say about lucid dreams throughout the book. Right now, let’s look at a map that can help us understand where we’re going when we sleep and dream, and then explore how to get there.

i Some say the term “lucid dream” originated with Frederik van Eeden. A more technically accurate term would be “cognizant dreams,” used by Stephen LaBerge (see note 4 below). “Metacognitive dreams” is also used, where “metacognitive” means “thinking about thinking,” or “reflecting on one’s mental processes.” Lucid dreams are also described as a “hybrid” state of consciousness, a hybrid of waking and dreaming. One problem with this term is that “hybrid” implies a dissociative combination of dreaming and waking, which supports the more Western scientific approach of the presence or absence of consciousness, versus a more Eastern approach of a spectrum of consciousness ranging from gross (waking) to subtle (dreaming) to very subtle (dreamless sleep), a view that is more resonant with this book.

Still others use the term “integrative consciousness,” again implying the integration of usually disparate states of consciousness; or “volitional dreaming,” which implies conscious control. Some scholars look at the popular definition of lucid dreaming as a Western term, because it assumes a (monophasic) culture where waking and dreaming are distinctly different states, an assumption that is not held by many indigenous (polyphasic) cultures.

The three principal states of waking, sleeping, and dreaming are not mutually exclusive. Like everything else in reality, they interpenetrate. When you’re having a daydream, you’re dreaming in the waking state; when you’re awake in a dream, you’re lucid dreaming; when you’re awake in dreamless sleep, you’re lucid sleeping; and of course from a spiritual perspective, when you’re sleeping in waking life you’re a “normal” confused sentient being. Buddhas are simply those who remain awake in all states.

ii The neuroscientist J. Allan Hobson theorizes that recognizing that we’re dreaming stimulates the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for self-awareness and working memory. This area is usually deactivated during normal non-lucid REM sleep. The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is also associated with the experience of when and how to act.

iii One cannot talk about lucid dreaming without honoring Stephen LaBerge. With a doctorate in psychophysiology from Stanford University, he has dedicated his life to the scientific exploration of lucid dreaming. His contributions are seminal and influence many pages of this book. The rigor that he brings to this field is important. Many books on lucid dreaming are available, and because dreams deal with highly personal dimensions of experience, almost anybody can say anything about dreams. In my reading of the literature, many books take artistic license in their accounts. It’s difficult to substantiate subjective inner experiences. This makes the science behind lucid dreaming, let alone dream yoga, difficult. Lucid dreaming is still on the fringe of science and academic study, often relegated to the mystic, the poet, or the New Ager. In the face of many obstacles, LaBerge has doggedly spent his life bringing needed discipline to a field that is dominated by speculation and metaphysics. You can always tell who the pioneers are—they’re the ones with all the arrows in their back. He is a pioneering voice of clear and precise thinking in a fuzzy world.

iv Flying and having sex are indeed the two most frequently engaged activities for lucid dreamers. See Bahar Gholipour, “What People Choose to Dream About: Sex and Flying,” LiveScience.com, July 10, 2014.

<http://www.livescience.com/46755-flying-sex-lucid-dream-content.html>. Other common adventures are doing things that are impossible in waking life: breathing under water, talking with animals, time travel, or being someone else.

v One neurological reason for this truth telling is that the prefrontal cortex is deactivated when we sleep. This part of the brain is involved with “executive function,” which relates to the ability to determine good and bad, to differentiate between conflicting thoughts, to predict outcomes, to apply moral values, and to moderate social behavior. (One reason adolescents and young adults get into trouble is because the prefrontal cortex isn’t fully developed until age twenty-five—which leads to bad decisions and poor social control. Executive function is “parental” function.) During sleep, the brain is largely uncensored, and therefore even secrets we didn’t know we held can leak out.

vi Though the two words are often used interchangeably, there is a difference between the “unconscious” and the “subconscious.” “Subconscious” can be defined as “partial consciousness,” “pertaining to what is in the margin of attention; pertaining to that of which one is only dimly aware;” in psychoanalytic terms “it is a transition zone through which any repressed material must pass on its way from the unconscious to the conscious.” (J. P. Chaplin, *Dictionary of Psychology*, 2nd ed. [New York: Dell, 1985], p. 452.)

The unconscious, in psychoanalytic terms, is the region of the mind that is the seat of repressions; also “characterizing an activity for which the individual does not know the reason or motive for the act,” and “pertaining to all psychic processes that cannot be brought to awareness by ordinary means.” (J. P. Chaplin, *Dictionary of Psychology*, 2nd ed. [New York: Dell, 1985], p. 481.)

The philosopher Evan Thompson offers this comment, which is central to our journey in this book, “One way to think about the Indian yogic idea of subtle consciousness is to see it as pointing to deeper levels of phenomenal consciousness to which we don’t ordinarily have cognitive access, especially if our minds are restless and untrained in meditation. According to this way of thinking . . . much of what Western science and philosophy would describe as unconscious might qualify as conscious, in the sense of involving subtle levels of phenomenal awareness that could be made accessible through meditative mental training.” (See his *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2015], p. 8.)

vii Tadas Stumbrys, et al., “The Phenomenology of Lucid Dreaming: An Online Survey,” *American Journal of Psychology* 127, no. 2 (summer 2014): 191–204.

viii Viktor I. Spoormaker and Jan van den Bout, “Lucid Dreaming Treatment for Nightmares: A Pilot Study,” *Psychotherapy and Psychomatics* 75 (2006): 389–394. This study showed that lucidity was not necessary for reduction in nightmare frequency. LDT alone was effective in reducing them. See also Antonio Zadra and Robert O. Pihl, “Lucid Dreaming as a Treatment for Recurrent Nightmares,” *Psychotherapy and Psychomatics* 66 (1997): 50–55.

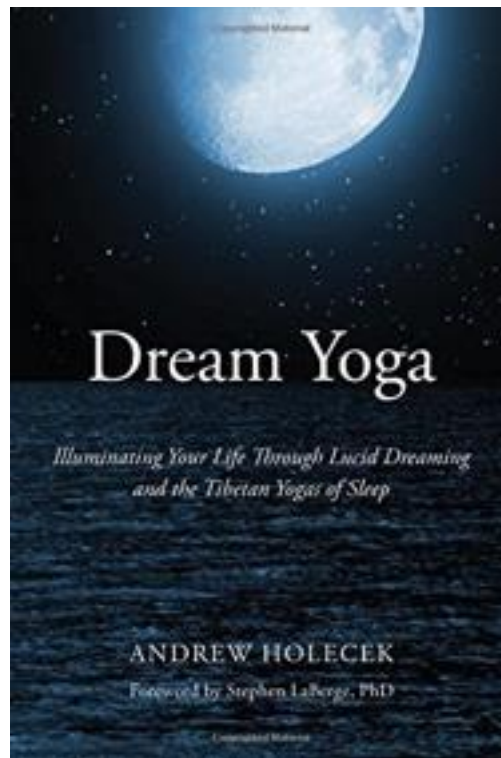
ix Patrick Bourke and Hannah Shaw, “Spontaneous Lucid Dreaming Frequency and Waking Insight,” *Dreaming* 24, no. 2 (June 2014): 152–159. “Results show that frequent lucid dreamers solve significantly more insight problems overall than non-lucid dreamers. This suggests that the insight experienced during the dream state may relate to the same underlying cognition needed for insight in the waking state.”

x Studies have shown that events in the dream body often coincide with corresponding events in the physical body. Most importantly, the brain can’t tell the difference between something that is “real” and something that is dreamt. See Morton Schatzman et al., “Correspondence During Lucid Dreams Between Dreamed and Actual Events,” in *Conscious Mind, Sleeping Brain: Perspectives on Lucid Dreaming*, edited by Jayne Gackenbach and Stephen LaBerge (New York: Plenum, 1998).

xi “Lucid Dreamers Are Using Their Sleeping Time to Get Ahead,” *Business Insider India*, August 18, 2014. <http://www.businessinsider.in/Lucid-Dreamers-Are-Using-Their-Sleeping-Time-To-Get-Ahead/articleshow/40376872.cms>.

xii “‘Creative Writers and Day-dreaming’: A Commentary,” in *On Freud’s “Creative Writers and Day-dreaming,”* edited by Ethel Spector Person, Peter Fonagy, and Servulo Figueira (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 113.

Excerpt from the Book:



Dream Yoga: Illuminating Your Life Through Lucid Dreaming and the Tibetan Yogas of Sleep

This is the most comprehensive book yet on the nocturnal meditations. Joining science and spirituality, East and West, in a full-spectrum exploration of the night, it explains how lucid dreaming develops into dream yoga, which can evolve into sleep yoga, which further develops into bardo yoga. Diving deep into the Buddhist nighttime practices, this dream yoga book will show you how to have lucid dreams and what to do with them.

It is a practical guide for meditators, seasoned dream travelers wanting to go deeper, and total beginners eager to experience lucidity for the first time.

“Don’t miss your opportunity to realize some of the very deepest and highest of all human potentials, from a real master of these realms!”

—Ken Wilber, author of *The Fourth Turning*

“At once profound and pragmatic, traditional and contemporary, a fine contribution to the growing literature on ways of exploring the nature of the mind and its role in nature by way of awakening to our dreams.”

—B. Alan Wallace, author of *Dreaming Yourself Awake*

“Between these words one can sense a deep enthusiasm that comes from personal experience with the practice. This informative book will be very beneficial for dedicated dream yoga practitioners.”

—Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, author of *The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep*

