

The Utilization of Dreams in Asian Religions

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What does it mean to dream? Sages and scientists alike have pondered this question throughout history, but never has it been fully answered. There are many theories regarding the nature of dreams, and they tend to vary based on one's culture and religion. In the west, dreams are often disregarded as mere illusions of sleep. However, in the east—particularly in southern Asia—dreams are incorporated into both religion and culture and are often considered a valuable resource. This is an ancient belief that goes back thousands of years and can still be found today in many parts of the world (Bulkeley 25-50).

In Asia, the earliest reference to the nature of dreaming can be found in an ancient Hindu text known as the Rig Veda. The Vedas are a group of texts that are often credited as the founding scriptures of Hinduism and date back all the way to 1200 B.C.E. The Rig Veda is the oldest of them all, and although the subject of dreaming is merely touched on, we are able to see a glimpse of the ancient Hindu attitude towards dreaming. In Mandala 2, Hymn 28 of the Rig Veda it is written: "O King, whoever, be he friend or kinsman, hath threatened me affrighted in my slumber—If any wolf or robber fain would harm us, therefrom, O Varuna, give thou us protection." Evidently, ancient Hindus feared being affrighted while asleep and therefore prayed to the de-

ity Varuna for protection (Rig Veda, 2:28).

As the later Vedas were compiled, the Hindu attitude towards dreaming remained constant. Hindus in the Vedic period feared dreams and often viewed them as manifestations of evil spirits. Given these beliefs, only prayer could save them from the evil in their dreams. In the west, the average person would most likely not attribute a bad dream to the work of evil spirits. It is widely recognized that nightmares happen and are a harmless psychological phenomenon. Nevertheless, the belief that dreams could potentially harm the dreamer was not uncommon in early civilizations. But as cultures developed, so did their perspective on the nature of dreaming (Eranimos and Funkhouser).

Sometime between 900-200 B.C.E., a collection of texts known as the Upanishads was compiled. In these texts, the Hindu attitude towards dreaming fundamentally changed. In a sudden shift of perspective, dreaming became something divine and prophetic—an idea similar to that once expressed in the Abrahamic religions. Once Hindus began seeing the potential in dreams, they made a discovery that would not reach the west until thousands of years later—that dreams could be interpreted and used to understand the self's nature.

The Hindu worldview and philosophy are very complex. Many Hindus hold

the belief that the world is an illusion created by the cosmic power of the gods. This power is noted in the Vedas and is often referred to as Maya. What Maya does, to simplify, is trick humans into believing that what they are experiencing is real, when in actuality, it is an illusion. The only way to break free from this illusion is to achieve moksha—liberation from the cycle of samsara, the Hindu concept of rebirth. Unfortunately, those who attempt to attain moksha face a complicated process, but precisely here is when dreams come into play. Hindus realized that dreams could be used to aid the process of liberation and ultimately understand the true nature of the atman, or what we know as the self. Dreams in Hinduism quickly became a personal path to moksha and self-understanding (Mota-Rolim et al.).

One of the most fascinating aspects of Hindu philosophy is that consciousness is separated into four distinct parts. This idea ties into the Hindu creation myth and the primordial sound—AUM. Commonly known as the mantra “OM”, the primordial sound is the expression of the Hindu ultimate reality known as Brahman. However, what is not often known about AUM is that each letter represents a separate state of consciousness. The “A” represents waking consciousness, the “U” represents dreaming consciousness, and the “M” represents deep sleep without dreaming. In its entirety, AUM represents the final state—oneness with Brahman. Interestingly, dreaming sleep and deep sleep are both deemed of higher importance than waking consciousness. Many Hindus believe that only in deep sleep can one be fully free from distracting thoughts, and therefore find it significantly more valuable (Brodd et al. 35).

Some Hindus regard sleep so highly that they practice a rare form of yoga known as Yoga Nidra. Sometimes called “Yogic Sleep”, Yoga Nidra is mentioned in the Upanishads and is seen as a path to understand-

ing the atman. This practice involves lying on the floor in the corpse pose (shavasana) and observing the mind’s reaction. While doing so, the practitioner falls into a state of deep sleep, where they can then observe dream imagery and, in a sense, “witness sleep”. This practice has led to a philosophical debate in India over whether consciousness exists in a deep sleep, and only in recent studies have western scientists found that indeed, it does. The ancient Hindus, however, knew this long before modern science (Mota-Rolim et al.).

It has been established that dreams play a significant role in Hinduism, yet no religion has contributed more to the understanding of dreaming than Buddhism. Founded around 2,500 years ago, Buddhism consists of three major branches: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana (Brodd et al. 97). Dreaming is not a major part of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, rather it is Vajrayana—or tantric—Buddhism where it is most prominent. Nevertheless, dreams have been a part of Buddhism since the birth of Siddhartha Gautama himself, as can be seen in his birth story.

Before the Buddha was born in what is now Nepal, dreams already held value and were interpreted to gain insight. Siddhartha’s parents were royalty, and his story begins with his mother, Queen Maya. One night, she had a rare vivid dream where she was carried away by spirits to a lake in the Himalayas. After bathing in the lake, the spirits proceeded to clothe her and bestow her with divine flowers. Soon after, a white elephant holding a lotus flower appeared and entered her womb from the right side. It then abruptly vanished, and the queen awoke from her slumber. What could this dream mean? Queen Maya was determined to find out and had the king send a group of wise men to interpret it. After hearing the dream, the wise men came to a conclusion. The dream, they said, was the spirits’ way

of telling her that her child was destined to become an extraordinary being (“Life of Buddha”).

The Buddhist approach to dreams is far more psychologically relevant than any other ancient religion. Ultimately, Buddhists regard dreams as mind-created phenomena that still hold importance. Of course, the Buddhist attitude towards dreaming also varies depending on which sect of Buddhism one follows. One common way to understand dreams is through the lens of the Three Marks of Existence. The Buddha’s Doctrine of Impermanence states that all things are constantly changing, and nothing ever remains the same—not even for a moment. By holding onto these ever-changing things and mistakenly believing that they are exactly what they appear to be, suffering is sure to ensue. Therefore, in order to free oneself from suffering, one must cease all desire and attachments (Brodd et al. 91-92).

In Mahayana Buddhism, dreams are no different. Anyone who has ever had a dream knows that dreams are often unstable and constantly fluctuating. In fact, Mahayana Buddhists view dreams as representative of the impermanent nature of the world. Nothing in a dream is real, and nothing can be held on to. By attaching oneself to the dream state, there can be only suffering. This does not mean that dreams are not important—but it does mean that the Doctrine of Impermanence still applies when dreaming, and therefore dreams are not exempt from suffering (Sure 1).

Just like other ancient religions, ancient Buddhism held the same belief in prophetic dreams. A dream could be a message from a Bodhisattva, an ancestor, or even a god. The purpose of such a dream is often to convey important information to the dreamer and aid their path to enlightenment. However, evil spirits could also send dreams to disrupt a practitioner from

attaining enlightenment, so one must take extreme caution when listening to dreams. Sometimes, a dream may not be prophetic per se, but can still determine one’s good luck or misfortune (Sure 1).

Finally, there is a psychological approach to dreaming that cannot be left out. Ancient Buddhists were very advanced in the field of psychology, despite it not existing at the time. Ancient Indian medics would use dreams to aid them in a diagnosis—whether it be a mental one or a physical one. Ancient Buddhists believed that the symbols of a dream held meaning and could indicate both illness and health. Another belief that was commonly held was that dreams could replay the contents of the mind. For example, what the dreamer experienced during the day could come back to him at night in the form of a dream. Those who are familiar with the works of Sigmund Freud will know that he came to this same conclusion thousands of years later and popularized what was essentially the same idea of “day residue” in the west (Sure 1).

The most fascinating dream-related practice in Buddhism is Dream Yoga. Dream Yoga is a complicated practice that originated in the Vajrayana sect in Tibet. What Dream Yoga aims to do is allow the dreamer to manipulate and control the content of his dream to his liking. In the west, many know this as Lucid Dreaming—a phenomena thought to be a myth until the late 20th century, when it was finally scientifically proven. Even today, little research has been done on this subject, and it is largely unknown. In essence, Dream Yoga is a step further from the Hindu Yoga Nidra. In Yoga Nidra, as previously mentioned, the practitioner will see dream images but leave them be. Dream Yoga takes these dream images and turns them into a full dream, which can then be manipulated in whatever way the dreamer desires. Tibetan Buddhists use this practice to look beyond the contents of the

conscious mind and do things they could not do in waking life. For example, many Tibetan Buddhists will use dreams to meditate on death, as they believe that the dream state is nearly identical to the state of death. In addition, Dream Yoga works in the same way as meditation—and it is said that one minute of meditation in the dream state is akin to 30 days of meditation in waking life (Mota-Rolim et al.).

Tibetan Buddhism largely influenced the study of Lucid Dreaming or Dream Yoga in the west. It was only recently discovered that the best way to control one's dreams consistently is to meditate and be mindful frequently. A meditation-heavy and mindful lifestyle is none other than the exact lifestyle of a Buddhist, so it is no surprise that Tibetan Buddhists came to this discovery far before western societies. Modern scientists may take credit for the new research being conducted on the nature of dreaming, but in reality, Buddhists were the ones to grasp a complex understanding of how the dreaming mind works and how it can be controlled (Baird et al.).

While India may have figured out how to utilize dreams to their advantage, not all Asian religions did the same. In a very different approach, the ancient Chinese feared dreams and viewed them as useless and harmful. In Daoism, dreams are seen as an obstacle to attaining immortality. In fact, only when a person ceases to dream can they reach the highest stage of self-cultivation. A person who still dreams is seen as a person who has not yet attained immortality (Lin 101).

It appears as if the Daoist perspective of dreaming never evolved past the idea that dreams are caused by evil spirits. Daoists went to extreme measures to stop these spirits from infiltrating their minds with dreams. These spirits responsible were believed to be the Three Corpse-Demons, and in ancient China, it was common to make a talisman to ward them off and then swallow it to force them out of the body. In addition, praying to various deities for help with their dreams was also a common practice.

All of the religions mentioned in this paper continue to regard dreams with some level of importance. Sadly, in the west, society has completely disregarded dreams, and many people rarely even remember them. When they do have a vivid dream, many do not take the time to reflect on it and understand its meaning. The truth is, most people in the west have neither the clarity of mind nor the time to dream, let alone to sleep. Many are stuck working 9-5 jobs with little time to relax and cleanse the mind. In turn, dreams have been left behind and forgotten—even highly religious individuals usually do not contemplate them. Nevertheless, most people do see dreams as important. When any person has an interesting dream, there is often a desire to interpret it. However, in western society the vast majority do not exert the mental effort to do so, and the dream is lost forever. There is much that could be learned from the eastern religions. If the phenomenon of dreaming continues to be researched, maybe the day will come that dreams are reintroduced into western society.

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