

Lucidity from the Bön Tradition of Tibet

[Tia Rich]: Welcome to the Contemplation by Design Summit. This is the closing evening of our 10-day summit. It is an opportunity to be with wise people who guide us in the path of reflecting on its merits and the unanswered questions of how to bring it into our modern lives. This evening, it is a very great honor to present Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, who will bring to us his gift of sharing in a manner that Western minds would particularly respond to, the teachings of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He is an author and teacher, and we're fortunate to have him living in the San Francisco Bay area, being able to bring his wisdom to each of you and to the Stanford community tonight. He will be giving a lecture as well as some guided meditation. And then at the end of the evening, we will have an open discussion of question and answer. So please give a warm welcome to our speaker.

[Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche]: Hello. Is it working? Good evening, everybody. Very happy to be here this evening. The title of the talk is "Tibetan Dream Yoga and Lucid Dreaming". I will try to say a few words about it. To start, how many of you are familiar with any sense of this dream yoga practice or night practice? Okay, good. No problem. The talk I am going to give is based on a book that I published called "The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep". It is based on a very ancient tradition of Tibet, on ancient texts, and also a little bit on my own experiences and understanding of the night practice. This practice is very much based on how to utilize our nights as a way of personal development. In our lifetime, we spend probably anywhere from 25 to 30 years sleeping. Right? And very often we don't know what's happening during that time. Very often it is not seen as something important, sacred, or useful. People go to sleep—they just "go to sleep". For example, tonight everybody is going to go to sleep. How many of you are looking forward to going to sleep? Okay, that's good. But how many of you are planning to do something else—stay up late to study or watch something? You see, very often for us, night is somehow a time we go to sleep, but we don't really look at it as something special, something needed for physical and mental health, for well-being, or for personal and spiritual development. We don't think that way. We just go to sleep. We hopefully get good rest, but it's not guaranteed. In the Tibetan tradition, going to sleep is a whole other understanding. It's a sacred journey. It's a spiritual journey where there is a lot of possibility to understand oneself, one's conditions, and one's potentiality.

For example, every night when we go to sleep, we often have many negative dreams, and sometimes positive dreams. Very often it is said that a positive dream tends to turn into a negative dream rather than a negative dream turning into a positive one; it often goes the other way around. Very often in the night, we go through sleep deprivation, nightmares, and interrupted sleep. We don't get enough rest. And when we have a dream, the dream influences us. Every night, whatever dream you have, chances are it will be impacting your mental health, your mood, or your restfulness in the morning. You don't get good rest because you have a long nightmare or fearful dreams. The dream yoga practice is very much about personal and spiritual development. It's like discovering a whole other time to practice and meditate. Does that make sense? Usually, we don't think: "I go to sleep and in the morning I become a better person psychologically or physically". In principle, yes, it should be like that. If you really look at sleep in a right, positive way, sleep is sacred. It is about utilizing how to be conscious, how to have a lucid dream, and how to change your nightmare into something positive or at least protect yourself from it. So in the morning, you don't carry bad experiences. In the Tibetan tradition, this is used as a way of spiritual development. It is not looked at so much as mere psychological development; it is part of the spiritual path. Every night when people go to sleep, this is their practice.

What about lucid dreaming? Lucid dreaming is a very important part of this practice, and it means being conscious of your dream as a dream while you're dreaming. Does that make sense? When you're sleeping and dreaming, you are aware that it's a dream. That's called lucid dreaming. What does that do? When you're conscious that it's a dream, it means that in the dream you don't have to worryâ€”it's just a dream. This is how we think: "It's a dream, don't worry about it". Or "It's a dream, and I can do anything". I can change and transform; I don't have to suffer continuously or be stuck in one place. I can transform many things. That's the idea. But in order to do that, you have to have lucidity first.

I'll tell one story of a student of mine. She had a dream... in her general life she was feeling a little bit unsafe, threatened, not very secure. That was the general sense of her life. But in a dream, she was doing some dream yoga practices, and she had this dream where she was in a restaurant in the evening and was a little bit worried. As she was leaving the restaurant, she saw a bunch of guys following her. She went to the parking lot, and they were following her. She got in the car, and they followed. She drove on the highway, and they were following her. Suddenly, she realized: "This is a dream". The moment she realizes it's a dream, the mantra is: "This is a dream, and in a dream I can do anything". Right? You're free. In a dream you're free. In reality, you feel you are not freeâ€”that's the idea we have. That's our definition of reality and seriousness. For her, it was: "This is a dream, in a dream I can do anything". So she flew her car into the sky. Her car was flying, and

all the guys were stuck in their car on the highway. she looked down and felt a deep sense of freedom and liberation. For us, we can talk about it, but the way she describes it is a unique experience. For Tibetans, this kind of experience means that a deep change happened in her. It's not just "it was a dream," but a deep energetic and psychological shift. That sense of freedom from what she's afraid of... we think the effect of that transformation in the dream, with the help of lucid dreaming, is far more powerful than an analytical approach. It is very energetic and physical too.

How do you have a lucid dream? The practices for having a lucid dream are not so much about what you do in the night. Normally, sleep just "happens" to you, and you are "dreamt" rather than you dream. It's just something that happens but you don't really prepare. How many of you feel you have a choice in what kind of dreams you want to have tonight? Or if you are dreaming, do you feel you have a choice to change the dream? Not very often, right? In dream yoga practice, there are a few exercises I recommend.

Exercise number one: Look at everything you perceive as a dream. Right now, as you are listening to me in this hall, look at yourself a little bit. How serious are you, how relaxed are you? How are you listening and responding? Just step back, calm down, and settle deep. Open up and then look, listen, hear... whatever you are perceiving through your senses and through your mind, look at it as a dream. Like a dream. Does that make sense? Say to yourself: "It feels a little bit like a dream" or "This is a dream". Depending on how brave you are. Exercise this from morning until evening, many times throughout the day. Every time you get tense, serious, judgmental, or when you are contracting... at that very moment, feel the stillness and silence, look at things and say: "This is like a dream". It's like creating files in a computer. Every moment in our day, we are automatically creating files. And every time a file is closed, the computer asks: "Do you want to save the file?". Usually, we say yes. And then: "What do you want to call it?". We call it "Serious", "Personal", "Deadline", "Urgency". These files are causes of suffering because of the way you see them. So when you say "save it," look at the meeting or the conversation and say: "It's a dream". If you are able to save that file as a dream—even a serious or challenging one—you will build a different relationship to it. And in the night when you go to sleep, maybe something linked with that dream shows up. And the moment the dream shows up, what is the file name? "This is a dream". Basically, you're trying to take waking information and bridge it into the night consciously.

Exercise number two: Do the same but with something that challenges you strongly. Whenever you react strongly or feel shaken by a situation you are not used to, take a few minutes. Don't just let the experience impact you and walk away. Process that emotion and that thought. Clear it by slowing down, being still

and silent, and looking at it again from a deeper, calmer place. And then say: "Wow, it was scary, but it's a dream". Rather than carrying that fear with you all day, you process it.

Exercise number three: Before you go to sleep. What do we usually do before sleep? We are half-dead, tired, we throw ourselves on the bed and go to sleep. We don't prepare. Usually, your schedule stops when you close your eyes, but you don't often say: "I'm going to calm down, breathe deep, be conscious, and look at my day". Look back at your day and see what was not well processed. Those conversations, emails, or thoughts... look back at them. Take five minutes. Feel the stillness in your body, the silence in your speech (mind quiet and calm), and the spaciousness in your heart (heart open). Breathe deep and, from that place, look at your day. That meeting was difficult, but it's okay. Process it from a deeper place, build a positive relationship with it, and then say goodbye. The best thing is to delete the file. The second best thing is to rename it. Instead of saying "it was horrible and that person is confirmed to be horrible," find inner peace and then go to sleep.

Exercise number four: When you wake up in the morning. Look back at what happened. Was it a successful dream yoga practice? Was I able to be lucid? Did I fly? Did I transform the lion into a flower? If there was success, celebrate with a sense of joy. And if it was not a success, reinforce your practice. Don't feel bad; just say it didn't happen and you will try again, building trust in your ability to have a lucid dream.

Once you have a lucid dream, what do you do? Like the girl in the story: she could have transformed those people into angels, but at least she was able to fly. The degree of what you are able to do depends on how flexible you are. If you are on the fifth floor and someone is chasing you, and you know it's a dream, you could jump... but you might prefer not to because your confidence is not total yet. The same thing happens in our life. During the day, when you have to make a decision, how do you make it? Are you forced? Is it out of fear? The best decisions are made when you are fully open and aware of the situation. Awareness during the day helps awareness in the night to have a lucid dream. The whole idea in lucid dreaming is basically being free— not feeling stuck in something that stops the flow of your life, your creativity, or your potential.

Someone asked why we try to see things as a dream. According to Buddhist teachings, it "is" like a dream. What you see as real is as unreal as a dream, and a dream is as real as this reality. In the night dream, if you are lucid, you suffer less. And if you suffer less in the night dream by being aware, it will impact the way you experience the day. What is "real" for you? What is "serious"? Sometimes people

say: "We've been happy in a relationship for many years, now let's get serious". What does that mean? "Let's have a problem"? Seriousness often narrows things down and limits them. It's like renting an apartment for years and enjoying it, but the moment you buy it and sign the papers, you begin to see problems in the walls, the roof, the floor... The apartment is the same, but you are seeing it through the "self-grasping eye" and with seriousness. Seeing everything as a dream helps us be freer.

There is also "non-dreaming sleep". In the tradition, we don't call it lucid dreaming because there is no dream, but "Sleep of Clear Light". It is the possibility of being conscious and aware in a deep, non-dreaming state. And all these exercises are preparation for death. The moment you die, the same process happens. If you have success in your sleep yoga and dream yoga, you have more chances of success in the "Bardo" — the intermediate state after death.

We also discussed mindfulness. In the beginning, some initial control is necessary. It's like learning to drive: at first you are very focused and in control, and later you can let go and do it naturally. The same happens with meditation.

About food and the body: Yes, food matters. It is recommended to keep the evening meal light and avoid alcohol (unless used as medicine for "Wind"). There are also physical exercises ("Tsa Lung") to open channels. Even the sleeping position and visualizations matter. You visualize a "Green Goddess" who protects you like a mother.

Regarding positive emotions: Joy allows you to clear sadness. By bringing the "light of awareness" to the "darkness of sadness," the sadness clears and a new space appears where spontaneous joy can arise. And it is important to express that joy through your body, speech, and mind (the three doors).

Should we analyze dreams in the morning? There are two approaches. The Western approach often analyzes a lot searching for meaning. We believe meanings are things we build ourselves according to our culture. If you create a positive meaning, it has a positive impact; if negative, a negative impact. You are the creator of your meanings. I met a woman who was proud of having analyzed a single dream for fifteen years... we would think she was stuck in a dream for fifteen years! The goal is natural awareness, not being stuck.

Now we will do a short meditation.

Sit comfortably. Breathe in deep and hold it in the area of the heart (heart chakra). Re-inhale slightly (a short inhale on top) to fill completely. Hold as long as you can with full attention. When you cannot hold anymore, gently breathe out slowly

through your nostrils. Repeat this five times. Clear all the stale breath and the energy you are holding in your body, breath, and mind. One last time. Hold... and gently breathe out. Now rest and breathe normally.

Bring your attention to the body. Scan from the soles of the feet to the crown of the head. Any place you feel pain, blockages, or tension, bring the light of your awareness there. Clear the darkness of obscuration. Simply be fully aware and conscious.

Now bring your attention to the throat. Be aware of the silence around you and within you. Rest deep in that silence. Allow the voices of pain, noises, and challenges to dissolve into that inner silence. There is a difference between being quiet and being aware of the silence. Awareness of silence is powerful—like tasting chocolate.

Finally, bring your attention to your heart. Imagine it is like a crystal-clear sky. Sensation of spaciousness, the boundless sacred space of your heart. Allow any wound or conflict to dissolve there. Rest in that space, as if preparing to go to sleep tonight. We call this "Sleep of Clear Light". "Clear" means that sacred space, "Light" means the awareness of that space.

You can open your eyes.

Imagine going to sleep with these three little meditations. Because when you go to sleep, you take your body, your mental voices, and your emotions with you. They all impact your sleep and your dream. By preparing beforehand, you will sleep better and have more chances for lucidity.

Remember the importance of the last moment. Just as when someone dies, the last moment before sleep matters very much. What thought, what emotion, and what energy you are carrying. Every single night we have the experience of rehearsing how to die properly. Someday we will die, and this is the rehearsal.

If you lose awareness in a dream, there is not much you can do at that moment. It's like a final test: you have to prepare before. That's why we practice during the day. If you are aware during the day that you are angry, you can change, breathe, and feel empathy. The same in the night. It all depends on your level of confidence and awareness.

For sleeping, the upward position is recommended, but if you don't have energy, lying down is okay. And regarding writing down dreams, I only write down what I feel is a significant dream, not insignificant "samsaric" dreams. Listen to your dreams. If you have a recurring dream, it's because you are a bad listener. The dreams repeat until you get it. Don't let them repeat too much, because what is deep in the unconscious—how we project and feel—ends up creating our

reality. Before they become real (in waking life), delete them in the dream.

Thank you very much.