How to experience lucid dreaming

“The Tibetan Buddhists who have been practising the yoga of the dream state for 1000 years claim that you can change dream content in any imaginable way: that if it’s single you can make it multiple, if it’s hot you can make it cold, small, large and so on. They believe that it’s possible to changeit all in any way you like.”

– Dr Stephen LaBerge, expert on Lucid dreaming

One of the greatest mysteries of the mind is dreaming. Why do we dream? No-one really knows. There are theories, such as that it keeps us entertained while the body rests, or that it helps us form new memories. Whereas current theories as to why we even sleep include the idea that we sleep to conserve energy, or that it’s needed in order to restore the metabolic balance of the brain. Both these theories are backed up by the fact that our body temperature naturally drops during the night (hence lowering our metabolic rate and conserving energy; see chapter two) and that there are repeatable differences in our brain wave activity when we are deprived of sleep. In fact, this is similar (if less extreme) to when mammals go into hibernation through the winter.

Alternatively, some (including the Nobel Prize winner Francis Crick) have suggested that we sleep in order to make sense of information gained during the day and to clear out unnecessary memories from the brain. Support for this theory comes from the fact that we all dream during the night, possibly a way for the brain to process and integrate information. Research has also shown that when we learn a new skill we do not display any increase in performance ability until we have had at least eight hours of sleep. The truth may be that we have evolved to sleep for all these reasons. Whatever the real

reason for sleep, it appears to be an essential function that almost all animals engage in (although only mammals engage in the REM sleep which is closely associated with dreaming).

Another mystery of dreaming is this: when we are dreaming our brain-wave activity is the same as when we are awake, yet we don't seem to realise that we are dreaming. All sorts of strange things may happen in our dreams – we may fly, defying gravity, we may hold conversations with famous people or deceased relatives; in short, you can explore the wonders of your own imagination as though they were real. Yet because we never realise we are dreaming, we never fully enjoy the wonders of our dreams, and we never fully explore the range of possibilities they offer us. However, have you ever had the experience of 'waking up' inside your dream and realising that you are dreaming? This is called a 'lucid dream' (a term coined by the early 20th Century Dutch doctor Frederik Van Eeden), and can be an amazing experience.

The first written record of lucid dreaming dates back to the 5th century in a letter written by St. Augustine of Hippo from 415 A.D. The first person to write that anyone can learn to lucid dream was the Frenchscholar the marquis Léon d'Hervey de Saint-Denys (1822-1892) in his book 'Dreams and how to guide them' (1867).

The Senoi people of Malaysia were reported by one researcher to use lucid dreaming extensively to improve happiness and their general mental health. However, later researchers were unable to confirm this.

For over a millennia, the Tibetan Buddhists have used lucid dreaming as part of their path to enlightenment. They believe that the state of the lucid dream mirrors the illusory nature of reality and contemplating it can help us understand this.

The following instructions are taken from "Doctrine of the Dream State" from Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines

translated by Evans-Wentz:

“At the outset, in the process of realizing [the dream] to be maya, abandon all feeling of fear;

And, if the dream be of fire, transform the fire into water, the antidote of fire.

And if the dream be of minute objects, transform them into large objects;

Or if the dream be of large objects, transform them into small objects:

Thereby one comprehendeth the nature of dimensions.

And if the dream be of a single thing, transform it into many things;

Or if the dream be of many things, transform them into a single thing…”

By this process the practitioner of the Tibetan dream yoga learns that the physical properties of objects in dreams are entirely under the control of the dreamer’s mind and willpower.

I can still remember quite clearly the first time I had a lucid dream, such was its intensity. In my dream I was running through a forest, I paused in a clearing, then suddenly I realised I was in a dream, and at that moment everything became extremely vivid and bright. The colours of the forest around me became hyper-luminous and my vision was noticeably sharper. It was like switching from an old 1970s TV set to a 21stcentury state-of-the-art high definition LCD screen. Of course, at that moment I had perfect vision as

I wasn’t even using my eyes! I was seeing directly within my own mind. Yet I wasn’t using my eyes in the dream before I became lucid either. It must have been something about suddenly becoming conscious of the reality of my state that heightened my senses.

And what a feeling of exhilaration it is to ‘go lucid’ within a dream! If you’ve never experienced it it is difficult to convey what a rush of excitement and feeling of freedom accompanies the realisation. It’s also deeply weird to feel like you are standing in the middle of a beautiful forest, to feel your body, to feel the ground beneath your feet and the air moving past your ears, yet to know that in reality your body is actually in bed asleep. It raises all kinds of questions about the nature of what is ‘real’. It reminds us that reality is ultimately a construct within our mind. Yes, that construct is usually linked very closely to the sensory inputs from the ‘solid’ world around us (which actually isn’t really solid, but that’s another issue!). But Part of the feeling of freedom is due to the realisation that one need not have any physical fear. Nothing can harm you in a dream. You can jump off a cliff, hit a lion on the nose (if you have the desire to!), or stand in front of a train and none of these things can harm you. The second aspect of the freedom of a lucid dream is the realisation that you can do the impossible, things that are just not possible in the real world such as flying or speaking to a deceased relative. The only limits are those of your own imagination, not those of the laws of physics!

Just think of some of the potentials for lucid dreaming. Someone who has lost the use of their legs could once again consciously experience the freedom of being able to walk and run in their dreams. You could use your dreams to access the wealth of information stored in your unconscious. Psychologists know that it’s possible to absorb way more information than we are consciously able to recall. Perhaps

almost everything you've ever seen or heard is locked away in your unconscious memory banks, waiting to be rediscovered. There are also potentials for therapeutic exercises, such as saying goodbye to a deceased loved one, or confronting phobias. Likewise, a lucid dream could be used to confront regular nightmares: once the power of our conscious mind is activated we realise that we no longer need to fear the things that plague us in our nightmares. You could also use lucid dreaming as a way to practice or rehearse things such as talking in front of an audience, or going for a job interview. Because it is under the control of your own imagination, and you are in a fearless state, you can use the dream to practice the event going well, helping to make you feel more confident and in control.

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I'm afraid that learning this skill is not something you can achieve in 5 minutes. It's going to take some time and effort on your part. So, the more you read on the subject, the longer you will keep your interest up. We've all experienced what I call the 'Mr Toad' effect. Mr Toad was the character in the Wind in the Willows children's stories who was always enthusiastically jumping in to some new hobby, only to burn-out on it pretty quickly and then becoming enthused about something new. I believe most people approach lucid dreaming in this way: becoming very excited about it at first, but then soon forgetting about it when they don't get instant results.

The first stage towards lucid dreaming is simply to start becoming more aware of your dreams. We are usually so unaware of our dreams that many people believe that they don't dream at all. Yet they do. They just don't remember them. Often as soon as we wake up in the morning, our memory of that night's dreams evaporates like the morning mist under the warmth of the rising sun.

The key to keeping hold of your memories for the night's

dreams is to make it your first thought when you wake up: what have I been dreaming? Do this before you open your eyes, or even before you move. As soon as you start moving around and focusing on the outside world, your memories of your dreams will begin to fade.

It's a curious thing that there is a barrier in our conscious awareness between our waking mind and our sleeping mind. As dreaming is still such a mystery (psychologists still have no proven explanation of why we dream) it's anyone's guess as to why this is. Equally, why should we not be able to lucid dream naturally with ease? Why should we always remain unaware within a dream that we are dreaming. I believe the answer is that the brain doesn't want us to wake up, it wants us to remain focused inwards. One of the initial problems with your early lucid dreams will be that you become so excited that you wake up. Sometimes just thinking about your sleeping body, and the room you are sleeping in is enough to switch on your senses and shift your focus away from the dream and back to the outside world. You may have experienced this just as you are waking up in the morning. As soon as you realise that you are waking up, there can come a point when you switch your focus to your senses and suddenly your hearing, for example, seems to be flicked on and you can hear what's going on in your immediate environment. If everyone was naturally born with the ability to lucid dream, there is a good probability that during our first few years of intelligent consciousness we would keep waking up constantly, as we realised we were dreaming.

So it can take some effort of concentration to keep focused within the dream once you 'get lucid'.

There is also the fact that if we were born with the ability to lucid dream naturally, many people would become totally confused about the difference between their waking reality and their dreams! This was obviously not a good thing for our ancestors. For example, if you have a Saber-toothed tiger

charging at you, standing around thinking to yourself ‘Don’t worry, it’s only a dream!’ is not the best response!

When you first wake up, try to make remembering your dreams your first thought of the day. Do this before you move an inch, before you open your eyes, and before you focus your senses on the outside world. Run through in your mind as many details of that night’s dreams as you can. Then have a notebook and pencil ready by the side of your bed to jot down as many of these details as you possibly can. Just write them all down as quickly as possible, don’t worry about the neatness of your writing, you can always go back afterwards and edit what you’ve written. Just get it all down, out of your head and onto paper.

Pre-lucid dreaming:

Before you experience your first proper lucid dream you will probably experience what I call a ‘pre-lucid’ dream. What is this? Well there are two types.

Firstly, you may have a dream in which you manage to gain control of what is happening, but don’t actually become fully conscious that it’s a dream. I’ve had many dreams like this concerning flying. I become aware in the dream that I can fly, and start to deliberately do it – which can be an exhilarating experience in itself – but I wasn’t actually thinking to myself ‘hey, this is a dream’.

The second type is where you might realise briefly that you are dreaming, or question the logic of what is happening in the dream, but you never allow the realisation to take hold, and you soon go back to the dream state again. This type can take the form of thinking to yourself about something in the dream: “wow, that’s kinda weird!” but not actually then making the ‘ah-ha!’ connection that you are dreaming it.

Nevertheless, even though these are not a full lucid dream, pre-lucid dreams are a step in the right direction. But the

trick is to get both of these effects working *at the same time*:

To become both aware that it is a dream AND take control of it.

It's also worth mentioning that not all lucid dreams (or ordinary dreams for that matter) are of equal quality. Some will be hyper-realistic, in fact can be *more* realistic than everyday life (for example, the clarity and vividness of your vision in such a lucid dream can be better than in your waking life). However, some dreams are of lesser quality, they look more vague, and maybe are even kind of black-and-white or 'washed out' rather than in vivid colour. Equally, in some lucid dreams you can gain an amazing amount of control, willing yourself to meet certain people, travel to certain places, and basically experience anything you want to. Yet in other lucid dreams you may struggle to control events. Your control on what is happening may be more clumsy, and after a while may slip away completely and you slip back into the ordinary dream-state, forgetting that you are dreaming. I only mention these points so that you will not feel disappointed if your lucid dreams are not spectacular to begin with. They can be, so keep going until you experience one!

So, your first task if you wish to learn to lucid dream is to get into the habit of remembering your dreams and writing them down. During the next week I want you to do this each morning.

Two tips to help you:

1. Get a nice notebook, one with a design or style you really like. This will cause you to value it more, and hence be more keen to use it.
2. Don't panic if you forget to remember and write your dreams down for one or two days. Just relax, remind yourself that you have plenty of time to accomplish this, and then resolve to begin again the next day