

Levels of Dreaming and the Makeup of the Human Being

The Spiritual Ontology of Dreams

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Everyone dreams, but few people find sufficient interest in their dreams to move beyond mere curiosity at their strange contents. Even many who work with dreams as a part of a transformative practice usually concentrate on their content, and only more rarely question their form, ontology, and origins. Exploring these aspects, however, can help provide a context that helps orient dreamers to some of the esoteric underpinnings of dream etiology (their meaningful origins), and can help enliven dream-based transformative practices. This article is an attempt to show how a spiritually-oriented understanding of the makeup of the human being gives a context for understanding different types of dreams, their origins, and some associated consequences for dreamwork.

The language of spiritual science, also called anthroposophy (human wisdom) will be of help in this endeavor, because it maintains its cogency across multiple phenomenal realms (such as those of sleeping and waking), and because it has as its aim the ability to make clear and coherent processes which work within the physical realm but have their source beyond it, in the spiritual worlds. Fundamental anthroposophical terminology will not be explained in this article for reasons of space, and neither will the basic anthroposophical view of dreaming in general.

For a brief introduction, I highly recommend that readers peruse this article: [Sleep and Dreams in Anthroposophy](#), which provides the context within which the current article is written, as well as introducing the terms etheric, astral, and Ego. For the purposes of this article, however, we can look at these in the following way:

Ego - the “I-being”, the spiritual ontology responsible for the manifestation of the lower aspects of each individual human, the spiritual self (to be distinguished from the ego of psychology, which is more like an interface between the soul and spirit). There are higher and lower “parts” to the Ego which are undistinguished in this presentation for the sake of simplicity, which could be included with slight modifications.

Astral - the sensory organization through which the Ego connects with other spiritual beings and the physical world, the “doorways” of the I-being and the source of sentience, the soul.

Etheric - processes of manifestation and dissolution of form as a mediation between the astral body and physical body, the ‘life-body’ responsible for growth and decay.

Physical - the body of organized form filled with material substance.

The terms physical, etheric, astral, and Ego, are not intended to represent strict ontological

categories, but rather qualitatively coherent descriptions of subtle experiences that can be of great service for those wishing to gain a foothold for conceptualizing spiritual development.

These concepts have an epistemological status very similar to the concept of “heat” or “electron” in physics: they are terms which describe qualitatively coherent experiences across a range of situations. No physicist really knows *what* an electron is; but they can use the concept to help make sense of a whole range of experiences which otherwise would remain mysterious.

The more closely one examines the concept of “electron”, the more one is led to see how it depends completely upon other descriptions of related experiences which have an equal epistemological status. The whole network of associated concepts forms a coherent basis upon which to think about experiences in ways that allow for repeatable tests, communication of meaning, and continual refinements. The concepts of the physical, etheric, astral and Ego in relation to the human being form just such an interconnected network, but instead of concentrating on sensory experiences that are linked primarily to the physical realm (and which result in physical concepts), these terms refer to sensory experiences which are increasingly free from the purely material world. This point is mentioned here primarily for context, and would require a whole book to fully flesh out.

States of Consciousness

“Dreaming” is a condition of consciousness -- one of many. As is the case for any particular state of consciousness, its appearance is a consequence of the specific modes of relation found in the ontological makeup of the being whose consciousness is under consideration. Dreaming is a state of consciousness available to human beings and animal beings; neither plants nor minerals dream in the strict sense, because dreaming requires that a particular relationship holds between the physical, etheric, and astral bodies. Both humans and animals can experience dream-consciousness because these are the beings which have etheric and astral bodies that unite with the physical body, creating the condition of consciousness we call “awake”. While animals do not have an individual Ego that also unites with the lower bodies during wakefulness, animals still have sentience, and thus experience dream-states. It will take a separate article to explore the nature of animal dreaming in more detail.

For the human being, the astral body and Ego are separated from the etheric and physical bodies during sleep. Dreams occur when the astral and Ego approach and mingle with the etheric and physical bodies during sleep without completely uniting with them as is the case in waking consciousness. The quality of one’s consciousness--experienced phenomenologically, “from the inside”--is dependent upon the way in which the various members of the human organism (physical, etheric, astral, and Ego) relate to each other, and to their level of individual development. There are thus a whole variety of states of consciousness available to human beings--in potential more so than for any other being: we can reach both the heights and the depths.

A consequence of this variegation of consciousness shows up in the examination of dreams:

they are not all of a type, but manifest qualitatively in a wide variety of ways. It is important to understand that what I am indicating here relies upon a distinction being made between dream content and the “form” of the dream. While these two levels are intertwined (the form is like the vessel that holds the potential for particular types of content to manifest), the form is more fundamental than that of content. Having the capacity to distinguish between different forms of dream states is therefore a very helpful tool when we begin to utilize our dream-life for the purposes of transformation. Without these distinctions, we can make epistemological mistakes that can lead either to inflation or to missing opportunities for spiritual advancement.

Transformations of Consciousness and the Rule of Projection

Every transition from waking to sleeping and sleeping to waking is a passing through a doorway, where consciousness experiences the fruits of transformed relations between the various members of the organism. These members act as the substrates which allow consciousness to awaken in different ways. The waking/sleeping transition is a microcosmic analog of the macrocosmic transition between life and death. The place where human beings have the greatest potential for spiritual advancement occurs precisely where consciousness already experiences rhythmic qualitative transformations. The most accessible of such rhythms is that between sleeping and waking. For human beings, therefore, changing our relationship to this gateway offers an opportunity for a kind of spiritual work that is difficult to achieve using other means.

A metaphor will help make the importance of the crossing of this threshold more apparent.

When light in the air encounters the surface of a more optically dense medium such as glass or water, two things happen. On the one hand the light penetrates into the second medium, but in a transformed way: it refracts (bends), changing its direction of travel. But not all the light refracts into the second medium in this way--some of it reflects off the outer surface and bounces back into the air.

Metaphorically, the light is consciousness, the first medium (air) is wakefulness, and the more optically dense medium (glass, water) is sleep. The meeting of these two mediums is the gateway through which consciousness transforms from waking to sleeping and back again. The spiritual pattern at work in this metaphor can be expressed in the following way: whenever consciousness transitions between states, an opportunity arises for *projection* to occur, where a part of consciousness transforms its state while simultaneously another part is reflected back, untransformed.

Projection is a description of what happens when some aspect of “me” is experienced as coming “to me” as if from “outside me”. In other words, I experience some aspect of myself, but in a way that makes me conclude that the content of that experience is due to something that is not me. I unknowingly misidentify a piece of myself as other: hence the term “projection”, for I quite literally project an image of myself onto an other (another person, the environment--

everything that arises in my experience as “not me”).

In the metaphor, the light that reflects off the surface is untransformed: it reflects back into the original medium. This represents those aspects of consciousness that are not able to transform across the gateway formed between waking and sleeping. Other gateways exist as well: between waking and dreaming, between dreaming and dreamless sleep, even between dreaming and day-dreaming and different levels of dreaming. States of consciousness are not simply arranged in a linear order from higher to lower, but are both hierarchically arranged and fractally nested.

The reflected light is analogous to the process of projection. In projection, we experience a reflection of ourselves. Like a normal reflection, it is experienced as “out there”, and it is also “mirrored”, so that while it maintains a correlation with what is experienced as “in here”, it is *qualitatively inverted*. In a regular mirror image, the inversion is geometrically between front and back (not right and left as is commonly thought): in projection the inversion is between consciousness and unconsciousness. Thus, in projection, what is unconscious in me is experienced *consciously*, but as coming to me from anywhere *but* myself.

The Guardian of the Threshold

Anthroposophically, we can call the experience of the reflected projection “the meeting with the lower guardian of the threshold”. Any time consciousness moves through a gateway to a different qualitative state, we encounter the lower guardian, who is responsible for throwing back consciousness that is not capable of crossing the boundary into the new state. For this reason, every encounter with the lower guardian of the threshold is an opportunity to deal with our unconscious projections.

We generally experience this meeting as a source of suffering. We suffer in the meeting with the lower guardian because we are unaware that what seems to be coming to us has its source in ourselves, and because the content of what comes to meet us is precisely made up of the untransformed, thus “lower”, parts of ourselves. Carl Jung would call these parts of ourselves collectively the “shadow”, and it is just these untransformed parts that require integration if we are to achieve Jung’s goal of individuation.

So, a fundamental spiritual pattern can be discerned, whereby transformations of consciousness from one state to another occur in the context of a meeting with the lower guardian of the threshold. This is why every transition from waking to sleeping and sleeping to waking provides an opportunity for spiritual work, because every such meeting offers an image of just those parts of ourselves which still need work. By being aware of this fundamental spiritual pattern, we place a seed in our consciousness that can grow into an alertness around transformations of consciousness and the attendant projections. This alertness can help in the alleviation of the suffering experienced in the meeting of the lower guardian by giving us a new

context for the suffering: it is suffering that can be experienced consciously as a necessary part of transformative work. Suffering is further ameliorated because we can recognize that the content of the suffering is a mirror image of what we could experience were we to transform the specific part of ourselves that comes to us as a projection. In other words, the content of the projection, identified as such, yields valuable information about exactly the patterns in our soul life that are in need of transformation.

Types of Dreams

How does all of this relate to dreaming? [At the end of a previous article on the movie Inception](#) I briefly explored four “levels” of dreaming: four common “forms” that dreams can take. Each of these levels corresponds with particular relationships between the four basic members of the human being: physical, etheric, astral, and Ego. Additionally, each level is qualitatively linked to the cycle of the elements: [Earth, Water, Air, and Fire](#), which are alchemical terms for qualities of consciousness, and which help describe the qualitative difference between the dream states.

It is important to understand that the types of dreams being discussed here do not exist as absolute categories, but as descriptions of experiences that maintain a qualitative coherence.

Once we understand the role played by the different aspects of the makeup of the human being, we can begin to penetrate more deeply into the vast number of different ways that those aspects can relate, and see the resulting consequences for consciousness. The fact that the relationships between the different aspects of the human being are dynamic means that the types of dreams are thus not strictly separate, but flow each into the other. Indeed, during sleep we may weave into and out of different *types* of dream states continuously, without any awareness of this change (except in the case of the transition from an etheric to an astral dream, which can be quite distinctly marked by a change of consciousness to a state of wakefulness within the dream, as we shall see later).

Physical Dreams

The lowest level of dreaming, associated with the qualities of the alchemical element of [Earth](#), is what is known as the “night terror”. A night terror is a dream that is generally unremembered, but causes the dreamer to wake up with an overwhelming and often vague feeling of terror or existential dread, with commonly associated physical symptoms of sweating, a pounding heart, and occasional lack of awareness of one’s waking surroundings.

This type of dream is a result of the Ego and astral bodies entering into relationship with the physical organism as such. We could, in a most literal way, call these dreams “physical dreams”, because their content arises as a kind of reflection off of the physical body. This level of dreaming is a strange state of consciousness, experienced almost as a kind of darkness or lack rather than as full of stimuli of various types as in the case of more normal dreams. The

experience of a physical dream is thus often associated with feelings of dread or unspecified fears whose source remains unnameable. Physical dreams are generally not associated with REM sleep, but occur rather in the deeper portions of sleep when the brain is in slower, synchronous rhythms.

Without spiritual development, the human Ego awakens to consciousness primarily by virtue of what it encounters outside itself. It is as if, in order to “see” itself, it has to “reflect” off of whatever it meets in its spiritual and physical environments. The actual content of consciousness depends upon both *what* and *how* the Ego meets its environment, which it does through the mediation of the lower bodies (astral, etheric, and physical). The primary exception to this pattern is when the Ego uses *itself* as a basis for its own reflection, in a cybernetic loop that is the basis for the spiritual experience that is summed up in the words “I am”. The human Ego is generally not awake to the physical realm *per se*, but rather gains experience of the physical through the mediation of the etheric and astral bodies. Without training, the Ego, which is purely spiritual in nature, becomes dark when it encounters the physical directly; it does not find in the physical realm by itself a basis for its existence, a spiritual ground upon which to rest. The undeveloped Ego simply cannot use the physical body to reflect its own activity back to it in order to experience wakefulness. The Ego’s true home is in the spiritual world.

Keep in mind that we are speaking here of the *form* of the dream and its underlying logic, not the dream content. In other words, even if, for example, someone dreamed of entering the physical body directly, this does not mean that this is what is actually occurring as a spiritual reality. Dream *content* (particularly in the lower levels of dreaming) is not a direct and unmitigated expression of the full spiritual situation. However, the dream *form* does always reflect the spiritual ontology of the dream. In other words, the *way* in which a dream comes about carries a qualitative signature of the actual spiritual relations that form the ontological basis for the dream.

What this means is that when we start to address our dreams not on the basis of just their content, but also learn to pay attention to their form, we open up the possibility of a more direct and lawful relationship with them. For instance (and this is a real example), one would not automatically think that because one had a dream of, say, reaching through the wall of one’s house to see if an object outside had become wet overnight, that one’s astral body actually performed these actions in reality, precluding the need to check the actual object’s situation with day-waking consciousness. If we only pay attention to the dream content, we can easily be fooled about the “meaning” of our dreams, but by paying attention to the signatures of the *form* of the dream awakens in us a higher-order awareness that can help orient us towards our dreams more directly. Unfortunately it would take a separate discussion to elucidate the various methods by which we could begin to recognize these “higher order” signatures; this essay, however, does provide the needed background to understand why such work could be useful and gives a context for how it could proceed.

With this in mind, we come back to the physical dream. In such a dream the astral body and

Ego “touch” in briefly to the activity of the physical body without awareness of the mediatory influence provided by the etheric body. When absent an etheric body, the only activity that takes place in the physical realm is that of entropic decay -- in a very literal sense, the process of death. For this reason, the content of this type of dream, reflected off the physical to the Ego by the astral body, often revolves around feelings of peril, existential terror, or unnameable dread. These are all good descriptions of what the Ego faces were it to try to unite with the physical body directly.

This type of dream occurs more often in children, because in children the Ego has yet to fully take hold within the physical organism. A child’s astral body has less restriction imposed upon it via the will-nature of the Ego, and during sleep can occasionally touch into the forces at work in the physical body. This process occurs in most children, but in general the forces at work in the physical realm do not move through the astral body into the Ego, and the experience remains unconscious. It is when the astral body reflects off of the physical body in deep sleep and then is able to give this activity over to the Ego that a night terror results, usually awakening the child. In other words, if the dreamer doesn’t awaken, the whole experience will likely never reach consciousness.

This transition of consciousness in the meeting with the physical organism itself is like a *de facto* presaging of a future capacity that can be undertaken as a part of esoteric development. The meeting with the guardian here is fierce and uncompromising, because penetration of the physical realm by human consciousness represents one of the highest levels of spiritual development. What the Ego faces in a night terror as a child is an indication of the type of challenge that human beings who continue their spiritual development will one day have to confront directly.

In this case, almost the entirety of consciousness is thrown back by the guardian of the threshold. The Ego, too weak to awaken fully in the physical body, has an experience the content of which is almost completely a projection: it cannot penetrate deeply into the physical realm directly, but “reflects” off of the purely physical processes (entropic decay). What returns to the Ego is an experience of something like an inward falling away from itself, a sort of inversion of the Ego’s prime spiritual experience that arises when the Ego reflects upon itself. Thus, instead of an experience of “I am”, what comes to the Ego is something more like the experience of “I am *not*”. It is understandable why this relationship between the Ego and physical body is experienced upon waking as a kind of terror.

Etheric Dreams

Luckily for us, physical dreams are not the most common type of dream: rather, etheric dreams form the majority of dreams in present humanity. Alchemically the form and genesis of these dreams exemplify the qualities of the [Water](#) element. Just as in the case of the physical dream, where the experience given to the Ego is a result of its reflection off of the physical body, in an etheric dream the Ego, in concert with the astral body, reflects off of the etheric body. The etheric body is like a field of organizing forces which take hold of the physical in a way that

counteracts the physical realm's tendency towards entropic decay. It is thus the basis for all the localized negentropic (or, positively expressed: syntropic) activities we call life. If, as in the case of death, the etheric body no longer works to maintain itself syntropically, the physical body simply succumbs to entropy and is slowly rendered back into what the Bible refers to (alchemically) as "dust". In order to understand the nature and genesis of etheric dreams, we must have at least a basic understanding of how the etheric body relates to the rest of the human organism.

The activity of the etheric body works within bounds provided by the physical body below and the astral body above: it must meet these activities and bring them together in itself. During waking life, when the Ego and astral bodies are united with the etheric and physical bodies, sensory experiences impinge upon the etheric from the astral body. In a very literal sense the astral body eats away the etheric body: it uses the etheric body as a basis for outer sensory perception. One of the functions of sleep is to remove the astral body from its connection with the etheric body so that the etheric body can do its work of keeping entropy at bay in the physical body. If we could not ever sleep, our etheric bodies would be unable to overcome the destructive influence of the astral body: the etheric, prevented from fulfilling its restorative function, would not be able to keep the physical body intact, with death as the ultimate result.

During sleep, when the astral body and Ego are removed from the etheric and physical, the etheric body must deal with the impulses that have impinged upon it from the astral body during waking life. During waking states, the sensations that arise in us by virtue of our astral bodies effects decay in the etheric body in ways that are linked to the type, quality, and duration of the specific sensations. The whole of human physiology is at work in this process, in a drama that dynamically shifts between the two major physiologic poles of nerve-based activity and metabolic activity. The nerve pole, which provides the physiological basis for sensory activity, operates primarily on the basis of catabolic processes which break down substances in the body: in a very literal way, sensation rides on the destruction of substances in the body. The metabolic pole, which provides the physiological basis for the processes which build up the very substances which are broken down in catabolic processes, meets the activity of catabolism in an inverse, mirroring way. For this reason, the *way* in which the catabolic processes occur during waking life sets the stage for *how* the etheric body responds in sleep. In other words, the *quality* and *rhythm* of our sense experience plays a very important role in mediating between the astral body and the etheric body. This relationship is like a key for those interested in spiritual development.

The upshot of this relationship is that our etheric body has, as it were, an imprint formed by the *patterns* of sensation that take place in the astral body, which must constantly be dealt with. During waking life this can only be done to a limited extent, because the astral body continues to destroy the etheric body in order to be active so that we can have sensory experiences. But during sleep, when the astral body is much more loosely connected with the etheric body, the etheric body can accomplish its building up activity in a way that inversely mirrors its earlier destruction during the day.

During sleep, the astral body and Ego, although separated from the etheric and physical bodies, make rhythmic approaches back towards the etheric and physical bodies. We have seen what type of dream results when the Ego is able to “touch” into the activities occurring in the physical body *per se*. Much more commonly, however, the astral body and Ego begin to unite with the activities of the etheric body. This approach of the Ego and astral body towards the etheric leaves its trace in the physical: brain waves change into what is known as the beta rhythm, which is almost indistinguishable from normal waking activity in the brain, and the period of sleep known as REM sleep (rapid eye movement) ensues for a period of time. REM periods, where the astral body and Ego are partially united with the etheric body, occur with increasingly long durations as the night proceeds.

When the astral body alights upon the etheric during REM sleep, what comes to the astral body is in large part a result of the etheric processes that metabolically restore the physiology. These etheric processes carry the imprint of the astral body’s activity during the previous day, which now are given back to the astral body, but through the filter of its effects upon the physiology. In other words, pictures are given to the astral body primarily from the metabolic activity taking place in the physiology by virtue of the etheric body, but this activity unfolds in a way that carries the signature of the destruction caused by the astral body during the day. In other words, the astral body sees the consequences of its own previous activity mirrored back to it off of the physiology.

An etheric dream is thus a dream in which we experience the effects of our previous day’s waking activity on our etheric body. In itself this is a simple statement, but it can only be understood and unpacked by clearly tracing the connections between the various members of the human organism made above. Many dreams of this type could even be called *organ dreams*: “liver dreams”, “lung dreams” or “spleen dreams”, for example -- these are dreams that arise upon the basis of the etheric body’s activity around a particular organ during sleep.

Because the origin of these dreams lies in the human physiology, a certain commonality can be found between people in dreams of this type. However, since the dreams are not *simply* “physiological dreams”, but are dreams that arise as a consequence of the *way* in which the astral body connects to the etheric body during waking life, the overt content of the dreams can vary considerably, in ways that are directly linked to cultural considerations and other aspects of waking life that are influenced by habits in one’s astral body. Remember, it is first and foremost the *form* of the dream that provides a basis for similarity, not the content.

The overt content of etheric dreams is highly sensory, unlike the case of physical dreams. In a certain sense we could say that the etheric body contains *latent* images, which the astral body reads and forms into the dream sensorium. The astral body takes hold of etheric processes during sleep and creates through its own activity a sensory world. This world is a projection of etheric processes by the astral body: we thus experience in the dream events which seem to be coming from “outside myself” (in the dream), when in reality these are pictures of our own etheric bodies. In an etheric dream, therefore, we can say that the primary overt content of the

dream, experienced as outer events such as running down a long corridor, jumping off cliffs, walking into a house, meeting friends, and so forth, is actually a picture of the way our astral body reads the activity of our etheric body, projecting it outwards into a series of dream events.

In an etheric dream we meet the lower guardian of the threshold once more. It is not common for one's Ego to be strong enough to enter with wakefulness into the etheric body: the etheric processes are thus experienced as reflections coming to us in the dream world, and are not experienced from within, directly. The guardian says to us, "Here is presented to you all of the consequences of sensory activities in your waking life upon your etheric body." Etheric dreams are a gateway through which we must pass to gain higher consciousness. What this means is that we must pay attention to what we pay attention to when awake. This is not a tautological statement, but a cybernetic one: we must have awareness of our awareness in order to begin a process of self-development that works lawfully with the inner organization of the human being.

To state this another way, if we maintain greater awareness of where we direct our awareness when awake, we learn to recognize how certain day-waking activities to which we give our attention will lay down a kind of signature in our dream life that can be clearly seen upon waking analysis, taken up rhythmically in an experimental way over time. Just as importantly, and key for those wishing to undertake spiritual development, we must pay attention not only to *what* we pay attention to, but we must also pay attention to *how* we direct our attention. This is a second-order attention which reveals the source of the patterns which drive our butterfly-like consciousness to from object to object during the day. It also prepares the way for the next stage of dreaming.

Astral Dreams

The next level of dreaming is of a qualitatively different type, and is associated with the way in which the Ego and astral body mingle together in sleep. Astral dreams are associated with the alchemical element of [Air](#), whose main quality is that of reversal., and we can see a strong qualitative inversion of the type of experiences associated with the lower levels of dreaming in which the Ego cannot come to an experience of wakefulness on par with that of day-waking life.

In an astral dream, the Ego is capable of connecting with the astral body without the usual help of the etheric and physical bodies as is the case during the day.

Normally during sleep, when the astral body and Ego are removed from the physical and etheric bodies, the Ego is generally not capable of self-reflection. In a physical dream, the Ego is so far from self-reflection that the entire experience seems to come to us as if from out of an abyss.

We never find ourselves awake *within* a physical dream, but only experience ourselves *coming back from* such a dream, as if bursting into light after experiencing a journey of unknown duration through darkness. In an etheric dream, the Ego reflects off of the etheric body, but is not yet self-reflective. Again we generally don't experience ourselves from *within* the dream as it is occurring, but only have the dream experience come fully to the Ego upon waking, when the Ego and astral body unite with the etheric and physical. In this case we access the dream

content through our memory.

The situation with an astral dream is somewhat different, because the Ego is able to penetrate the astral body with much more ease than the etheric or physical bodies. In an astral dream, the Ego is developed enough to maintain a state that is almost equivalent to that of normal waking life, and what we experience is a “waking up” within the dream; in current parlance, we have a “lucid” dream. At the lowest level of astral dreaming, we simply become aware that we are dreaming, and often this is enough to wake us up fully. The Ego is not used to being awake without a physical and etheric body, and generally the maintenance of such a state requires overt training or perhaps “innate” capacities which rest upon work done in previous lives.

Generally speaking, the Ego aspect of most modern human beings cannot remain “awake” without its activity uniting through the astral body to the etheric and physical bodies, which it uses as a basis to reflect its own activity back to it, modified by these lower bodies. Imagine that you could only experience yourself with the use of a mirror, and that the inward experience of coherent, willed attention that characterizes wakefulness relied upon access to this mirror. Now imagine that you turned away from this mirror: you would lose the ability to experience yourself, and would fall into a state similar to that of normal sleep, where the Ego is not explicitly aware of itself. But if you strengthened your Ego so that it did not require a mirror in order to perceive itself, because *it took upon itself the function of the mirror*, then when you turned away from the mirror you could still maintain a level of wakefulness commensurate with the extent of this inward strengthening of the Ego.

This is a good description of what occurs in an astral dream, where the Ego becomes strong enough to maintain coherence without the benefit of the etheric and physical bodies as a mirror for consciousness. In the astral dream, the astral body is, as it were, taken hold of by the Ego, and transformed into a mirroring surface that allows the Ego to remain awake to itself. Hence, in an astral dream, we actually experience a state of wakefulness that is akin to--but significantly different from--the state of normal day-waking consciousness.

When awake during the day, the physical and etheric bodies continually draw the astral and Ego down, and provide a foundational context into which the activities of the astral and Ego are drawn like water into a dry sponge. In other words, the astral body and Ego remain bound by the context of the lower bodies, which (in their current, partly untransformed configuration) limit the potential activities of the higher bodies. This is merely to say that our soul life is profoundly connected to our physical life; a few parts per million of adrenaline in the physical body has definite consequences for one's soul state. But in an astral dream, when the strengthened Ego is united with the astral body away from the immediate influence of the etheric and physical bodies, such limitations are loosened. This allows for the well-known phenomenon of “conscious control” in astral, or lucid dreaming.

Whereas the content of an etheric dream is more closely associated with what occurs in our feeling-life, the content of an astral dream is more sensory-oriented. The astral body is the body

that takes sensory content and reflects it upwards to the Ego. Normally such sensory content is provided to the astral body through the etheric and physical body, which is connected with the outer physical world. However, in an astral dream, with the physical and etheric bodies oriented peripherally to the astral body and Ego, the sensory experience is stimulated from within the astral body itself. What is important to understand is that this activity can be more or less influenced by the Ego.

Part of the task of transformation in the present age involves what Rudolf Steiner refers to as the transformation of the astral body. This is accomplished when the Ego invests itself in the processes that take place in the astral body and imbues them with what could be called a Higher Will. A vast amount of what occurs in our astral body does so by virtue of habituated response patterns whose basis is in various levels of past experience linked with present circumstances, but Higher Will is future-oriented. Astral response patterns are linked to patterns in the etheric and physical bodies, and both supports them and is generated by them in a recursive feedback loop. But when the Ego awakens to its aspects which connect it to the wider spiritual world, connecting with its Higher Will, the Ego lifts the astral body away from the physical and etheric components of the cybernetic loop, freeing the astral body from their direct influence through the awakening of the Ego's Higher Will within the astral body itself. The part of the astral body transformed in this way then becomes the basis for new capacities of spiritual seership.

The task of the Ego's transformation of the astral body--the modern Rosicrucian path--is meant to be fulfilled in our day-waking life, but as our Ego is strengthened from within, it is usually the case that we will have the opportunity to meet the lower guardian of the threshold first within our sleep life, where the disconnection between the physical and etheric bodies from the astral and Ego allows the Ego to connect with the astral body more directly than when awake.

However, what this means is that we can have lucid dreams before our Ego is strong enough to take hold of the astral body within the context of the influence provided by the physical and etheric bodies. In other words, as is always the case, when building a new capacity we are granted an encounter with a guardian whose work it is to provide a form of suffering commensurate with the actual level of spiritual work that has been accomplished by the Ego.

This suffering is accomplished by the throwing back from the gateway those aspects of our being that have yet to be transformed, which then become available to consciousness in the form of projections.

In the case of the astral dream, when we meet this guardian we encounter patterns--essentially sympathies and antipathies--from the untransformed part of our astral body. In an etheric dream, we meet the projections from the etheric body in a kind of default way: experiences (even our own actions within the dream) happen as if *to* us, not as actions freely taken *by* us as is possible when we are awake. But in the astral dream the Ego has just awakened to itself, and the possibility now exists for the Ego to experience a whole sensory panorama, through the stimulation of the astral body, that is no longer bound by the rules of waking life. In other words,

“one’s wildest dreams” can *literally* be fulfilled as experiences within the astral dream.

In a sense, the astral dream is a kind of training ground for higher spiritual perception. The lower guardian poses us this question: *What will you do when you awaken into the world of the spirit?* The guardian is asking us, and providing us with an opportunity to demonstrate, the extent to which our Ego is capable of infusing the astral body with its Higher Will. If a lucid dream is thus used as a kind of playground for the fulfillment of desires that arise from habits within the astral body, we prevent ourselves from gaining access to higher spiritual perception, remaining satisfied with our own projections instead of opening to the vast spiritual world available beyond the mask raised by our astral body. We kid ourselves if we think that what happens in our dreams is private, known only to us. This inner space of the dream, particularly the astral dream, is like the foyer of a grand palace: so filled with potential wonders that it is possible to get lost there, mistaking the entrance for the inner sanctum.

Such dangers--for they are dangers to spiritual development--have been well-known throughout the esoteric traditions, from the ancient Greek’s imputation “Nothing in Excess” to the Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz to the teasing rituals of the African Bushmen to the yogas of ancient India. The astral dream is a sign that the Ego is waking up to its higher nature, not that its mission is accomplished.

Dream Technologies

Before moving on to the last level of dreaming, it should be noted that the astral dream, because of its underlying ontology in the relation between the astral body and Ego, allows for what we can call *dream technologies*. These technologies have been known to indigenous cultures across the globe for longer than recorded human history--although the coming of the modern era has eroded this wisdom quite severely. Dream technologies are all essentially methods of utilizing the various levels of freedom that are potentially experienced in the astral realm by virtue of an astral body that is freed from the influence of the etheric body.

Such technologies include astral travel, remote healing, communication with plants, animals, or with the dead, and both “white” and “black” magics, among other potential uses. I highly recommend reading my friend Ryan Hurd’s excellent article, [Lucid Dreaming as Shamanic Technology](#), for a well-researched perspective on different ways of viewing the phenomenon of lucid dreaming.

For the purposes of this article, the main thing to point out is simply that care and foresight must be exercised when the transition to the astral dream state is made, *especially* for those who wish to develop spiritual seership. In this case, one maintains a definitive humility in the face of such possibilities, always with awareness that *how we approach the spiritual world has definite consequences for what we experience there*. Recognition that the reception of spiritual experiences are a gift from higher sources and not simply a consequence of one’s own will or

desires should be maintained as a conscious attitude.

Dream technologies have their place and shouldn't be avoided out of any sort of fear that one's progress will automatically be derailed with their use. However, it can be easy to overdevelop one's astral body through the engagement of certain processes that are designed to heighten facility with one or another dream technology (most egregiously, the use of drugs). Pursuit of dream technologies for their own sake, and not in the context of continued spiritual development, can lead to imbalances which show up elsewhere in life and prevent progress from being more easily achieved. The caveats for this kind of shift in consciousness are far too numerous and contextually dependent to explore further in this article. In this regard, however, I can fully recommend the perspective cultivated by anthroposophy as a basis for healthy spiritual development.

Ego Dreams

Beyond the astral dream is what we could call the significant dream. This kind of dream has qualities associated with the alchemical element of [Fire](#), and happen only rarely or even not at all in a given life. In a significant dream, the Ego comes awake to itself, connecting to its higher aspects which act as a doorway to the wider spiritual world. The astral body does not lead the Ego around in a significant dream, as can often be the case in an astral dream; rather, the Ego receives, as it were, a gift from itself that carries a picture of one's destiny. The astral body receives this picture and makes a world out of it, but the content for this world is provided from the Higher Will of the Ego. In a significant dream, the Higher Will of the Ego is available also for the transformation of the Ego itself.

In this case, the Ego meets the lower guardian of the threshold and sees itself: the Ego becomes its own mirror. Out of this self-meeting flow pictures held by the higher aspects of the Ego that are normally inaccessible due to the obscuring nature of the astral, etheric, and physical bodies. A significant dream thus connects us to our innermost selves.

Whereas in an astral dream we experience a wakefulness like that available during day-waking consciousness, in a significant dream we may not feel quite as "self-aware". This may seem like a strange thing to say because it would seem that the trend has been towards greater and greater self-awareness as we move through the different levels of dreaming. The reason for this change has to do with the source of the significant dream. In the cases of the physical, etheric, and astral dreams, the Ego looks "down" as it were, on the reflected activity from these respective bodies. In other words, it is not called to look "up" to what lies beyond the Ego, but as it strengthens itself it becomes more and more capable of maintaining a kind of wakefulness.

But something happens in a significant dream that reveals the workings of a sort of spiritual law: lower consciousness struggles to maintain wakefulness within the context of higher consciousness. When the Ego awakens to its higher aspects in a significant dream, it is as if the Ego is meeting a higher being, because initially the part of our Ego which can say to itself "I

am awake” resides only in the lower part of the Ego. In the significant dream, this part of the Ego, which usually provides the light of wakeful consciousness itself, is now in the presence of an even greater light. The lower part of the ego thus becomes like a darkness to this greater light, a single candle in the presence of a blazing fire.

The strengthening of the Ego thus far has allowed it to maintain enough coherence away from the activities of the physical, etheric, and astral bodies so as to open itself up to this type of experience, which is received like a gift from above. A significant dream cannot be formed from the activity of the lower Ego or the lower members of the human being, but has its source in the part of the Ego that is connected to the wider spiritual world, and which holds one’s destiny pictures, or we could say, which holds one’s karma. Thus a significant dream can rightfully be called a karmic dream: the beholding of one’s karma.

The overt sensory content of a significant dream, still filtered through the astral body, may not seem special or in any way out of the ordinary. But--and this is one of the qualities of the significant dream--*you know* that there is a more important level of dream content that is only *carried by* the sensory, symbolic content of the dream, and that the real importance of the dream comes from this deeper level. The meaning of such dreams is therefore not subject to purely symbolic interpretations, approaches which can only utilize the overt sensory content of the dream but cannot penetrate to the true source of such dreams.

Significant dreams, as pictures from our higher selves of some aspect of our karma, can serve as guiding lights for many years, perhaps even a whole life, and generally should be shared lightly, if at all. The biblical injunction to cast not your pearls before swine can be seen as a warning in this respect: the gift of a destiny picture is from a higher source to you alone. Once shared, it is not difficult to come under the influence of all the untransformed aspects of our lower selves which are stirred by contact with the lower selves of those around us. Keeping a significant dream sacred is a good way of allowing its influence to continue to work through the Ego, an influence which helps the Ego transform itself and thus further its work on the lower bodies.

Conclusion

We have seen that dreaming, when understood in the light of the spiritual makeup of the human being, takes on dimensions that go far beyond what is available to psychology, which generally is incapable of achieving much clarity in matters of the spirit, even as it reveals important aspects of our soul-lives. The kind of context for dreaming presented in this article can provide a useful series of signposts for one’s own spiritual work--in dreaming and also in day-waking life.

This is because all of the states of consciousness described above in the various levels of dreaming are potentially available also during our regular daily lives.. In other words, dreaming

is not an activity that takes place solely at night. It should be clear that the approach in this article has been to provide a description of the underlying logic of the makeup of the human being and its consequences for dreaming. But the relations between the various aspects of the human being are at work during the day as well, and we can literally slip into and out of various dream states without realizing that this is the case.

In other words, it is important to realize that opportunities for spiritual work arise *every day*, and that we meet the lower guardian in various guises every time we speak to another person, every time we eat lunch, and every time we initiate a will activity. All of these meetings are fractal to each other: manifestations of a single complex pattern at various scales and over various time periods. By taking in the kind of descriptions offered in this article as a context for these day-to-day activities of life, we provide the Ego with another loop in its own bootstrap so that it has more of an opportunity to pull itself upwards towards its own transformation, and it is in this spirit that this article is offered.