

Dream Yoga

*Illuminating Your Life Through Lucid Dreaming
and the Tibetan Yogas of Sleep*

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sounds true
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This is a dream. I am free. I can change.

TENZIN WANGYAL RINPOCHE

Introduction

Adventures in Consciousness

THE JOURNEY WE are about to take in the course of this book is both fun and profound. Most people have no idea about the extent of possibilities that exist for this adventure in consciousness, an adventure in the darkness of the night.

We begin our journey with lucid dreaming. “Lucid dreaming” is when you realize you’re dreaming, but without waking up from the dream. You’re fully conscious within the dream and can do almost anything you want within it. Lucid dreaming is the ultimate in home entertainment. Your mind becomes the theater, and you are the producer, director, writer, and main actor. You can script the perfect love story or the craziest adventure. Lucid dreaming can also be used to solve problems, rehearse situations, and work through psychological issues. (For books specifically about lucid dreaming, see the suggested reading list at the end of this book.) From the trivial to the transcendent, lucid dreaming is a spectrum of experience mostly concerned with worldly matters and self-fulfillment.

Going deeper, lucid dreaming can develop into dream yoga, and become a spiritual practice. This is not to say that lucid dreaming isn’t spiritual. It can be. But as a practice, and in contrast to dream yoga, lucid dreaming doesn’t have as many spiritually oriented

methods. “Yoga” is that which yokes, or unites. Dream yoga unites you with deeper aspects of your being; it is more concerned with self-transcendence.

Other traditions work with sleep and dreams for spiritual purposes, including Sufi and Taoist dream practice, aspects of Transcendental Meditation, and Yoga Nidra. I will focus principally on Tibetan Buddhist dream yoga because this is a specialty of this branch of Buddhism.

From the etymology of “buddha,” all the way to the nocturnal meditations, this tradition has explored the nighttime mind for over twenty-five centuries. In the biographical poem the *Buddhacarita* (“Life of the Buddha”), it is said that the Buddha attained his enlightenment through four “watches of the night.” In the first watch, the soon-to-be Buddha gained recollection of his past lives and knowledge of the cycle of rebirth. In the second watch, he saw that all beings go through this cycle and that karma drives the wheel of life. During the third watch, he saw the means of liberation from this cycle. And in the fourth watch, just at the break of dawn, he attained the great awakening and became the Buddha. Following his example, we will similarly “watch” the night in a new and illuminating light.

The exact origin of dream yoga is opaque in Buddhism. Some scholars trace dream yoga back to the Buddha. Namkhai Norbu, a master of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, says it originated in the tantras (especially the Mahamaya Tantra), which are shrouded in mystery and authorship.¹ Guru Rinpoche, the founder of the Nyingma tradition who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet, taught dream yoga as part of his cycle of teachings. In the Kagyu and Gelugpa traditions, dream yoga is taught mostly in the Six Yogas of Naropa, which is perhaps the oldest certain source. Naropa gathered the Six Yogas but was not their author. Lama Thubten Yeshe says, “The Six Yogas of Naropa were not discovered by Naropa. They originated in the teachings of Lord Buddha, and were eventually transmitted to the great eleventh-century Indian yogi Tilopa, who in turn transmitted them to his disciple Naropa.”² But the Indian master Lawapa (“master of the blanket,” also known as Kambala) is the author of dream yoga as presented in the Six Yogas. He passed the teachings on to Jalandhara, who passed them to Krishnacharya,

who taught them to Naropa. Tilopa, who is the founder of the Kagyu tradition, attributes dream yoga specifically to Lawapa.

My study of dream and sleep yoga comes from all these lineages (and others as well), but my practice of dream and sleep yoga is mostly from the Six Yogas of Naropa. Four of the Six Yogas will be central to our journey in this book: illusory form yoga, dream yoga, sleep yoga, and *bardo* yoga. The other two yogas are *chandali* (inner heat) yoga and *phowa* (ejection of consciousness) yoga, which are beyond the scope of this book.

We tend to think of yoga as physical, stretching the body into various postures, but there are also mental yogas that work to stretch the mind. As a mental yoga, dream yoga may leave stretch marks on your mind. But stretching, at any level, is good for growth. Just as physical yoga makes your body more flexible, dream yoga makes your mind more flexible: that is, adaptable, pliable, malleable, supple, accommodating, compliant, amenable—and open. Who wouldn't want a mind like this? Once a mind is open and pliable, you can wrap it around all sorts of new experiences.

With dream yoga, instead of using your mind as an entertainment center, you turn it into a laboratory. You experiment with dream meditations and study your mind using the medium of dreams. At this point you become a “spiritual oneironaut.” Oneirology is the study of dreams, and oneironauts (pronounced “oh-NIGH-ro-nots”) are those who navigate the dream world. Just like astronauts explore the outer space of the cosmos, oneironauts explore the inner space of the mind.

While dream yoga originated as a Buddhist practice, the Dalai Lama says, “It is possible [to practice dream yoga] without a great deal of preparation. Dream yoga could be practiced by non-Buddhists as well as Buddhists. If a Buddhist practices dream yoga, he or she brings a special motivation and purpose to it. In the Buddhist context the practice is aimed at the realization of emptiness [the nature of reality]. But the same practice could be done by non-Buddhists.”³ Emptiness is a core doctrine in Buddhism, and a central theme of our journey. It is also one of the most misunderstood concepts in all of Buddhism. We will return to the concept of emptiness frequently in this book and gradually unpack it.

Taking this practice further, dream yoga can develop into “sleep yoga,” an advanced meditation in which awareness spreads not only into dreams but into deep dreamless sleep. Staying awake during dreamless sleep is an age-old practice in Tibetan Buddhism. With sleep yoga, your body goes into sleep mode, but your mind stays awake. You drop *consciously* into the very core of your being, the most subtle formless awareness—into who you truly are.

If you want to go even further, there’s one final destination of the night. Dream yoga and sleep yoga can develop into “bardo yoga,” the famous Tibetan practices that use the darkness of the night to prepare for the darkness of death. “Bardo” is a Tibetan word that means “gap, interval, transitional state, or in between,” and in this case it refers to the gap between lives. If you believe in rebirth and want to know what to do after you die, bardo yoga is for you. On one level, all of dream yoga and sleep yoga is a preparation for death.

Lucid dreaming, dream yoga, sleep yoga, and bardo yoga are the evolution of the “dark practices” that comprise this book. Illusory form yoga is their daytime counterpart. These practices are designed to bring light into some of the deepest and darkest aspects of your being. In this book we’ll focus mostly on lucid dreaming and dream yoga (including the daytime practice of illusory form), with some discussion of sleep yoga and a brief survey of bardo yoga for those who are interested in these more advanced practices. An entirely new world of “nightlife” awaits you in the dark, and with the techniques presented here, you will have everything you need to safely explore this deep inner space.

While I’ve never seen anyone get into trouble with dream yoga, as with any discipline it may not be for everyone. People with dissociation or depersonalization tendencies should consult with a mental health professional before undertaking lucid dreaming or dream yoga. Those with psychotic predispositions, or anyone suffering from a loss of a stable sense of reality, could potentially worsen those dissociative states of mind. As with any meditation, it’s always good to check your motivation. If you’re looking to escape from reality, the nighttime meditations are probably not for you.⁴

So who is this book for? It’s for anyone interested in the thrill of waking up in their dreams, and having the time of their life in the

privacy of their own mind. It's for anyone wanting to make better use of the twenty-four hours of each day, and for those wondering what happens when they sleep and dream. It's for intrepid pioneers interested in exploring the frontiers of consciousness, and the nature of mind and reality. It's for anyone interested in psychological and spiritual development, those who want to learn about the creative powers of the mind, and those who want to prepare for death. Finally, it's for those drawn to Buddhist practice, and interested in waking up in the spiritual sense.

This may seem ambitious. But remember that if you live to be ninety years old, you've spent thirty of those years sleeping, and entered the dream world around half a million times. That's a lot of time in a state of consciousness you know very little about. Don't you want to change that? Think about how much you could learn in "night school" if you had even a few of those thirty extra years.

How to Read This Book

While this book shows you how to have lucid dreams and what to do with them, it is designed to go deeper. Many fine books (listed in the suggested reading list) are available to introduce you to the world of lucid dreaming. This book is written to show you how vast and profound this world truly is, and how far it can take you. It's more of a philosophical and spiritual journey into the practices of the night, geared to support the practices themselves and the experiences that unfold from them. If you want to limit your journey to the wonders of lucid dreaming alone, you will learn how to do that. But the heart of this book is to show you that dreams can be used to remove suffering and achieve lasting happiness, which is one way to define enlightenment.

This book is therefore about waking up from the delusion that results in samsara, which is the conventional world filled with dissatisfaction and suffering (and set in contrast to nirvana, or enlightenment). As the political commentator Bill Maher says, "Anytime there's mass delusion, bad things follow." This comment applies to the full spectrum of delusion, from cults all the way down to delusions about the nature of reality. As we will see, we are all

unwitting members of the cult of materialism, the mass delusion that things are fundamentally solid, lasting, and independent, the central characteristics of samsara. Our mission in this book is to point out this delusion, a fallacy that Buddhism defines as being asleep to the true nature of things, and to wake up from it. And anytime there's mass awakening or truth, good things follow.

While lucid dreaming is more of a Western phenomenon, dream yoga, sleep yoga, and bardo yoga come mostly from Tibetan Buddhism. Our journey will unite both worlds, the best of the East and West. The Indian philosopher Mahadevan said that the main difference between Eastern and Western philosophy is that the West develops its view of reality from a single state of consciousness (the waking state), while the East draws from all states of consciousness, including that of dream and sleep. It's more comprehensive.

The Tibetans have been exploring these states of consciousness for over a thousand years, with the explicit intent of using sleeping and dreaming as ways to understand life and death. This isn't merely philosophical understanding, but knowledge that is designed to remove suffering. So while dream yoga and sleep yoga (let alone bardo yoga) can seem esoteric and otherworldly, they have extremely practical applications for how to live.

Because the spectrum of nighttime practices, ranging from lucid dreaming all the way to bardo yoga, covers such a wide range of experiences, this book takes a broad-spectrum approach. This is in line with several themes that structure this book: the three levels of mind, as discussed in chapters 2, 9, and 10, and the three levels of body, as discussed in chapters 5 and 10. These three levels go from gross to subtle, outer to inner, the familiar to the unfamiliar. This threefold approach is inherent throughout the corpus of Buddhist teachings, which themselves are presented via the Three Yanas and the Three Turnings.⁵

The following material will therefore go from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the exoteric to the esoteric, from easy to more difficult. For example, most people are familiar with the psyche and the outer body (which here will be treated as the first levels of mind and body), so this material is straightforward. However, most people are not familiar with the concepts of the "clear-light mind" and the

“very subtle body” (here discussed as the third levels of mind and body), so this material may be more alien.

This book is like a tour into your innermost self. As many guide-books say, we’re going to leave familiar territory and journey into foreign lands. It takes an intrepid spirit to leave the comfortable and familiar and travel into the unknown, but as any seasoned world traveler knows, the moments of hassle and discomfort are worth it. You will return from this inner journey, just as you would any outer sojourn, a better and more worldly person. You will become infinitely more cosmopolitan because you will connect not just to the people you might meet in places like Istanbul or Delhi (if you were to venture out into the world), but to all people everywhere as you venture into a shared inner domain.

This inner journey may take you temporarily out of the comfort zone of your familiar home in the gross mind and outer body, but it will eventually deliver you to your true home in the center of yourself, and the bed of mind that you share with all sentient beings. Then you might arise from this bed and come back from this inner journey to re-inhabit your outer forms, and your everyday life, with the newfound treasures you have discovered within. And perhaps, just like the masters of old, you will then offer these riches to others and invite them to do the same.

While this book generally progresses from gross to subtle, and familiar to unfamiliar, there are early sections that may stretch you, and conversely there is material toward the end where you can relax. You can either read these challenging sections, or simply skip them and go on to easier information. Many of these sections begin by alerting the reader about challenges to come, but others glide into deeper material without such a preface.

I’ve tried to make this book as accessible as possible, sprinkling in personal stories and anecdotes, injecting supporting quotes, and constantly showing how these sometimes esoteric teachings apply to every moment of our lives. I endeavor to pay homage to the depth of this material while providing the occasional oasis of ease. Like any good yoga, this book will stretch and then relax. And as with physical yoga, the best way to expand and grow is to feel the stretch, and let it work on you as you gently lean into it.

As a note to encourage the reader, all the chapters prior to actual dream yoga practice (chapter 14) are designed to set the stage for dream yoga. In Buddhism, it is often taught that the preliminaries are more important than the main practice. If you plow a field, remove the weeds, fertilize it properly, and do so during the correct season, the seeds you plant will flourish. If you don't, it's like dropping seeds on untilled ground in the dead of winter. Dream yoga is subtle. Without working the field of your mind in advance, it may not take root.

Finally, you will find many endnotes to further enrich the material. With these endnotes I give myself the license to write with freedom. You can refer to them during a first reading, skip them entirely, or attend to them in a second reading of the book. I'll often read the endnotes of a book collectively when I finish reading each chapter. My hope is that they will augment the main text without distracting you.

We'll start discussing the many benefits of the nighttime practices right away, and summarize them in chapter 19. If you just can't wait, or want to know why you should bother with these nocturnal meditations, then jump ahead and read chapter 19 now. The numerous benefits may surprise you.

Three Wisdom Tools

To take this journey inward, we're going to engage the three *prajnas*, or "wisdom tools," of hearing, contemplating, and meditating.⁶ Hearing, or reading, about something leads to contemplating upon it, which leads to meditating on it. By reading and thinking about this material, you will be engaging the first two wisdom tools. In our voyage this is like filling the gas tank, getting a good map, and stocking up on all the necessities for a big trip. But the journey truly begins when you start to meditate, when you actually turn the ignition on and engage the yogas that take you within. This is when you'll replace the map with the territory, savor the uniqueness of this trip, and make your own discoveries as you travel into the core of your being.

The three wisdom tools are the way we ingest, digest, and metabolize the teachings until they literally become us. If we remain at the

level of hearing and contemplating alone, we'll remain at the level of mere philosophy. The teachings may tickle your intellect or entertain you, but they won't fundamentally change you.

Once you chew on the material and bring it into your system through the embodied practice of meditation, the teachings can transform you because this is when you *feel* them. Otherwise the material stays safely and aseptically tucked away in your head. The three wisdom tools take information from your head and deliver it down into your heart and guts. This is where you really feel things, and where you're truly fed. This is where you transform cerebral data into somatic fiber.

We're going to try to uproot the basis of samsara, which involves transcending fear. And as the religious scholar Reza Aslan says, "Fear is impervious to data." You're not going to get at it by hearing, or even contemplating. To transform fear, you have to work at the level of feeling, which is where you touch what you're trying to transform—exactly what meditation is designed to do.

When you're around someone who has done this inner work, and has fully incorporated the teachings with deep meditation, *you* can feel it. You can tell that this is a person who practices what they preach and is someone you can trust. For me, this has always been a guide for identifying an authentic teacher. Is what they say more than just talk? Do they embody their teachings? Do they live their truth? I have had the good fortune of being around some of the most intelligent people on this planet, from famous scientists to world-renowned philosophers. I find them infinitely fascinating. But the ones who really touch me, who truly move me, who inspire me to change, are the most meditative people on this planet.

It is through the three wisdom tools that knowledge is transformed into wisdom. So the real point of this book is meditation, or yoga, the final instrument of wisdom. Take these teachings and yoke them to your life through the meditations presented in the following pages.

The Tibetan word for "meditation" is *gom*, which means "to become familiar with." It is through meditation that you will become familiar with previously unfamiliar inner states of mind and body.⁷ It is with meditation that you take this miraculous tour into the cosmos

within. So while there is plenty in this book to feed the casual tourist, the book comes to life when you make the journey for yourself. As the Buddha himself said of his teachings (but in the language of today), “Don’t take my word on it. Find out for yourself.”