

## DREAMS – PART 2

# *What You Cannot Do in a Lucid Dream*

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A 'typical' dream is experienced automatically, with little conscious awareness that the events are constructions of the mind. Things seem to happen to us in the dream and we generally do not think about the dream events while they are occurring. In a study in North America, however, it was found that approximately 10 per cent of the population reported having at least once a month a quite different type of dream experience — a 'lucid dream'. In 1913 van Eeden coined the term 'lucid dreaming' to describe dreams in which one has an 'an awareness of dreaming while dreaming'. This awareness is often accompanied by the ability to control or regulate the dream body or the dream environment. In one of van Eeden's lucid dreams he dreamt he was lying on his front in his garden, before the windows of his study. He saw the eyes of his dog through the glass pane, yet at the same time knew he was dreaming. As

he awoke, van Eeden was able to feel the transition from lying on his front to lying on his back in bed.

Lucid dreaming has a number of potential applications, such as creative problem solving, mental rehearsal, and alleviating the stress of nightmares. For example, nightmare sufferers can learn to recognise that they are in a nightmare, confront the feared events and alter their emotional reactions. Much of the research on lucid dreaming has emphasised its positive potential and seemingly unlimited possibilities. This article looks instead at the limitations one may experience during lucid dreams.

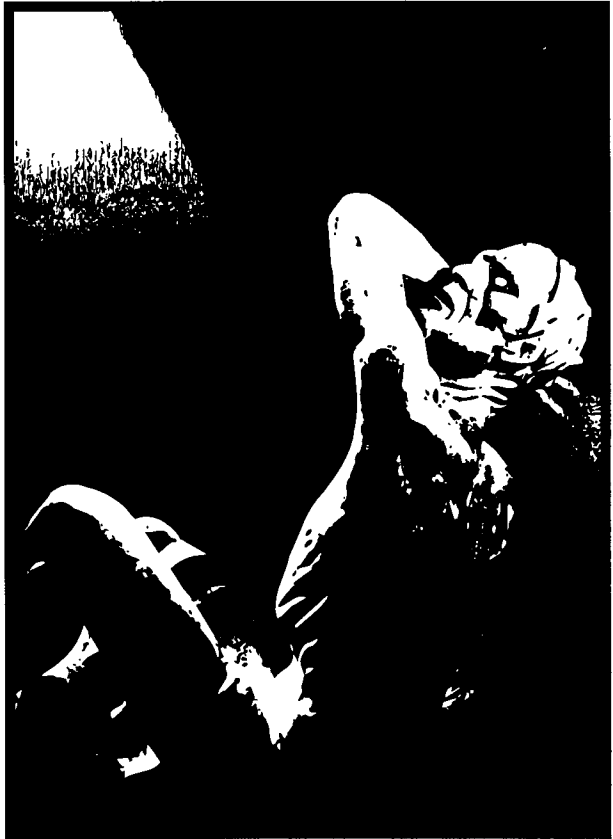
One such limitation is the 'light switch phenomenon', in which one first dreams of being in the dark and then attempts to turn on a light. Alan and others have observed an interesting 'inability' in that it is difficult to produce sudden illumination in a lucid dream, although the

*This article is based on a discussion during the 1994 annual conference of the Association for the Study of Dreams (see S&S, May 1995). Tracey Kahan is a lecturer in psychology, whose work aims to show that many of the apparent deficiencies evidenced during ordinary dreams also occur during our waking experience. Alan Worsley has made an extensive personal exploration of lucid dreaming. Mark Blagrove is a lecturer in psychology whose interests are the cognitive deficiencies we have during ordinary, non-lucid dreams.*

gradual illumination of a dim light is possible. Apparently some sudden effects are easier to produce in lucid dreams than others. For example, the colour of an entire scene can be quickly altered by holding up a coloured filter. In one dream, Alan had to search for something coloured and transparent and found a red sweet-wrapper. In another he experimented with pulling the trigger of a gun; the bullet simply fell out with no noise. In another, he deliberately opened a door in order to allow bright sunlight to illuminate a room. He was not expecting a failure of the sun (as might occur with faulty light switches), but he was not able to produce a sudden illumination in this way. He reported that the only time he made visual imagery appear when none was

previously present, this was achieved by closing his dream eyes for a couple of seconds. However, the scene did not come back if the eyes were closed for too long.

Alan Worsley has experimented with standing still in a dream and, instead of walking, making the imagery move past him. This was to demonstrate that waking assumptions (for example, that to get a change of scenery one has to move) need not limit what is possible in a dream — one's abilities and inabilities in lucid dreams are not fixed. He has also developed a technique for making his arm



longer in lucid dreams. On one occasion, he noticed that his long arm went off into the distance while his normal arm remained just below it. This wasn't satisfactory, as he needed to synchronise the one he could see with the nearer one that he could feel. To achieve this he moved the normal hand away, scraping it along a wall. Arm lengthening became part of his repertoire in lucid dreams. Later he had an ordinary dream in which he returned to his old school and reached out with his long arm to snatch someone's cap, finding he was able to carry this trick into his ordinary dreams. He has also used

levitation in lucid dreams to check whether he is dreaming, but when this levitation carried over into an ordinary dream it left him feeling that he was in the waking world and had really learnt how to levitate!

A further limitation described by Alan is that reading is difficult in both non-lucid and lucid dreams, unless it involves familiar material which doesn't need to be created — otherwise very accurate creation is required.

In a lucid dream one is not completely lucid. In one of Alan Worsley's dreams he wanted to draw triangles in order to watch the movement of the drawing, and so get his eyes to move in a particular configuration as a signal to the EEG experimenters. He wanted to draw the triangles on a blackboard he had found, but was worried about messing up what was already written there. In short, he was lucid enough to know that he was going to do an experiment, but he was not completely lucid because he didn't appreciate that there was no-one there to complain about him altering the blackboard writing. In the same lucid dream Alan wanted to write on some pieces of paper, but there was writing there already that he didn't want to ruin. This indicates that in lucid dreams we still have some limits to our logical thinking and knowledge; our range of actions is not limitless. Alan has also found that concentrating too much on a particular choice or action in a lucid dream can make the dream turn non-lucid.

People who often have lucid dreams are more likely than others to believe that in their waking life they are in control of good or bad things that happen to them,

rather than believing that occurrences are a result of chance or powerful others. A question that arises is whether some reports of lucid dreams arise because people ascribe to themselves control over events, and thus ascribe the same to their dream events. Sometimes people reporting on a dream may read a degree of lucidity into it that was not really there. If subjects are given a short period to rehearse dreams upon waking, they report more self-reflectiveness than if they wake and report immediately, so in some instances lucidity could be a waking addition to the dream. However some lucid dreams are validated by signals given from the dreamer while dreaming. In one study Alan even signalled with his eyes to equipment which replayed these signals to an electrical stimulator on his wrist, and reported on waking the number of these stimuli he had received in the dream, and the way in which they were incorporated into his dream world! In another case a woman interpreted her own dream while she was having it, giving herself the novel information that she was overbearing to her husband, a thought she'd never had before, whereas in waking life she considered him to be the overbearing one.

The distinction has not always been made between awareness in dreams and control. This is important. Some people argue that awareness is not enough to define a lucid dream; one must also be able to recall information from waking life and have a sense of control. The following is an example of a lucid dream that demonstrates control on the part of the dreamer: 'There's a fire here, but I don't see much fire and there's less smoke. I have the sensation of having changed the

environment suddenly so it's not so smoky, and so I can see better. I remember thinking it would be much smokier in real life.' In this case there is awareness of dreaming, ability to regulate aspects of the dream environment, and comparison of the dream with the waking environment.

The same dreamer then gave an example of awareness with no control, and with an interesting bit of logic. 'We're looking up at the sky and there's a parachute coming down. Two people are on the chute; one has skis on and is doing flips. I'm wondering aloud how this is possible and say in the dream, "This must be a dream; we're dreaming; this is a lucid dream; we're both in the same lucid dream." I waited for my husband who was with me to come to the realisation that he was dreaming — the logic was that we were in the same dream because we each put ourselves there, not because I the dreamer had constructed this experience. I wanted him to write the dream down so that we would remember.'

During lucid dreams people tend to carry over from waking life knowledge about physical possibilities and impossibilities that can limit what they attempt to do. A lucid dreamer may not try to walk

through a wall, because in waking life this is not possible. Alan Worsley, however, has a technique for it: walk backwards, so that, although you know the wall is there, you can't see it. You must do this quickly, he says, because when you enter a wall it goes dark. The dream imagery can fade if one is in the wall too long, and another dream arise in which one may not be lucid.

Lucid dreams can be induced in various ways. One method is to suggest to yourself before going to sleep that you will have a lucid dream. There is also LaBerge's method, called 'Mnemonic Induction of Lucid Dreams'. In this method you must, when awake, imagine yourself in a dream and focus on what it feels like. Then when you are next in a dream you will realise what it is. You can also try continually asking yourself during the day whether you are dreaming or not. Then this question carries over into your dreams. But be warned — you may get the wrong answer!

Another method is to work on increasing your dream recall, and then to develop your own dream cue, a characteristic of your dreams that will cue lucidity. Eventually, after having some dreams in which you have to think about it, recognition will come automatically.

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## Further Reading

J. Gackenbach and S. LaBerge, *Conscious Mind, Sleeping Brain — Perspectives on Lucid Dreaming*, New Plenum, 1988

S. LaBerge, *Lucid Dreaming*, Ballantine, 1985