

## **Dreams Spiritual, Dreams Scientific**

In Issue 50 of De Numine I briefly described how, over a period of forty years or more, working with my dreams has been a major factor in my own "spiritual" development. In concluding that piece I suggested that attending to dreams is something that everyone could potentially find a very natural thing to do, and that dreams offer an entirely natural approach to exploring our inner world. In this follow up I would like to amplify this perspective and say a little more about why I consider our dreams deserve more of our attention and consideration than we normally afford them in western culture. But before turning to dreams it will be necessary to indulge in a little scene setting to establish the context for what is to be said about dreams and our notions of self.

We live, I would suggest, deeply embedded in mystery. It has always been that way. In recent times science has made almost unbelievably successful progress in describing the nature of "reality". We have found answers to many of the questions that puzzled our forebears but even in science mystery remains and as we move into the twenty first century science is facing bigger challenges and bigger questions than it has for some time. This too is a sign of its success, as science is perhaps more about asking pertinent questions than it is about providing final answers, more about achieving an understanding of what can reasonably be said about the world rather than saying what or why it is in any fundamentally fixed or absolute way.

At the personal or societal level mystery is not something we generally seem very happy to live with. We want answers and we want them now, and if someone else will provide them without us having to make too much of an effort then so much the better. In so many cases we insist on making life difficult for ourselves by demanding answers to the big questions and imagining that if we had the answers all would be well, we would be satisfied, we would know. Is there a god? Who or what am I? Who or what is the real

me? Is there life after death? Is there a heaven? Reincarnation? What's it all about? For heaven's sake - Why? The list goes on.

So how are we to make progress, to increase our understanding and appreciation? Well, science has done so by paying close attention to phenomena that happen in the outer world, by asking small questions about specific phenomena and demanding, via experiments, that whatever the outcome, whatever answer emerges, it can be replicated and repeated by someone else.

So far so general, and perhaps so vague. To make things more specific I'll indulge in one further scene setting exercise. Please bear with me, and apologies to those with a science background.

Consider your current condition as you read this article. What can be said about it? Well there is a fair chance that you are sitting down, probably at home. So if I ask you something simple, something objective, such as "At what speed are you traveling?" you are likely to respond that you are stationary and that you are travelling at exactly 0 mph. Quite clearly you have no speed at all. These are, on any common sense or everyday level, the facts of the matter. However, if we take a step further and insist that this is the universal and absolute truth, that this is "The Answer" about your speed we would be mistaken. It does not take much reflection to consider that, while comfortably ensconced in your armchair, from other perspectives you are indeed in motion and that you do indeed have a speed. This becomes apparent when you consider the following:

- You are sitting on a rotating earth. To complete one rotation with the earth at the equator you will be travelling at some 1,040mph, at the latitude of Great Britain about 650mph.
- The Earth is orbiting around the sun at about 65,000mph. That's your speed too!

- The Sun, with the earth in orbit, is traveling around the centre of our Milky Way galaxy at some 486,000mph. Wow! You're going fast!

What can we learn from this? Are there any useful generalisations we can make that we might apply in other situations?

Given this multiplicity of speeds you might well demand to know what your “**real**” speed is. The short answer is that you haven't got one. It's not your speed after all. Speed is the word we use for one of the factors that helps to describe your change in position over time, your motion, *in relation to another object*. To speak unambiguously about your speed you must specify in relation to which object you are moving. There is no absolute, universal standard or spatial framework against which to establish a universal or “ultimately true” speed. You have as many speeds as you choose objects to measure yourself in relation to. That's potentially a lot of speeds. Importantly, the natural state of objects is revealed to be one of constant motion, they always “have” a speed, and contrary to all our everyday and common sense notions they are never at rest. But you are at rest relative to your armchair, your room, your house and the earth. Call it a “paradox” if you wish and note in passing that spirituality is full of them.

We could carry out a similar exercise with many other everyday words and concepts such as weight, size and colour that relate to the physical world. In the biological world we might give the concept of a species similar treatment.

This is all well understood in the world of science but what does it have to do with dreaming and spirituality?

To jump right in I would like to suggest that just as you have no “real, unique and absolutely true” speed there is no “real, unique and absolutely true” you. I suggest that your sense of “you” depends very much upon the circumstances, the other concepts,

ideas and emotions, the mental phenomena that you habitually choose to “measure” yourself against. Your “you” is not, in the final analysis, yours but arises in relation to the mental phenomena that you choose to attend to. In short we are not single entities from which all else proceeds. Yet just as you appear to be at rest while in your armchair you also appear to be you while engaged in the activities of everyday life.

All of us who drive have surely experienced that unsettling moment when our conscious attention returns to the road and the traffic, only to realise that we have been engaged in some reverie for the previous few minutes. Some other part of our psyche has been behind the wheel and doing the driving pretty competently until an out of the ordinary event, all those brake lights coming on ahead, prompted some other unconscious us to issue a warning so that we resumed conscious control over the vehicle.

There is nothing new here. For 2,500 years Buddhism has been saying something similar. In Buddhism key concepts and ideas about the nature of the world include:

**Dependent origination:** Phenomena arise only in relation to one another. Objects and phenomena are said to be “empty”, they have no reality in and of themselves.

**No-self:** The self is illusory. It arises habitually and is perceived in relation to every day events and thoughts.

**The constancy of change:** Everything is impermanent, nothing persists, and all is change.

The spirit of personal verification, of experimentation and testing, so central to science is clearly and forcibly present in Buddhism, where it is applied to the inner rather than the outer world. Buddha did not expect others to take his word for it. He expected them to test his teachings personally, to make the path their own, to live it and judge the outcomes for themselves. Buddhist’s have for the last 2,500 years been experimenting, testing and importantly repeating observations on there own minds and psyches

through practices such as meditation and waking mindfulness, and by constantly questioning and observing their own mental states.

It seems to me that through this they have discovered methods for abandoning or stepping outside the everyday experience of a single unified self to achieve new perspectives on their own subjective experience and a radically different appreciation of the nature of awareness. There is, I suggest, a powerful symmetry, a common ground, that begins to become apparent when we move beyond common stereotypes of science and Buddhism. The inner reality reflects the outer and vice-versa. They are both part of the whole piece, like the one/two side(s) of some cosmic Mobius Strip. In both cases the primacy of objects as independent things gives way to underlying processes and phenomena that facilitate the structured flow of energy and information that is a constant, dynamic unfolding of being.

As with science, Buddhists have accumulated a vast library of knowledge, contrived a host of technical terms, methodologies, spiritual technologies and maps to aid their explorations of mind. As with science, these can present formidable barriers to those whose have not been raised or educated in the various Buddhist traditions, and who are seeking to understand, implement and integrate Buddhist insights into their daily life. Buddhism has been remoulding itself in the west for some time now, so perhaps this situation will improve as contemporary western approaches appear and Buddhism adapts to a new culture, just as it has done so many times in the past.

We might at this point reasonably ask if there are spontaneous and naturally occurring phenomena that can help to shift us from our habitual, culturally conditioned, common sense view of the world and ourselves? Is there something most of us experience that, if we attended to it more closely, could help shift our awareness to a new viewpoint, that could help us gain a new experiential perspective, widening our appreciation of the nature of our being? The answer must surely be, yes. We know from Sir Alister's surveys

that many people report spontaneous shifts in consciousness and awareness, which many interpret as spiritual or religious. There can be little doubt about the existence of these phenomena; it is in the interpretation that differences appear.

For me dreams are obvious, regularly occurring mental phenomena that offer the opportunity for spontaneous shifts of conscious perspective. The difficulty is that in our society we are not encouraged to attend to our dreams, or to grant them any particular significance. Children are often told after an unpleasant dream “It’s only a dream”, in other words it’s of no significance and can be disregarded. Reality is generally considered to be that which we experience in the waking state and dreams, together with other “altered” states of consciousness, are regarded as fantasy, imaginary, fictitious, but definitely not real and definitely not something offering worthwhile insights into the human condition. As a whole society takes pride in this stance seeing it a victory of the rational enlightenment, one that elevates us above most other cultures, past and present, which regard dreams and altered states of consciousness as either valuable or real. In cultures where this holds true, dreams are given special regard, and their meaning actively sought. Further, although analytical or depth psychology arose in western European culture, we have not taken to heart the message of its pioneers: that we do ourselves a disservice by ignoring the workings of that larger mind which moves beneath the iceberg tip of our everyday conscious awareness. We do not regard dreams as C.G. Jung suggested we should:

*A dream should "be taken in all seriousness as something that has actually happened to us; it should be treated as a contributory factor in framing our conscious outlook"*

At a time when traditional forms of religion and spirituality appear to be in decline I’m inclined to feel that dreams provide a natural and readily accessible means of approaching the inner mystery that life presents to us. I value them because:

- For me much of what is religious has arisen from experiences grounded in dreams or other states of altered consciousness. States of awareness that are experienced in dreams can, I think, also be experienced through other forms of activity such as meditation, religious devotions and pharmacologically or herbally induced altered states.
- Many traditions have their own version of a spiritual path or progress. I would suggest that Jung's process of individuation is essentially another of these, and that dreams form a central component of this.
- Dreams are both universal and egalitarian. They have been reported through all cultures and times. You can't be blamed or praised for your dreams; they arise spontaneously and are not under your conscious control.
- Dreams are phenomena of nature; everyone agrees they exist. They can be studied and we can compare notes, if we would only agree to grant them significance and talk about them.
- Dreams offer a degree of objectivity when studying the inner world; they offer some degree of repeatability and re-observation. Patterns and relationships can be identified and described as with scientific endeavours.
- Dreams are "hands on". You can't make any real progress without getting involved. They are not dogmatic or faith based. A theoretical or academic consideration of dreaming is desirable but can only sensibly follow on from individual experience. Dreams are first and foremost experiential.
- Dreams are challenging and fun, fulfilling, illuminating and by equal turns frightening and scary, undermining of the mental status quo and therefore potentially

transformative. They can take you to the extremes of yourself, completely turning about your conception of your own being.

- Dreams are of many different types and scales. Some clearly relate to everyday situations and anxieties. Then there are “Big Dreams” that demand attention and stick with you for life. I would suggest that dreams are not of a single type and do not perform a single function.

My interest in dreams has always been driven by their ability to facilitate personal or spiritual development, to guide, map and chart the path of spiritual progress. In my experience they are not passive providers of information to the ego but autonomous agents of transformative, power and energy. It seems to me that in the post-modern age when authority of all types is being brought into question and looked at with a sceptical eye, whether that authority be political, religious or scientific, many people feel the need for a spirituality, however they conceive it, that is present in their day-to-day lives and not partitioned off in some special time or place. Dreams, with the relative regularity of their occurrence, can help and provide a focus for this need; and the more you attend to them, perhaps by keeping a dream journal, the more regular they become.

In short dreams have for me provided a natural way to approach and have access to “The Other” or “The More”. To quote William James:

*“The “more”, as we called it, and the meaning of our “union” with it, form the nucleus of our inquiry. Into what definite description can these words be translated, and for what definite facts do they stand?” (Varieties of Religious Experience, a Study in Human Nature, 1902)* In my experience dreams can unequivocally help address this question.

The only way I can bring things to an appropriate conclusion is to offer you one of my dreams. It is worth remembering that when referring to dreams there is the dream as



first experienced, the dream as remembered, the dream as told or written and the dream as heard or read. With each iteration there is loss of impact or power.



**D388: 27th November 1993. Bliss Amongst Trees**

I'm walking down an avenue of trees. The leaves are shimmering with yellow golden light.

Identification..... then dissolution and spaciousness.

Although this is a short and simple dream it is hard to convey the strength of its impact. The dissolution leaves only an awareness of spacious awareness with no intruding sense of identity. Jung referred to this process of individuation, his "spiritual path", in the following way:

*"The whole course of individuation is dialectical, and the so called "end" is the confrontation of the ego with the "emptiness" of the centre. Here the limit of possible experience is reached: the ego is dissolved as the reference point of cognition."*

And finally, you will recall that you have no true, or ultimately real, speed. In considering this dream experience and others like it, although they are powerful, I would not claim that they are uncovering an ultimate reality or somehow providing the ultimate real answer. What such experiences and dreams can do is prod, push and pummel you to radical new perspectives that go beyond the bounds of intellectual formulation. It has not always been comfortable, but dreams have enriched my life and increased my appreciation of the everyday, which I see as no more and no less real than the experiences of my dreams. Value the ordinary, for beauty and mystery are alive there too.

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*For those who might be interested I offer a much larger sample from my dream diaries at [www.openfoot.net](http://www.openfoot.net) where they are accompanied by other reporting formats including, sketches, jottings, and some dream interpretation, that further chart my ramblings through internal landscapes.*