

Discovering the Self: A Study of Dreams on Retreat

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'I long for spiritual authenticity. I long to experience the realities that my chosen path, Sufism, speaks of in its spiritual texts.'

These words emerged from my heart and whirled around again and again in my head during the late 1970s. Ironically, my call was answered through a direct spiritual experience of awakening beyond this reality during this period, but it came so unexpectedly, so suddenly, and vanished before I could really grasp it, leaving a still deeper thirst and longing.

So began a long journey of searching for my 'Higher Self' through a series of spiritual retreats. By 1988 I had established myself as a transpersonal psychotherapist as well as a training programme in transpersonal psychotherapy. It was also my fortieth year in this life, a time of personal crisis, mid-life. This time, my annual retreat at last answered my call with a profound experience of spiritual awakening that I could finally begin to grasp some eleven years after the first experience.

It also revealed to me an understanding of the spiritual journey through my dreams. I noticed that not only did the dreams clearly show the stages of my retreat process, but they depicted the various states of consciousness that came over me. Furthermore, as a spiritual guide on retreat, I began to notice the same phenomena in the dreams of the retreatants. By 1998 I decided to

formalise this as a research programme, which would enable me to communicate more clearly through a more acceptable medium, the importance of dreams as a tool for understanding the soul and its psychology.

A brief summary of the work to date follows.

The Research

The initial research phase has involved a review of over 200 dreams covering a series of 21 individually guided retreats, representing a total of 420 days of retreat. Basically, a qualitative analysis of the themes involved at each stage and each level of consciousness being experienced during the retreat was undertaken (Braud and Anderson, 1998). Each level of consciousness experienced, described below, is characterised by themes and particular qualities. The retreat environment is a simple room.

Each day the retreat guide sits in meditation with the retreatant to intuit their inner state. The retreatant then shares their dreams and experiences of the day and the guide then prescribes spiritual exercises/mediation that will take them further on their inner journey. Other than this dialogue the retreat is conducted in silence. The purpose of the retreat, personal issues and the length of the retreat, are discussed before the retreatant begins.

The retreats typically can last from six to up to 40 days, during which time the retreatant has the opportunity to explore their inner world and undergo considerable changes in their personality and outlook, as well as having insights into their personal problems. Many record profound inner psychological and spiritual changes on these retreats. The four major stages of the retreat process are briefly summarised below in Diagram One.

The retreat begins with a turning within to ease the inner and unconscious aspects of ourselves. Later, a second stage, the subtle self, takes over which begins creatively but becomes increasingly innocent and pure, almost angelic. The third stage, the transcendent self, is seldom experienced. Wilber (1979). Finally,

the fourth stage, awakening in life, is experienced towards the end of the retreat.

The dreams research so far shows clearly the stages of the retreat. An example is included later in this article.

RELATING THE FOUR-STAGE PROCESS MODEL TO MAJOR LIFE TRANSITIONS

The most obvious major life transition that this process model of four stages applies to is mid-life. The line of questioning values assumptions about your reality, it is the beginnings of the stage of *turning within*. This is a difficult transition often involving breakdown of relationships, health, job loss, even death of loved ones. It makes you really re-evaluate everything in your life. It is a line of turning away from the accepted norms of your life to try to find something more genuine within you.

The second stage of the process, the Subtle Self, follows on from the mid-life transition. It represents the awakening of new life and something of greater meaning and depth from within you. You come to discover valuable qualities in you that transcend your limited personality, your inner life begins to stimulate you, as offered to the outer world. It is very similar to

Diagram 1.

Stage 1: Turning within	Stage 2: the Subtle self	Stage 3: the Transcendent state	Stage 4: Awake in life
<p>Descent into the unconscious and a confrontation with the Shadow.</p> <p>Encounters instinctual, desire nature.</p> <p>Experienced as a 'dark stage'.</p>	<p>Less aware of body, and conscious mind very quiet. Retreatant in a receptive state (to their inner experiences).</p> <p>Struggles are to do with life issues. Becomes more aware of particular qualities emerging into consciousness associated with their personal struggles.</p> <p>Sense of self becomes more and more subtle.</p>	<p>Little awareness of body and virtually no conscious thought. Detached, timeless, impersonal state. Has feeling of being 'out of life', beyond existence.</p> <p>Initially experienced as 'empty', 'nothingness'. Initial 'dark night' of this experience gives way to visions, impersonal imagery.</p>	<p>Consciousness of body and personal thoughts returns.</p> <p>Sense of self becomes more substantial again, yet incorporating an awareness of the 'subtle inner self'.</p>

the experience of a writer or artist or musician, who after a long dry period, suddenly experiences fresh inspiration coming from within and their creativity starts to flow again. The Greek Orphic and Eleusian mystery schools took neophytes through these first two stages - going to the underworld initially until they saw the light and then emerging to the upper world to be initiated.

In the third stage, the transcendent self, we can, if we are fortunate, catch a glimpse of it in brief moments. Those times when we intuitively know everything will work out when we are in the midst of a crisis, or the flash of inspiration in a dream. This knowing seems to come from a place beyond the mind even, perhaps from a non-existential state of reality, which I call the Transcendental State.

The fourth stage represents the rebirth or awakening into life. This marks the real turning point in which you begin to return to the world, but from a fresher and more essential depth of your being. Your personality and your life circumstances have to change to accommodate it.

DREAMS AS AN INDICATOR OF INCREASINGLY SUBTLE LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SUBJECT

Another distinct feature of the dreams on retreat has been the changes in level of subtlety in the dreams as the retreat progresses from stage 1 to stage 3. It seems there are at least seven major degrees or levels of subtlety characterised by the qualities experienced in the dream through the characters and the background landscape. These correspond closely with the retreatant's experience of an increasingly subtle sense of self as the

retreat proceeds. For example, in the early stages of retreat, it is as though the retreatant has entered the dark underworld of their inner life. Later, this changes to move beyond this underworld through to a more subtle, innocent and almost angelic sense in the dream and in the sense of self. Later, in some cases, this is followed by a very subtle sense of being beyond the existential state, i.e. the sense of the dreams (and the sense of self) having a timeless, very pure and impersonal quality to them: In stage 4 the dreams show a progression in which the contents of the previous stages are carried through into this culminating fourth stage, a return to the physical world.

The notion of dreams on retreat as an indicator of the seven possible levels of consciousness that can be attained emerged by comparing the dream material and experiences of the retreatant and the guide with the classical seven levels outlined in a variety of spiritual traditions. Harris (1981), Jung (1944, 1954), Khan (1922), Peers (1959), Taimni (1975). The seven levels, which are all beyond the usual scope of waking consciousness, are identified by the following characteristics/qualities:

level one

the instinctual mind/self

Dreams are quite chaotic, showing the instinctual nature. Themes are a mix of fears, oppression, sexual conflicts, temptations. Whilst the retreatant is often conscious of these themes, through mental images, thoughts and feelings in the waking state, they also experience drowsiness and poor concentration as though they are in a trance-like state.

STAGE 1 OF THE PROCESS

level 2

creative mind/self

The mind becomes very clear and creative. The retreatant feels more awake and alive. Dreams show the artistic and creative side, humour, creativity and a greater clarity. Instinctual nature disappears from the dream content. The mind world, ie the way they think about people, their personal issues, likes and dislikes, are shown in the dreams. This is experienced at the beginning of Stage 2 after the rebirth dreams.

level three

the loving self

Retreatant becomes innocent. Influence of the mind lessens. Dreams show qualities/themes of beauty and harmony in people and natural landscapes. A more joyful, loving heart-like nature emerges in the personality. Retreatants feel less connected to the body and more subtle. This is experienced in Stage 2.

level four

the wise self

Initially encountered themes are negative, ie distortions of the personality are shown in dreams (crookedness of their nature, fear of power, wilfulness, anger, rage). If these issues are acknowledged and resolved in their personal lives following the retreat then in subsequent retreats the dreams show themes like justice, wisdom, compassion, truthfulness. The retreatant initially experiences a real struggle of dark versus light, between the distortions in their

personality and their deeper inner (soul) nature. Resolution of this struggle is often shown by dreams of celebration, carnival, festivals, etc. Now the retreatant starts to feel more peaceful and is still in Stage 2.

level five

the angelic/religious self

Issues of self image come up. Feelings of being unworthy of the spiritual quest. Dreams show innocent children in them, along with religious symbols like the cross, churches, altars, etc. Later, qualities of peacefulness, sacredness, splendour (of a landscape) emerge. The retreatant begins to feel ecstatic and yet it is contained inwardly.

level six

the pure self

Retreatant becomes very detached, impersonal, complete disinterest in body, outside world. Feels very pure, inside. Dreams initially show landscapes of snow, white doves, etc. This Stage 2 culminates with dreams of weddings or marriage.

level seven

the transcendent state

There is a seventh level beyond the above mentioned six levels which is characterised as completely impersonal, out of life, and has a transcendental, quality beyond existence to it. (Timeless.) The start of this state is indicated by dreams of the subject (retreatant) dying. A few of the more experienced retreatants have reported having seemingly unconnected and unworldly images flash in front of them. The sense of self begins to disintegrate. This is Stage 3 in the process.

As the retreatant completes the fourth and final stages of the retreat process, these levels of subtlety are encountered in the reverse order and yet something of their profoundness and depth is retained by the end of the retreat, i.e. the retreatant goes away with a deeper understanding of themselves and a more profound and deep stable sense of self that is now relatively independent of the conditions of their life and of their causal origins (family, history, etc). This is to do with the carrying over of a sense of eternity within themselves without it showing any evidence of ego inflation, narcissism or wish fulfilment. There is a firm sense of conviction on the part of the retreatants in follow-up studies that these experiences have lasted, although the intensity of the experience may have diminished with time.

It seems that these levels of subtle consciousness are universal as they are similar in character to the levels of consciousness outlined by the yogis when talking about the mind state (Taimni, 1975), the Buddhists (Bantly, 1992), the Kabbalists (Wills, 1990), the Sufis (Khan, 1922), the Christians (Peers, 1959), the Muslims (Harris, 1981). They reveal something much more fundamental in our human nature, something that is beyond the physical body, the mind and even beyond the soul.

Furthermore, the opening up of each subtle level of consciousness is always preceded by a struggle with personal issues. These issues seem to be consistently related to the inner plane or level of consciousness being opened up to on retreat. Once the issue has been resolved then the 'opening' proceeds. If the person cannot resolve the issues, they do not access that level

and remain stuck, as one would expect, for instance, in the psychotherapeutic process.

Typical issues that must be resolved before entering the subtle levels associated with the 'angelic' sense of self, would be the struggle between dark and light in us, surrendering our personal will to a greater will, distortions of our own truths, distorted sense of self-image, difficulties in forgiveness, resentment, feeling impure in our soul, etc.

AN EXAMPLE OF A RETREATANT'S DREAM PROCESS **

The first few nights of John's retreat involved sexual dreams, dreams of old age, dreams of being attacked and having to be assertive. On the third night he dreams of being in an eastern country, the theme being pretending to hide his true feelings and intentions of being inauthentic. On the fourth night he dreamt of his mind saying to him that he can't fall asleep!

However, the fifth evening, the themes of the dream changed significantly. The landscape became middle-eastern, his homeland, where he saw one of his favourite trees, a mulberry tree. Crowds gathered round and he was told the tree was to be cut down by the government. He protested. (The government may be his mind, the ruling order trying to block something natural like a life force in him).* Then he saw four men

strung up on four hanging gallows. One man, silently encouraged by John, separated himself from the other three and escaped. (I saw this symbolism as the death of something of the old self and yet some part that needs to live, escapes.) Up to this point on the retreat John's personal experience was one of struggling with himself. He had been passing through the *first stage* of his process, turning within and wrestling with his instincts and his mind. This corresponded to consciousness level one, called the *instinctual self*.

Night six saw John dream of his girlfriend and his family. She is a talented architect. He woke feeling much clearer in his mind, suggesting he had moved in his consciousness to level two, the *creative self*. This level shows dreams of creativity, or people who are gifted or the dreamer's own creativity. Stage two of the process had begun.

On night seven, John dreamt of a very beautiful garden in India, with statues and plants. During the day's meditations, he kept getting images of an Indian woman whom he knew and in whom he saw much love and beauty. On the eighth evening, he dreamt of India again, living in a house with an Indian couple. He felt very loved and accepted there. The wife was a very loving, beautiful lady.

On the ninth night, John had a similar dream in which a woman reflected back to him his beauty within his own

pain. Her compassion and loving nature moved him considerably. These dreams correspond to level three, the *loving self*. Here the landscapes, the scenery and the people are very beautiful.

On night ten, he dreamt of people working on a building site. He saw disfigured chickens, some bald and similar-looking old ladies. The latter began taking drugs and wanted him to do the same. He awoke disenchanted with his dream which showed some of the distortions in his inner psyche. This dream corresponded to level four, the *wise self*, which initially is usually experienced through distortions of the personality.

The next night, night eleven, he dreamt of a young Scandinavian couple with a baby. They were impoverished so he helped them. He then helped them to obtain housing benefit, and they returned with a new four-bedroomed house for John to live in. He then saw his father and saw faeces dropped around the toilet floor. John cleaned this up. This dream showed the themes of birth (a fresh young couple with a baby) and a new accommodation arising in him (the four-bedroomed house) and cleaning up the mess (feelings between John and his father).

On night twelve he saw his girlfriend's cat on fire and suffering. John picked up the cat to save it, and then

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swallowed it, pulling the remains out of his mouth. Something in John was possibly projected outwards, and yet he was suffering and 'on fire' as well. By integrating it and pulling out the bits that stuck in his throat he unblocked his ability to express himself. During the previous day he had experienced pain at the back of his heart centre (chakra) and yet following this dream the pains disappeared and he felt much warmer in his feelings and more open to me.

On the thirteenth night, John dreamt his father was dying in hospital. His father called him and John saw him curled up like a small foetus in bed. John bent over and kissed him feeling sad. His father died. I saw this as the death of the 'old King', the ruling self, in John. This seemed to be connected with the earlier dream of birth, the death of the old self and, an emergence of a new, possibly *wiser self*.

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On the last night of his retreat, on night fourteen, he dreamt of his partner once again, this time of being physically close. In a second sequence that night, he dreamt of Africa and walking along in a funeral procession. A mummified woman was being carried aloft in a coffin on the shoulders of some men. They came to a river where an African chief welcomed them and pushed the mummy (in a coffin) into the river. The coffin split open and the mummy's bandages came off. Crocodiles appeared to come and eat the body.

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The Chief stirred the water and splashed it to distract people's attention away from the crocodiles. In alchemy, the process ends with a rebirth into life, back to the body, the instincts, but in a way in which the soul symbolised by the mummy transforms and renders harmless the instinctual forces (in this case the crocodiles) when they embrace or unite. The instinctual self is now embraced by and lives in harmony through the soul consciousness as opposed to the beginning of the process in which the soul consciousness is held captive within and can only express itself in a limited way through the instinctual self.

Clearly this series of dreams showed John progressing through the levels until the *fourth level* is reached. During the *second stage* of the four stage process. It represents the summit of his journey, after which he returns back to his worldly life. The *third stage* and higher levels may have been present but were not experienced consciously or in his dreams. The last night of his retreat showed him moving into the *fourth stage* of the retreat process, returning back to the world.

The implications of this material for psychotherapy and psychology are enormous. Most psychological and psychotherapeutic models do not speculate beyond the body/mind/emotional dimensions of the human psyche, which, according to the material reported above, limits the inner explorations to a very basic level of consciousness and yet it does not allow the recognition of any other reality, which if it emerges in the client and is reported, is either pathologised as a delusional state or is re-interpreted within the paradigm of the body/mind/emotional model.

This severely restricts the client's ability to reflect upon and integrate important inner experiences that emerge into their consciousness and which could give them a greater understanding of themselves and their life. In recent years, transpersonal models in psychology and psychotherapy have been proposed (Wilber, 1979), (Wilber, Engler & Brown, 1986), (Washburn, 1988) that begin to allow for the possibilities of the existence of such levels of consciousness in the human psyche. It is hoped that this research work will open up a new area of interest in counselling and will contribute to the further development of such a generally accepted transpersonal model of the human psyche.

* A possible interpretation.

** The above represents a summary of the retreat dreams only. The retreatant's personal issues and the guide's experience has been omitted.

Further reading

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