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# THE FIELD OF DREAMS



## Dreams and Meditation

*“How do you know, when you die, if your life has been successful?  
From the dreams.”*

—TENZIN WENGEL RINPOCHE

What kinship does dreamwork have with spiritual practices? This question has long intrigued me. I approach it not from the vantage point of any particular spiritual tradition, but from a belief that the process of reflecting upon one's dreams, done with integrity and good intent, may be, by itself, a meditative endeavor. In this column, I will give examples of dreams that lent themselves to inclusion in a meditation practice; and I will describe the practice of dream meditation that I have developed over the years. My hope is to encourage more crossover on both sides: that those with a committed meditation practice will see how dreams occasionally could be incorporated into it; and those who do dreamwork might look upon it as a natural spiritual practice.

More and more people these days, especially in major urban areas, are receiving some type of meditation instruction or training. The more common version is secular meditation, done to clear one's mind, reduce anxiety, and contribute to one's general

well being. Another version is contemplative meditation, done with a spiritual purpose. Contemplative practices typically involve opening an interior space and holding one's attention on that space for some time. What is permitted or encouraged to come into that space, if anything, varies from tradition to tradition, but is usually given by the teacher or the teachings. It might be a koan, a mantra, or a segment of a sacred text or painting such as a tanka.

There are established dream meditation practices within Sufi and Tibetan Buddhist, Bon, and Tantra traditions, and most of them entail carefully outlined procedures based on longstanding doctrines and beliefs about the nature of reality and of the spirit world. Tibetan dream practice, for instance, distinguishes between karmic dreams, which have to do with individual traits and tendencies carried over from lifetime to lifetime; and clarity dreams, which entail spiritual perceptions of an objective nature. These categories correspond roughly to Jung's distinction between the per-

sonal unconscious and the objective or transpersonal psyche.

My proposal is simply that since dreams can contain spiritual guidance specifically relevant to the individual dreamer as well as spiritual experience of a more general nature, dreams and dream images could be the focus of a contemplative meditation practice. I will cite two examples where this was done.

The first example comes from a woman in her early sixties who has been facing the challenges of later midlife: how to reconfigure a career, whether to remain in a long-time marriage, how to rebound from the loss of parents. The sheer quantity of upheaval was daunting, and left her often anxious. One week, she arrived at the dream group with this:

*I am sitting in a brown leather chair in the wood-paneled den of a lovely home. It's an evocative room with Julia Morgan-like qualities. I'm reading the Sunday New York Times, much as my late father used to. In the background, I can hear the voices of P. and his father, murmuring in conversation. This adds to the feeling of comfort pervading the dream.*

We learned that P. had been a love of hers in her twenties and that his father had left marriage at midlife and later left a position in business in order to go into the field of education, which he found more meaningful. The presence of a youthful love in the dream brings a spirit of renewal at what can seem a stage of decline in life; and the presence of his father, whom she regarded highly, introduces a figure with whom she could now converse about similar changes imminent in her own life. The dream puts her in the place of her father, in his chair, as if to imply that it is now her turn to be the elder. I felt the dream was a gift, showing the way to more inner solidity. By integrating masculine qualities she has admired, she may be able to revitalize her place in life.

The dream has three elements essential for a passage through a major life transition: valued companions; containment in a meaningful place; and a central fire to provide the energy for transformation. Because of its unique nature, I felt the dream could be brought into the woman's meditation practice in a direct way: she could picture herself again in that warm den, sitting comfortably, knowing support is nearby. At the very least, this could help reduce

her level of anxiety and provide some containment during the upheaval. Beyond that, meditating on this dream scene might allow the background murmuring to become more audible or, perhaps, the print on the page more legible. Messages from the guiding core of our being are frequently presented to us via the voice of a respected elder or the words of an important book or publication.

She did heed my suggestion to bring this dream into her regular meditation, and reported feeling an increased sense of resilience and solidity; in the weeks that followed, she spontaneously took significant steps toward detaching from past situations that no longer served and toward new connections and ventures for her future.

The next example comes from a woman trained as an architect, with longstanding interests in urban planning and sustainable living. At midlife, she was reevaluating her career in terms of whether it truly stemmed from her soul or contributed meaningfully to society. One night, she was awakened at four AM by this:

*I am looking at a baby, a special being that shimmers in a translucent way, in a bluish-green color that is not opaque but more like polished glass. It mouths the words, "What do you want from me?" In reply, I say, "What do you want from me?"*

She was very moved by the numinosity of this unusual being and soon recognized that it was not the inner child in the personal sense but an image of the divine child. This

is the aspect of the Self that brings renewal and rebirth. The dream introduces a dialogue between this numinous figure and the dreamer. A parallel question is posed on both sides: what does each want from the other? I suggest that a question of this sort is not meant to elicit an easy answer but to initiate a process of reflection; in this way, the dream itself provides a koan. Several years after the dream experience took place, the woman still retained a vivid image of the divine creature. She had, in fact, been meditating on the dream image and its evocative question.

These two examples illustrate how certain special dreams or dream images can be brought into one's meditation at special times in life. It is true that at turning points or moments of particular challenge or crisis, memorable dreams often occur; and these may have a potent numinosity or increased energy about them that makes them both easy to remember and to engage with. But I don't want to leave the impression that incorporating a dream scene into one's meditation would be a rare, special, or occasional thing. It can be done on a regular basis.

While in graduate school in my twenties, I received basic meditation training as part of the psychology curriculum, as well as exposure to guided imagery work, hypnosis, and psychosynthesis; later I had training in active imagination and shamanic journeying. From the time I began recording dreams regularly, in my late twenties, religious imagery appeared in them with moderate frequency; it was not as-

sociated with any single tradition, but drew from many. In retrospect, this was in keeping with the diversity of practices becoming available at the time.

Like many people in our modern world, I haven't always given adequate attention to the interior life. For many years, I would be awakened in the middle of the night, around 3 or 4 AM, into what sometimes seemed like a meditative state, and sometimes merely a state of worry about what was to happen that day or week. At one point, I dreamed that someone threw a set of keys at me, which hit the back of my head, and smarted. Doing active imagination with this scene, I realized that if I would provide more time for quiet reflection and meditation during waking hours, "it" would not have to come at night to speak with me. The "key" was to open that space on a regular basis.

I was never fond of meditating on a fixed schedule or keeping an entirely clear, i.e., blank, mind. I did not have trouble quieting my ordinary mind, and what then passed through was meaningful to me. This might include fresh views on problematic interactions, ideas for creative projects, insights into bodily symptoms, and, of course, reflections on dream images. I practiced this form of contemplative meditation for many years, though I did not necessarily refer to it as a formal practice. In the 1990s, I had monthly consultations with the Jungian analyst Joseph Henderson, author of *Thresholds of Initiation* and *Wisdom of the Serpent*, who had worked with Jung and was

one of the most senior Jungians in the country. One day, I told him, somewhat casually, that I had been doing active imagination with my dreams on a regular basis for a long time and I wondered if he considered that a meditation practice. Joe laughed his wonderful hearty laugh and said, "Of course!"

I now allow thirty to forty-five minutes in the morning for a period of meditation. I do this before rising, for I've found that if I lay very still as I awaken and enter into a receptive state, dreams and other types of images will come into the vestibule. Into this open space may also come simple guidance for events of the coming day as well as associations to previous dreams. I also try to set aside an hour in the late afternoon for a brief meditation and nap; this seems to renew me for the evening and also has improved my health. This, of course, is not a prescription for any one else's meditation program; it is merely a description of the one that seems to suit me. It's a form that has emerged gradually over time, not a rigid program I feel obligated to follow.

Many cultures throughout history have observed that dreaming is one of the principal portals to the spirit world, however they conceive of that. For those of us in whom that portal is open, dreams naturally blend with meditation. I encourage you to make your own experiment with dreams and meditating, and see how they may creatively blend.

