

"The Antecedents of the Experience of Light in Dreams"¹

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Since the beginning of my work with dreams, I have maintained a special interest in the ecstatic experience of light in the dream state. While the white light is the predominant, if not exclusive visual element in such experiences, the ecstatic feeling, perceived healing, and sense of holy presence that accompany the vision of light puts the experience in a category all by itself, as the undisputed centerpiece of the mystic's experience of God. Jung's words capture the universal significance of the vision of light. He says,

The phenomenon itself, that is, the vision of light, is an experience common to many mystics, and one that is undoubtedly of the greatest significance, because in all times and places it appears at the unconditional thing, which unites in itself the greatest energy and the profoundest meaning.²

Not surprisingly, the experience of light represents an especially elusive phenomenon, both from the standpoint of the one who seeks it, or seeks it again, and from the perspective of one who wishes to understand what precedes or gives rise to it. Of course, we have the literature of the mystics, both East and West, who have described their moments of ecstasy through their own metaphors, and within their own systems of philosophy and faith, thereby enriching their accounts with the uniquely personal context of their spiritual journey. However, such accounts reflect the particular orientation of the recipients in such a way that may effectively obscure the state of the mind and of the heart that typically precedes what the Tibetan Buddhists refer to as "the dawning of the clear light."

I propose to you that we can learn more about what accounts for this core mystical experience by examining, in particular, dreams which culminate in the experience of light. By analyzing the antecedent images, dreamer self-awareness and cognition, and dreamer-dream interactional dynamics, we might ascertain the processes that are at work without depending as much on the retrospective analyses of the recipients, or imposing constructs that subtly appropriate the experience into convenient theories. Out of such a study one might be able to articulate an approach to dream work and spiritual practice which would make previously inaccessible experiences more available to a wider population. Before we examine a few light experiences in the dream state, and their antecedents, let me share with you a so-called failure dream that sets that stage for appreciating the dreams that follow, and the hypothesis that will emerge in the process.

¹ presented at the 23rd annual conference of the International Association for the Study of Dreams

² Wilhelm, R. 1962. *The secret of the golden flower*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.

I become lucid and decide to search for the white light. I begin to see it here, and then there, as it seems to shine through the form of every ordinary object around me. I see a bicycle shining, and concentrate on the shimmer in hopes that it will expand into a full-blown experience of radiance. However, as soon as I do this, the shimmering disappears, and the bicycle becomes "just itself" again. I am frustrated when I notice a woman approaching. She walks up and says, "You must first learn to love the form before you can see the light within it."

With a paucity of words, the woman asserts that the dreamer must love the world of form—the realm of metes and bounds—in order to experience the uniting essence of everything. It suggests that if one wishes to experience the highest states of ecstasy in the dream state, one would do well to respect the particular imagery that arises in the dream state, regardless of its outward appearance. Certainly, lucid dreamers have considerable freedom over the forms that arise in their dreams, and in many instances can modify them or avoid them at will, and so an attitude of embracing the specific form of the dream may seem to curtail unnecessarily the newfound creativity and freedom of the lucid dreamer. If the dream is, as some say, a self-created reality, then why subordinate the creator to the creation?

There are two threads—transcendence and immanence—running through every spiritual tradition. The path of transcendence promises enlightenment through an elevated, unifying perspective, whereas the path of immanence offers enrichment through a complete, wholehearted involvement in the diversity of here-and-now events and relationships. Along these lines, I once had a dream that a woman and I were both seeking heaven. I knew that we had to pursue our singular goal in different ways. I had to embark on a journey through a dark, wooded land, whereas she had to find her way to heaven through deep meditation. To put it simply, she needed spirit, but I needed soul. This balancing act between transcendence and immanence, between spirit and soul, can be found in every spiritual tradition. But instead of digressing into a topic that is much bigger than the time we have, let's examine some dreams in which the dreamer has succeeded in experiencing the interior light to see if this conversation between transcendence and immanence can be discerned.

The following dream of a middle-aged man reveals a remarkable progression of strategies for engaging the form of the dream, each of which resolves the dream conflict with dramatically differing outcomes.

I am alone in a log cabin on a barren plain. The door opens and three figures come inside and stand before me, side by side. They are Dracula, Werewolf, and Frankenstein. At first I am terrified as I recall my childhood fear of these three characters. However, I suddenly realize that I am dreaming and my fear subsides. My first thought is that they are only a dream, and that I can make them go away. So I say, "Get out!" And they disappear immediately.

I begin to think that I didn't do the best thing by having them leave. I think, "Maybe I should have surrounded myself with light instead." So I shout, "Please come back." The door opens, and the three figures enter again and face me. I mentally surround myself with light, and a bright white cloud

appears all around me. I peer through the haze, and can barely make out the three characters standing there quietly.

Again I wonder if I have done the best thing. I think, "Maybe I should invite them into the light." So I say, "Please come into the light." I see them walking toward me, and suddenly the light comes into me. The characters and the cabin disappear in the radiance of my inner experience. I am on fire with love, and remain in an ecstatic state for some time before coming back into consciousness in my bed. The effects of this most exalted experience of my life remained with me for weeks.

In this remarkable experience, the dreamer applies three approaches to the unsettling encounter. The first two reflect common "transcendent" strategies for dealing with threat: banishing the threat from a perspective of the dream's self-created nature, or insulating oneself from the imagery through invoking the protection of higher power. Both remedies seem to work, but neither satisfies the dreamer's sense of the "very best." It is only the third strategy—that of respecting and welcoming the threatening form of the dream—that gives rise to the experience of light.

The second dream is one that was included in my book *Lucid Dreaming: Dawning of clear Light*. It is as follows:

I am the prisoner of the devil, along with a crowd of other people. The devil appears as an ordinary man, who is very powerful, cold and brutish. We are free to walk around, but the understanding is that there is no escape from his power. Even so, a woman and I decide to try to escape while he is distracted. It is night time, and we run across a lighted expanse of lawn toward an area that is not lit by the light. As I run, a voice says to me, "If you go further, you will fall into a well." I stop abruptly, not knowing what to do. Then I see a shadow creep pass me, alerting me to the devil's approach. Feeling powerless, I turn around, drop to the ground, and say, "Lord have mercy!" However, instead of seeing the devil, I see a woman clothed in white, surrounded by light. She walks up, bends down and touches my forehead. Immediately, I am infused with light and ecstasy, and I know that I have been healed. The light pours through me for some time before subsiding as I awaken in bed.

In this dream, the dreamer is also aware of a profound dilemma. He does the normal thing and tries to get away from the threat, but in the process, he becomes aware of another problem created by his flight. The dreamer is caught between two untenable choices with no way out. When he turns, he invokes the protection of higher power, but one can sense that the words are uttered in desperation rather than faith. However, in this state of resignation, the light comes to him through an unexpected source.

These first dreams reveal clear conflicts of which the dreamers become starkly aware. The dreamers do not resolve their respective dilemmas by piercing the illusion of the dream's ultimate reality, but they come to the point where they accept that they must face, and even coexist with, these troublesome influences.

As you may have surmised by now, the thesis that emerges from these experiences and the ones that follow is this: that the recognition and acceptance of an apparently unresolvable internal division can precede the experience of light, which then incorporates the respective viewpoints or paradigms into a greater whole. The dreamer's apparent role in the process does not appear to be one of solving the problem, nor of transcending it: the dreamer's role is to acknowledge and to accept the burden of inner conflict or division. As Jung often said, we must accept the tension of opposing viewpoints to qualify for the healing that only spirit can bring.

Another dream—again, a nonlucid dream—reveals a conflict for which there seems to be no resolution available; that is, until the light appears.

I am with Mike on the streets of a Mexican border town. It is evening, and we run into an attractive woman, who may be a prostitute, but we are not sure. We flirt with her, and make arrangements to get together later that evening. Just at that moment, I notice my father standing nearby. He wears a stern look, as if to express his judgment of me. I am unsure of what to do or to say. At that moment, there is an explosion to the east. I turn and see that an orb of white light has appeared about 100 yards away, hovering above the ground. I look at my father and see that his face is rapt with wonder, and illuminated by the light. We stand together, transfixed by the sight. The orb approaches us, and passes slowly over us. Again, there is an explosion and the orb appears to the east of us again. It is so powerful that it begins to attract everything toward it. I feel the wind becoming so powerful that I lose my footing and rush upward into the light, until there is nothing left of the dream but light and a sense of intense love and fulfillment.

The dreamer is caught in a conflict between competing values. While there is at first no solution whatsoever between these competing ideals, the light appears as an unexpected solution that unites, or supersedes the respective ideals of father and son.

Finally, I'd like to share one last dream with you that commences with a stark view of the dreamer's impoverished condition, but which gives ways to ecstasy and healing.

I am aware that I am terminally ill, and I am with a woman who also will soon die of an incurable disease. We are at a spiritual retreat, and sleeping in open rooms. She and I have beds beside each other, but we do not sleep together. That night, we lie down in our respective beds and fall asleep. In the middle of the night, I am overwhelmed by a white light that comes in intense waves, subsiding briefly between each exquisite pulsation. For a while, there is only light. I receive the light more fully than on many other occasions where I resisted somewhat out of fear or discomfort. I am aware that the light is pouring through me into the sleeping woman beside me, and that we are both being healed of our illnesses. As I surrender completely to the light, a voice says, "Your mortal life is over." Then later, we both awaken, and realize that we have been healed. Further, I know that she and I will remain together for all eternity.

This dreamer comes to the realization that he will soon die. In effect, the dreamer experiences his fate and everyone's else's fate. Like the Russian poet, who begins her poem, "I know the truth, you can forget all other truths," referring to the fact that we all will soon die, the dreamer apprehends the gritty truth of his own ill-fated existence. But in the context of this bleak realization—in the darkness of the night—light comes, as if to say that one must go to the depths of the human predicament before we can rise to a level where we can live free of despair.

We are seeing in these dreams a clear view of what precedes, at least in some cases, the experience of inner light. First of all, a sense of inner division, impoverishment, or disease—for which there is no apparent resolution—sets the stage. Then the dreamer comes to terms, or even accepts, the specific form of one's divided condition. Out of this apparent final realization comes something wholly unexpected—the fusion of differences into a greater whole, signified by the experience of radiance and ecstasy. It is significant, I believe, that the experience of light is not merely one of mental clarity; it is also an experience of deep love and connection, exquisite feeling, and abiding presence. That is to say, the experience is profoundly immanent or soulful, as well as spiritually ineffable and transcendent. While it announces the presence of something higher that is uniquely capable of resolving the inner division, it crosses graciously to the human side of the equation, as well, by intensifying one's experience of love and relationship.

Of course, once a person has learned to accept the form of whatever arises in dreams and waking life; that is, to accept his or her own limitations, and to move comfortably in the harness of life's daily losses and contradictions, then the level of inner conflict will presumably lessen. If so, the experience of the light should arise without as much antecedent conflict. In support of this view, consider a final dream. Recall, if you will, the first dream that I shared with you in which the woman told me that I first needed to love the form in order to experience the light. In the following dream, which took place 30 years later, I finally seem to know this. It was a simple dream.

I am with an unknown man in an outdoor scene, and I abruptly become lucid. I say to my companion, "If you want to see the light, meditate on whatever you see." Following my own advice, I immediately see a children's outdoor swing set. I lie down on the grass and meditate on the image of the swing set. The light comes after a moment's hesitation, obliterating the imagery and leaving me to receive it in gentle pulsating waves of ecstasy.

Perhaps one can never know why some momentous dreams give way to the fullness of light, and some do not, but we can point out to dreamers the profound significance of their willingness to become aware of, and bear the apparently unresolvable conflicts of their lives. Rather than representing a negative indication of growth, the awareness of conflict in the dream can be reframed as a state of awareness which may invite, or culminate in an experience of inner radiance, or may elicit from the dreamer a response that captures the unifying spirit of the light.

In summary, the anecdotal evidence of the aforementioned dreams suggests that when a dreamer is willing to embrace the specific form of the dream—however afflicted it may

appear to be with its inherent duality, conflict, and limitation—the dreamer may experience the fullness of light. This dark, troubled journey contrasts with the view what we need to do is to become lucid and acknowledge the self-created nature of the dream. The path of transcendence has its place, but the project we too easily overlook is becoming more aware of the complex division within us—the apparently irreconcilable aspects of impulse, habit, and character that seem to prevent us from becoming the person we aspire to be, and which often appear in our dreams as fully autonomous characters with their own agendas. And yet, the courage to acknowledge and accept the apparent irreconcilability of our complex inner condition may be the price of admission into the mystic's ecstatic vision. In the words of Yeats, "Nothing can be sole or whole that has not first been rent." The apparent paradox in all of this is that by becoming starkly aware of our internal conflicts, and suffering the burden that this awareness brings us, the experience of light—perhaps the most lofty and elusive experience conceivable—may become more available to us than ever before.