

PART TWO

Kinds and Uses of Dreams

The goal of dream practice is liberation; our intent should be to realize what is beyond dreams altogether. But there are also relative uses of dream that can be beneficial in our everyday life. These include both using information that we glean from dreams and directly benefiting from experiences that we have in the dream. In the West, for example, the use of dreams in therapy is widespread and there are many accounts of artists and scientists using the creativity of dreams to benefit their work. Tibetans also rely on dreams in various ways. This section describes some of the relative uses of dreams.

1 Three Kinds of Dreams

There are three types of dream that form a progression in dream practice, although not an exact one: 1) ordinary samsaric dreams, 2) dreams of clarity and 3) clear light dreams. The first two types are distinguished by the differences of their causes, and in either, the dreamer may be either lucid or non-lucid. In clear light dreams, there is awareness, but no subject-object dichotomy. Clear light dreams occur in non-dual awareness.

SAMSARIC DREAMS

The dreams that most of us have most of the time are the samsaric dreams that arise from karmic traces*. Meaning found in these dreams is meaning that we project into them; it is imputed by the dreamer rather than being inherent in the dream. This is also the case with meaning in our waking life. This does not make meaningful dreams unimportant any more than it makes the meaning in our waking life unimportant. The process is similar to reading a book. A book is just marks on paper, but because we bring our sense of meaning to it we can take meaning from it. And the meaning of a book, like a dream, is subject to interpretation. Two people can read the same book and have entirely different experiences; one person may change her whole life based on the meaning she has found in the pages, while her friend may find the book only mildly interesting or not even that. The book has not changed. The meaning is projected onto the words by the reader, and then read back.

Ordinary dreaming (Arises from personal karmic traces)	Non-lucid Lucid
Dreams of clarity (Arise from transpersonal karmic traces)	Non-lucid Lucid
Clear light dreams (Non-duality)	Lucid (beyond subject/object duality)

DREAMS OF CLARITY

As progress is made in dream practice, dreams become clearer and more detailed, and a larger part of each dream is remembered. This is a result of bringing greater awareness into the dream state. Beyond this increased awareness in ordinary dreams is a second kind of dream called the dream of clarity, which arises when the mind and the prana are balanced and the dreamer has developed the capacity to remain in non-personal presence. Unlike the samsaric dream, in which the mind is swept here and there by karmic prana, in the dream of clarity the dreamer is stable. Though images and information arise, they are based less on personal karmic traces and instead present knowledge available directly from consciousness below the level of the conventional self. This is analogous to the differences in the rough karmic prana of the white channel, which is connected to negative emotion, and the wisdom prana of the red channel. Just as they are both karmic prana—energies involved in experiences of dualism—but one is purer and less deluded than the other, so is the dream of clarity purer and less deluded than the samsaric dream. In the dream of clarity it is as if something is given to or found by the dreamer, as opposed to the samsaric dream in which meaning is projected from the dreamer onto the purity of fundamental experience.

Dreams of clarity may occasionally arise for anyone, but they are not common until the practice is developed and stable. For most of us, all dreams are samsaric dreams based on our daily lives and emotions. Even though we may have a dream about the teachings, or our teachers, or our practice, or buddhas, or *dakinis**, the dream is still likely to be a samsaric dream. If we are involved in practice with a teacher, then of course we will dream about these things. It is a positive sign to have these dreams because it means that we are engaged in the teachings, but the engagement itself is dualistic and therefore in the realm of samsara. There are better and worse aspects of samsara, and it is good to be fully engaged in practice and the teachings because that is the path to liberation. It is also good not to mistake samsaric dreams for dreams of clarity.

If we make the mistake of believing that samsaric dreams are offering us true guidance, then changing our lives daily, trying to follow the dictates of dreams, can become a full-time job. It is also a way to become stuck in personal drama, believing that all our dreams are messages from a higher, more spiritual source. It is not like that. We should pay close attention to dreams and develop some understanding of which ones have import and which are only the manifestation of the emotions, desires, fears, hopes, and fantasies of our daily life.

CLEAR LIGHT DREAMS

There is a third type of dream that occurs when one is far along the path, the clear light dream. It arises from the primordial prana in the central channel. The clear light is generally spoken of in the teachings about sleep yoga and indicates a state free from dream, thought, and image, but there is also a clear light dream in which the dreamer remains in the nature of mind. This is not an easy accomplishment; the practitioner must be very stable in non-dual awareness before the clear light dream arises. Gyalshen Milu Samleg, the author of important commentaries on the *Mother Tantra*, wrote that he practiced consistently for nine years before he began to have clear light dreams.

Developing the capacity for clear light dreams is similar to developing the capacity of abiding in the non-dual presence of rigpa during the day. In the beginning, rigpa and thought seem different, so that in the experience of rigpa there is no thought, and if thought arises we are distracted and lose rigpa. But when stability in rigpa is developed, thought simply arises and dissolves without in the least obscuring rigpa; the practitioner remains in non-dual awareness. These situations are similar to learning to play the drum and bell together in ritual practice: in the beginning we can only do one at a time. If we play the bell, we lose the rhythm of the drum, and vice versa. After we are stable we can play both at the same time.

The clear light dream is not the same as the dream of clarity, which, while arising from deep and relatively pure aspects of the mind and generated from positive karmic traces, still takes place in duality. The clear light dream, while emerging from the karmic traces of the past, does not result in dualistic experience. The practitioner does not reconstitute as an observing subject in relation to the dream as an object, nor as a subject in the world of the dream, but abides wholly integrated with non-dual rigpa.

The differences in the three kinds of dreams may seem subtle. Samsaric dream arises from the individual's karmic traces and emotions, and all content of the dream is formed by those traces and emotions. The dream of clarity includes more objective knowledge, which arises from collective karmic traces and is available to consciousness when it is not entangled in personal karmic traces. The consciousness is then not bound by space and time and personal history, and the dreamer can meet with real beings, receive teachings from real teachers, and find information helpful to others as well as to him or herself.

The clear light dream is not defined by the content of the dream, but is a clear light dream because there is no subjective dreamer or dream ego, nor any self in a dualistic relationship with the dream or the dream content. Although a dream arises, it is an activity of the mind that does not disturb the practitioner's stability in clear light.

2 Uses of Dreams

The greatest value of dreams is in the context of the spiritual journey. Most importantly, they may be used as a spiritual practice in themselves. They may also provide the experiences that motivate the dreamer to enter the spiritual path. Furthermore, they can be a means of determining whether or not the practice is being done correctly, how much progress is being made, and what needs attention.

As in the story I told in the preface, it is often the case that before giving a high teaching the teacher will wait for the student to have a dream indicating his or her readiness to receive the teaching. Other dreams may demonstrate that the student has accomplished a certain practice, and after hearing the dream the teacher may determine that it is time for the student to move on to another practice.

In the same way, if we pay attention to dreams we can gauge our own maturity in the practice. Sometimes in the waking state we think we are doing quite well but when we sleep we find that at least some part of us is still greatly confused or stuck in negativity. This should not be viewed as a discouragement. It is a benefit when different aspects of the mind manifest in dream and point out where we must work in order to progress. On the other hand, when practice becomes very strong, the results of the practice will manifest in dream and give us confidence in our efforts.

EXPERIENCE IN DREAM

Experience is very flexible in dream and we are free to do a great many things that we cannot when awake, including particular practices that facilitate our development. We can heal wounds in the psyche, emotional difficulties that we have not been able to overcome. We can remove energetic blocks that may be inhibiting the free circulation of energy in the body. And we can pierce obscurations in the mind by taking experience beyond conceptual boundaries and limitations.

Generally, these tasks are best accomplished after we develop the ability to remain lucid in dream. It is only mentioned here as a possibility; in the section on practice there is more detail about what to do in the dream once lucidity is attained.

GUIDANCE AND GUIDELINES

Most Tibetans—high spiritual masters and simple, ordinary people— consider dreams to be a potential source of both the most profound spiritual knowledge and of guidance for everyday life. Dreams are consulted to diagnose illness, for indications that practices of purification or clarification are needed, and for indications that relationships to deities and guardians need attention. Such use of dreams may be thought superstitious, but on a profound level dreams portray the state of the dreamer and the condition of his or her relationship to different energies. In the East, people recognize these energies and relate to them as guardians and protector spirits as well as physiological conditions and internal spiritual conditions. In the West, with its much younger study of dreams, these energies may be understood as incipient illnesses or deeply rooted complexes or archetypes.

Some Tibetans work with dreams throughout their lives, as a primary form of communication with deeper aspects of themselves and with other worlds. My mother was a good example of this. She was a practitioner and a very loving and kind woman. Often she told the whole family her dreams in the morning, when we were gathered to eat, and particularly when the dream had to do with her guardian and protector, Namthel Karpo.

Namthel is a guardian of the Northern part of Tibet, Hor, where my mother grew up. Although his practice was known throughout Tibet, he was primarily worshiped in the village in which she lived and in the surrounding area. My mother did his practice, but my father did not, and often he would tease her after she recounted her dreams.

I clearly remember my mother telling us one dream in which Namthel came to her. He was dressed, as always, in white robes and conch shell earrings, and he had long hair. This time he

looked furious. He came through the door and roughly threw a little bag on the floor. He said, "I always tell you to take care of yourself but you don't do a good job of it!" He looked deeply into my mother's eyes and then disappeared.

In the morning my mother was uncertain as to the dream's meaning. But in the afternoon a lady who sometimes worked in our home tried to steal our money. She was carrying it tucked under her clothes but when she walked in front of my mother the money fell out, right there. It was in a bag identical to the one that my mother had been shown in the dream. My mother picked it up and inside was all of our money, about to be stolen. She considered this event an activity of protection on the part of her guardian and believed that Namthel caused the bag to fall to the floor.

Namthel appeared in my mother's dreams throughout her life, always appearing in the same form. Though the messages he gave her varied, they were generally dreams meant to help her in some way, to protect her and guide her.

Until I was ten years old I was in a Christian school, after which my parents took me out and I entered the Meri Monastery. One of the monks, Gen Sengtuk, would sometimes tell me his dreams. I remember some of them quite clearly as they were very similar to my mother's. He often dreamt of Sippe Gyalmo, one of the most important and ancient of the enlightened protectors of the Bön tradition. The practice of Sippe Gyalmo is also practiced in the other Tibetan Buddhist schools; in the Potala Palace in Tibet, there is a room that houses her shrine. Gen Sengtuk's dreams of Sippe Gyalmo guided him in his life and practice.

Sippe Gyalmo did not appear in his dreams as the ferocious being that we see in paintings in temples and meditation rooms. Instead, he saw her as a very old, gray-haired human woman, in a body that was no longer straight, using a walking stick. Gen Sengtuk always met Sippe Gyalmo in a vast desert in which she had a tent. No one else lived there. The monk would read her expressions, whether her face was happy or sad, or if there was anger in the way she moved. And reading her this way he would somehow know what to do to heal obstacles in his practice or to change certain things in his life in a more positive direction. This is how she guided him through his dreams. He kept a close connection to her through dreams and she appeared to him in a similar manner throughout his life. His experiences with her are good examples of dreams of clarity.

I was a little boy then, and I can clearly remember one day when, listening to the monk recounting one of his dreams, it suddenly struck me that it was as if he had a friend in a different place. I thought it would be nice to have some friends to play with in dreams, because during the day I could not play much, as the studies were very intensive and the teachers strict. That was the thought I had then. So, you see, our understanding of dream and dream practice, and our motivation to do the practice, can become deeper and mature as we grow.

DIVINATION

Many meditation masters, because of the stability of their meditation practice, are able to use dreams of clarity for divination. To do so, the dreamer must be able to free himself or herself from most of the personal karmic traces that normally shape the dream. Otherwise, information is not obtained from the dream but is projected onto the dream, as is normally the case with samsaric dreams. This use of dreams is considered, in the Bön tradition, to be one of several methods of shamanic divination and is quite common among Tibetans. It is not unusual for a student to ask his or her teacher for guidance regarding an undertaking or for direction in overcoming an obstacle, and often the teacher turns to dreams to find the answer for the student.

For example, when I was in Tibet I met a realized Tibetan woman named Khachod Wangmo. She was very powerful and a "treasure finder" (*terton*) who had rediscovered many hidden teachings. I asked her for knowledge of my future, a general question about obstacles I would encounter and so on. I asked her to have a dream of clarity for me.

Commonly in this situation, the dreamer asks for a possession of the person requesting the dream. I gave Khachod Wangmo the undershirt I was wearing. The shirt represented me energetically, and by focusing on it she was able to connect to me. She put it under her pillow that night, then slept and had a dream of clarity. In the morning she gave me a long explanation of what

was to come in my life, things that I should avoid and things that I should do. It was clear and helpful guidance.

Sometimes a student asks whether or not a dream that tells us something about the future demonstrates that the future is fixed. In the Tibetan tradition, we believe that it is not. The causes of all things that can happen are already present, right now, because the consequences of the past are the seeds of future situations. The primary causes of any situation in the future are to be found in what has already occurred. But the secondary causes necessary for the manifestation of the karmic seeds are not fixed, they are circumstantial. That is why practice is effective, and why illness can be cured. If it were otherwise, it would make no sense to attempt anything, as nothing could be changed. If we have a dream about tomorrow, and tomorrow comes and everything happens just as it did in our dream, this does not mean the future is fixed and cannot be changed; it means we did not change it,

Imagine a strong karmic trace, imprinted with a strong emotion, that is a primary cause for a particular situation, and it is coming to fruition. That is, our lives may be providing the secondary causes necessary for the primary cause to manifest. In a dream of the future, the cause is present and the trace that is ripening toward manifestation conditions the dream, with the result that the dream is an imagining of the results. It is as if we go into a kitchen and there is a wonderful Italian cook there, and the smell of spices and cooking food, and the ingredients laid out on a table: we can almost imagine the dinner that is being prepared, almost see the results of the situation. This is like the dream. We may not be completely accurate, but we might get most of it right. And then, when we are served the dinner, it will merge with our expectations, the differences will blur, and it will be the dinner we expected even if it is not quite the same.

I remember an example of this from when I was young. It was a day called Diwali in India, traditionally celebrated with firecrackers. My friends and I did not have money to buy firecrackers, so we looked for ones that had been lit but had not exploded. We gathered them and then tried to relight them. I was very young, four or five years old. One of the firecrackers was a little wet, and I put it on a burning coal. I shut my eyes and blew on it and of course it exploded. For a moment I could not see anything except stars, and right then I remembered my dream of the night before. It was exactly the same, the whole experience. Of course, it would have been much more helpful if I had remembered the dream before rather than after the event! There are many cases like this, in which the causes of future situations are woven into a dream about a future that is likely to, but will not necessarily, unfold.

Sometimes in a dream the causes and results affecting other people can be known. When I was in Tibet, my teacher, Lopon Tenzin Namdak, had a dream and then told me it was very important that I do a particular practice connected with one of the guardians. I began to do the practice for many hours every day while I traveled, trying to influence whatever he had seen in his dream. A few days after his dream, I was a passenger in a truck traveling on a tiny road high in the mountains. The drivers in that part of Tibet are wild, nomadic people with little fear of death. Thirty of us were crowded into a big truck with a lot of heavy luggage when the tire hit a hole and the truck tipped over.

I got out and looked down. I was not particularly afraid. But then I saw that one small stone held the truck up, preventing it from sliding down into a valley, a drop so far that a stone tossed over the edge took what seemed to be a long while to reach bottom. Then my heart started to bang around in my chest! Then I felt the fear, noticing that one small stone was all that stood between us and death, that kept my life from ending as a short story.

When I saw what the situation was I thought, "That's it. That's why I had to do the practice of the guardian." That was what my teacher saw in his dream and why he told me to do the practice. A dream may not be very specific, but still can convey through the feeling and images of the dream that something is coming that needs to be remedied. This is one kind of benefit we can receive from working with our dreams.

TEACHINGS IN DREAM

There are numerous examples in the Tibetan tradition of practitioners who received teachings in dreams. Often the dreams come in sequence, each night's dream starting where the previous night's dream ends, and in this way transmitting entire, detailed teachings until a precise and appropriate point of completion is reached, at which point the dreams stop. Volumes of teachings have been "discovered" this way, including many of the practices that Tibetans have been doing for centuries. This is what we call "mind treasure" (*gong-ter**).

Imagine entering a cave and finding a volume of teachings hidden inside. This is finding in a physical space. Mind treasures are found in consciousness rather than in the physical world. Masters have been known to find these treasures both in dreams of clarity and when awake. In order to receive these kinds of teaching in a dream, the practitioner must have developed certain capacities, such as being able to stabilize in consciousness without identifying with the conventional self. The practitioner whose clarity is unobscured by karmic traces and samsaric dreams has access to the wisdom inherent in consciousness itself.

Authentic teachings discovered in dream do not come from the intellect. It is not like going to the library and doing research and then writing a book, using the intellect to collect and synthesize information as a scholar might. Although many good teachings come from the intellect, they are not considered mind treasures. The wisdom of the Buddhas is self-originated, rising from the depths of consciousness, complete in itself. This does not mean that mind treasure teachings will not resemble existing teachings, for they will. Furthermore, these teachings can be found in different cultures and in different historical periods, and can be similar even though they do not inform each other. Historians work to trace a teaching back in time in order to point out how it was influenced by a similar teaching, where the historical connection took place, and so on, and often they find such a link. But the underlying truth is that these teachings arise spontaneously from humans when they reach a certain point in their individual development. The teachings are inherent in the foundational wisdom that any culture can eventually access. They are not only Buddhist or Bön teachings; they are teachings for all humans.

If we have the karma to help other beings, the teachings from a dream may be of benefit to others. But it may also be the case, if we have karma with a lineage, for example, that the teachings discovered in a dream will be particularly for our own practice, perhaps as a specific remedy to overcome a particular obstacle.

3 The Discovery of Chöd Practice

Many masters have used dream as an important wisdom door through which they have discovered teachings, made connections to masters who are otherwise distant in time and space, and developed the capacity to help others. All of these are illustrated in the story of Tongjung Thuchen, a great master of Bön, who is believed to have lived in the eighth century. In a series of dreams he discovered the Bön practice of *chöd**, a visionary practice of cultivating generosity and cutting through attachment.

By the time Tongjung Thuchen was six years old he was already knowledgeable about the teachings. At twelve he was making long retreats and having remarkable dream experiences in which he discovered teachings and met and received teachings from other masters. Once when he was in a retreat and intensively doing the practice of Walsai, one of the most important tantric deities of Bön, he was summoned by his master. He left the retreat and journeyed to the house of one of his master's sponsors, where he went to sleep and had an amazing dream.

In the dream, a beautiful woman led him through unknown landscapes until they came to a large cemetery. Many corpses lay on the ground, and in the center stood a large white tent covered with ornate decorations and surrounded by beautiful flowers. In the center of the tent, a brown woman sat on a large throne. She wore a white dress and her hair was ornamented with turquoise and gold. Many beautiful dakinis were gathered around her, speaking the languages of many different countries, and Tongjung Thuchen realized they had come from distant lands.

Leaving her throne, the brown dakini brought Tongjung Thuchen a skull full of blood and flesh and fed him from it. As she did so, she told him to accept the offerings as pure offerings, and that she and the other dakinis were going to give him an important initiation.

Then she said, "May you achieve enlightenment in the space of the Great Mother. I am Sippe Gyalmo, the holder of the Bön teaching, the Brown Queen of Existence. This initiation and teaching is the quintessential root *Mother Tantra*. I initiate you so that you can initiate and teach this to others." Tongjung Thuchen was led to a high throne. Sippe Gyalmo then gave him a ceremonial hat, an initiation robe, and ritual implements. She then surprised him by requesting that he give initiation to the gathered dakinis.

Tongjung Thuchen said, "Oh no, I can't give initiation. I don't know how to do this initiation. This is very embarrassing."

Sippe Gyalmo reassured him, "Don't worry. You are a great master. You have all the initiations from the thirty masters of Tibet and Zhang Zhung. You can give us initiation."

"I don't know how to sing the prayers during the initiation," Tongjung Thuchen objected.

Sippe Gyalmo said, "I'll help you and all the protectors will give you power. There is nothing to be afraid of. Please, do the initiation."

At that point, all of the meat and blood in the tent transformed into butter, sugar, and various foodstuffs, and into medicine and flowers. The dakinis tossed flowers on him. Suddenly he realized that he did know how to give the initiation for the *Mother Tantra* and he did so.

Afterwards all the dakinis thanked him. Sippe Gyalmo said, "In five years the dakinis from the eight major cemeteries will meet as will many masters. If you come, we will give you more teachings from the *Mother Tantra*." Then the dakinis all said goodbye to him, and he to them, and Sippe Gyalmo told him he was to leave. A red dakini wrote a *YAM* syllable on a scarf, representing the wind element, and waved it in the air, then asked him to touch the scarf with his right foot. The moment he did, he was back in his body and realized that he was sleeping.

He slept for a such a long time that people thought he was dead. When he finally woke, his master asked him why he had slept so long. He recounted the dream to his master, who told him that it was quite wonderful, but also cautioned him to keep it secret lest it become an obstacle. The master told Tongjung Thuchen that someday he would be a teacher and then gave him a blessing to empower his future teachings.

The following year, Tongjung Thuchen was in retreat when one evening he was visited by three dakinis. They had green scarves that they touched to his feet. As they did so, he lost consciousness briefly, and then woke in a dream.

He saw three caves facing East. A beautiful lake was in front of the caves. He walked into the central cave. Inside, it was wonderfully decorated with flowers. He met three masters, each dressed differently in esoteric initiation clothes. They were surrounded by lovely dakinis who played musical instruments, danced, made offerings, prayed, and performed other sacred activities.

The three masters gave him initiations to wake him to the natural state, to cause him to remember his past lives, and to enable him to teach the chöd practice successfully. The central master stood and said, "You have all the sacred teachings. You have received the initiations and we have blessed you to empower your ability to teach."

Then the master who sat to the right rose and said, "We initiate you into all the general teachings, the logical philosophies used to cut the ego, the use of the conceptual mind to liberate delusions, and into the chöd practices. We bless you so that you can teach these practices and give them continuity."

The master on the left then stood and said, "I'm going to give you the sacred tantric teaching that is at the heart of all the masters of Tibet and Zhang Zhung. We initiate you and bless you through these teachings so that you can help others."

All three masters were very important Bön masters who had lived around the end of the seventh century, over five hundred years before Tongjung Thuchen was born.

Some time later, after Tongjung Thuchen's master had passed away, Tongjung Thuchen returned to his master's little village where he did rituals and practices for the people there. On numerous occasions, during both short meditations and retreats, he was visited by various masters in visions. He experienced being able to see inside his own body, with the channels and energies appearing as clear crystal. Many times when he walked his feet did not touch the ground, and he could walk very, very fast, using the power of his prana.

Four more years passed. The brown dakini he had met in his dream, the manifestation of Sippe Gyalmo, had told him they would meet again after five years and the time had arrived. One day he took a nap in a cave and during sleep prayed to all the masters. When he awoke, he looked into an incredibly clear sky. A small breeze arose and two dakinis came to him, riding the wind, and told him that he was to accompany them.

He went with them to a gathering of dakinis, the same dakinis from many lands whom he had met in the dream five years earlier. He received transmissions and explanations of the chöd practices and the *Mother Tantra*. The dakinis predicted that in the future a time would arrive in which bodhisattvas and twelve blessed masters would appear and that during that time Tongjung Thuchen would teach. Each dakini made a promise to aid him in teaching. One said that she would act as a guardian of the teachings, another said that she would bless the teachings, the next said that she would protect the teachings from erroneous words and interpretations, and so on. Sippe Gyalmo also pledged to act as a protector of the teachings. In turn, each of the assembled dakinis told him what responsibilities she would undertake to aid the spread of the teachings, and they told him that the teachings would spread in the ten directions like the rays of the sun, to all the areas of the world. That prophecy was an important one that is encouraging for those who today learn these practices, because we know that they are going to spread out across the earth.

Tongjung Thuchen's dreams are good examples of dreams of clarity. He received accurate information in one dream regarding an important dream he would have in the future. He received teachings and initiations and was aided by dakinis and other masters. In the early part of his life, though he was accomplished, he did not know his full potential as a master until it was revealed to him in dream. Through the blessings he received in dream, he woke to different dimensions of consciousness and was reconnected to the part of himself that had learned and developed in past lives. He continued growing through his dreams, receiving teachings and meeting with masters and dakinis throughout his life.

So it can be with all of us. We will find, as practitioners, that a continuity develops in that part of our life we spend in dream. This is valuable in our spiritual journey, as dream becomes part of a specific process that reconnects us to our deeper selves, and matures our spiritual development.