

The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep with Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche

[Marianne]: This is your host, Mary Ann Pastana. And we're here today with a special guest, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, who's here to share with us his new book, **The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep: Practices for Awakening**. So, welcome to the show.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Thank you.

[Marianne]: What an honor it is to have you here and to talk about your new book. What was the inspiration for writing this?

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Well, you know, in our tradition—I am a Tibetan Lama and was one from childhood—the dream has been a very important part of our life. My mother always told me her dreams; they had very important meanings and guided her life. The teacher I grew up with also always told me his dreams were telling him to do this or that; basically, dreams were guiding him. So in our spiritual tradition, both dream and sleep are actually a very important part of our spiritual practice. Average humans spend twenty-five years of their lives sleeping—one-third of our lives. So I felt it was important to really share some traditional wisdom with the West.

[Marianne]: Well, we're so glad that you are. I found this book to be so impactful because you're right: we spend a lot of time in our sleep, and that line between the "me" and when we go to sleep kind of blurs.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yes, absolutely. So basically, our day is going to be affected by our night, and our night is very affected by our day. Somewhere, the cycle has to change. Bad day, bad night; bad night, bad day—it keeps getting worse and worse. At some point, you have to enter into an "intermean" (intermediate state) and change the course. Dream yoga practice is very much about trying to bring more sense of awareness during the daytime so that in the night there will be more awareness, more lucidity. So you can actually change things in your dream and bring more healing.

[Marianne]: Is that what you mean by "dream yoga"?

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yeah. "Yoga" is an Eastern word; in the West, sometime when we say yoga, people immediately think of only the physical aspect. But yoga is the exercise of wisdom. It could be physical, it could be breathing, it could be mental, it could be meditative. So here, dream yoga and sleep yoga refer to the awareness that we can bring into our dream and sleep. How we can bring that awareness, what that awareness can do, its impact—you know, how you are going to heal old wounds that we are not able to get in touch with during the awakened state, how we can get in touch with them in the night, and so on. So it's very much about bringing awareness into the dream and sleep world.

[Marianne]: I love how your book talks about lucid dreaming and how that's not an end in itself. Rather, it just provides us the context where we can engage and advance our practices and become free of the things that keep us stuck.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yes, absolutely. You know, generally when we talk about "lucid dreaming," some people might not be very familiar with the idea. What it means is being aware of your dream while you're dreaming. That is a lucid dream. The benefit is that when you're aware of your dream while you're dreaming—if it's a nightmare and you want to get out—you don't actually have to get out of the dream. You have to be aware of it. Then the dream contents can change. Because when you know it's a dream, you're not afraid. You are not affected by it; you feel you have a choice and the power to change it.

For example, if a tiger is chasing you and you're running, and suddenly you realize "It's my dream," you can change the tiger into your cute dog. And then you will not run away; you will immediately hug and hold it. Then the relationship to that dream has been changed. Many times in our everyday life, we have reoccurring dreams. Recurring dreams happen because we are not good listeners; we don't listen to our dreams, we don't hear them, we don't process them—so they keep coming back again and again. But when we hear them, when we feel them, we understand them. Then we can see what's going on—some kind of old wound, unprocessed feeling, thought, or emotion is still there. During the daytime, we get very busy, we forget, we ignore them. But in the night when we are not working and not busy, when we are sleeping, they show up again and again. So when you are lucid, you have the opportunity to change, to process, and to transform those recurring dreams and bring more healing.

[Marianne]: I've often heard people say they've had lucid dreams and it feels so "real"—using little air quotes—and then they wake up and can't tell which one is the real reality. I understand that we also look at real life as a dream world too.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yes. In Buddhism, there's a deep meaning: they say a dream is as real as our waking life, and our waking life is as unreal as a dream. The reason why there is a possibility of awakening in our dream is that for most of us, we think

a dream is not real. We say "It's just a dream." In a dream, if you die, you don't actually die. If you're sick in a dream, you're not actually sick. If you're suffering in your dream, you're not actually suffering. You just have to "wake up" within the dream and know it's a dream; then you are free from death, aging, and fear. We understand that a dream is not real, and that is exactly why we use it.

If you are able to have a lucid dream, if you're able to wake up in your dream and realize all the suffering that you're producing is just a dream—if you recognize that and process it, transform it, and become free from it—then when you wake up, your life is already changing because you have already made changes in your dream. So this is very much about doing the work that you are not able to do in awakened life during the night, in dream and sleep. The impact is similar, and you can achieve a lot of healing like that.

[Marianne]: I think that's so profound. In the West, we've always looked at dreams as if they were just something too spicy we had last night, or our imagination, as opposed to something that would benefit us.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yes. Of course, people can have very exciting dreams like flying, entering different worlds, traveling back to the past or into the future, and meeting people you were never able to meet in your waking life. All this is encouraged in a dream yoga practice once you have a lucid dream.

[Marianne]: When we look at how experience is shaped, in your book you talk about how even in dreams it's shaped by ignorance. I wonder what that correlation is.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Well, again, the word "ignorance" is very precisely defined in Buddhism. In everyday life, you would say "ignoring" is not knowing something—like not knowing technology or art architecture. But in Buddhism, we're not talking about just not knowing *something*. It refers very much to not knowing *yourself*. Do you know yourself? Do you know who you are? If you don't know who you are, then that's called ignorance. Of course, people say "I know who I am: my name is Susan, my name is John." But that's your name, that's not you. "I know who I am: I'm a lawyer, I'm a doctor." That's what you do; that's your profession, that's not who you are. "Oh, I'm a father, I'm a mother." No, that's a role you're playing in a particular relationship.

When you look deep inside trying to see who you are, most people find nothing. And when they find nothing to refer to, nothing to identify with, they are lost. That sense of loss is called ignorance. Once that deep ignorance is present in our life, we are always looking to identify with something. At different times, we identify with different things—as a teenager, identifying with games, YouTubers, or famous people. As we get older, we get caught up with work and survival. We have a lot of

emotional stories, identifying as someone who was dealing with all these pains and stories. We don't know who we are. That is ignorance. Every single dream that we have is the product of ignorance.

[Marianne]: And is that where the keys are to help us identify who we really are?

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yes. Apart from the dream and sleep yoga practices, in Buddhism generally, first, in order for you to know who you are, the most important part of the journey is to know who you are **not** and how seriously you are identifying with something that you are not. When you look at that, you might say "How does that work?" If you look at this very moment, at your deepest pain or strongest conflict, look at who is feeling the conflict. Who is feeling the pain? That "who" is not you. When you recognize "Oh, that's my pain, it's not me; that's my fear, it's not me," the moment you are able to even recognize that you are not your fear, your pain, or your story—a little distillation from that is already a big shift in consciousness.

[Marianne]: It sounds very liberating to get to that point.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: But it's also about being genuinely interested in knowing yourself—knowing who you are not and how we identify with that.

[Marianne]: That sounds like such a gift. For a lot of people, we hear all the time about karma, and I think a lot of people think of karma as a negative thing. What really is karma and how does that tie into what we're doing here?

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Karma is not negative. In the West, sometimes people think it is, but in Buddhism, when we say "karma," it basically means your actions. If you have a good action, the result will be happiness. If you have a negative action, the result will be unhappiness or suffering. Karma is action. They say: if you want to know your past life, look at who you are today; if you want to know your future life, look at what you are doing today. What you're doing today is creating the causes and conditions for your next rebirth. It's the same way before you go to sleep: if you want to know how you're going to sleep tonight, look at what you're doing today. If your awakened life is conflicting, confusing, painful, and exhausting, your night is going to be a difficult one. But if you are open, kind, restful, and optimistic, you are going to have a good night and good dreams. Karma is your own current actions, which define your future life.

[Marianne]: Does karma also show up as "karmic traces" in our dreams?

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yes, every single dream you have is influenced by your karma. Every single thought you have is caused by actions. Every emotion you experience is also caused by certain actions of your past. There is a "cause condition" set up in the past. In order to change your life and not feel these painful emotions, you have

to clear this karma. Karmas are the seeds; if you burn the seed, it will not grow again. When we talk about purification, personal work, and processing things, we're talking about burning the seed of these karmas so they stop making things happen in our life.

[Marianne]: That's so impactful. I learned from your book that we can affect some of the karma in our dreams as well.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yes. Let's say there are events supposed to happen in your life in the future—conflict, suffering, sickness, or negative incidents. These seeds are already in us. So, what we are trying to do is dive into our unconscious, see these seeds in our dreams, and with awareness, try to change these elements and process them so they don't have to manifest in our actual life. It's a bit like breathing. In our meditation, we do a lot of breathing exercises. They say we take about 23,000 breaths every day. Most of the time, we are not breathing therapeutically; we are breathing in a "fight mode," which exhausts our biological energy and life force. That leads to sickness. But if you breathe with awareness—deep breathing—the replacement of cells in your body can be influenced. You have the opportunity to influence the transitions that happen every moment in your body. We have to pay more attention to these transitions, or our karma and conditions will keep repeating the same pattern. You have a choice.

[Marianne]: Do you just giggle at some of the science that comes up because it's verifying what Buddhist teachings have been sharing for so long?

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yes, absolutely. Recently, at our retreat center in Virginia, we had a conference on the Five Elements with scientists from Harvard. They talked about the science behind the breath, meditation, and specifically deep breathing versus shallow breathing. It's very nice for science to back this up with data. In the Western world, there's more belief in science, so it's important.

[Marianne]: I'm so excited all that is coming together.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: It's beautiful, not only for Westerners but even for me. When science shows how deep breathing changes heart rate variability and effects heart health, or how loneliness and anger are risk factors for heart disease, it makes absolute sense. In the future, there will be a lot more spiritual-based lifestyle changes that can affect collective health.

[Marianne]: Thank goodness for the teachings of Tibet to help bring us to this point. In your book, you talk about the "energy body" and how all experiences have an energetic basis.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: When we think about the body in the West, you immediately think of the physical body—birth, growing, aging, and death. But we also look at our "internal body" (the energy body), which is who you really are: your consciousness

and awareness. Your body is not you; your job is not you; your thoughts and feelings are not you. You are pure awareness. When you are in deep meditation, or fully in love, or fully rested, your sense of "you" is very expansive and boundless. You are indestructible and limitless. We talk about three things: "Spaciousness," "Luminous," and "Warm." When you feel like that, that's who you really are. I am unbounded space, I am infinite awareness, I am pure warmth. That unbounded space was never born and never dies.

[Marianne]: With that deep connection, I can see how it all comes together.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: In the West, people don't like the idea of "I am no one." But the truth is: I am no one, therefore I can be anyone. If you are "someone," that someone might interfere with your being another one. We get so conditioned by specific things that we lose this absolute flexibility. Why? Because we identify with specific things. Even the wars today are identity issues. These identities could merge into a union, but often they separate and fight. If you look at your dreams—starting from recurring dreams—you can analyze them using the "Six Lokas" of Buddhism: Hell, Hungry Ghost, Animal, Human, Demi-god, and God realms.

You might have "Hell dreams" (anger-based, destructive), or "Hungry Ghost dreams" (attachments, desires), or "Ignorant dreams" (getting lost, looking for an address, no windows). If specific dreams happen again and again, it means your identity is lost. For example, if you dream you're looking for your home or an important belonging and can't find it, or you're following someone and get lost—who is the one feeling lost? Who is the one with the wound, or the anger, or the disappointment? Ultimately, dream yoga is about finding "who" is lost or "who" is suffering. Even if it's difficult to know who you are, at least you can know you are *not* that suffering, that attachment, or that story. Then you have more chance to find who you truly are.

[Marianne]: I think that's phenomenal. It starts us investigating our dreams in new ways.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: It's a fantastic tool. I tell my students: every night before you go to sleep, realize that sleep and dream are sacred. You are entering a sacred temple to discover yourself. If you set the mood that way—with prayer, trust, and awareness—it becomes an exciting journey.

[Marianne]: For those who say "I don't remember my dreams," how can they get into a state where they can?

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Everybody dreams every ninety minutes. If you don't remember, it's often because you are over-exhausted, restless, or your biological system is messed up. Dream and sleep yoga is about preparation—how to go to sleep, how

to bring lucidity, and how to process the emotions that interfere with sleep.

[Marianne]: It sounds like a practice, just like everything else.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yes. One-third of our life is sleep. If we spend 25 or 30 years sleeping and have no clue what's happening or how we can heal, that's a lot of lost time. In the Tibetan tradition, we say you have the opportunity to work with your dream and transform those wounds while you sleep. That is what dream yoga is about.

[Marianne]: In your book, you talk about three kinds of dreams.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Generally, we say dreams are caused by thoughts, emotions, and activities. Experiences that are not processed during the daytime are stored as "karmic traces." Even if you ignore them, they show up in your dreams. Most of our dreams are "Samsaric dreams"—related to hope, fear, pain, and unprocessed stories. Then there are "Clear dreams" (or Clear Light dreams), which have more to do with collective wisdom—predicting the future, communicating with someone who died, or encountering enlightened beings like Christ or the yogis of the past. These are more intuitive. Finally, there is "Clear Light sleep," where you don't have active stories or samsaric dreams; you are in a beautiful experience of space and light. It's like the "merging with the light" described in near-death experiences.

[Marianne]: That's so interesting. You also mention how masters have used dreams to cross time and space to get information.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yes. Some masters have written whole books based on encountering past masters from the 7th or 8th century in their dreams. It's like setting up a "Zoom session" with them! Personally, in my own journey, when I have specific questions while working on a book, I pray and energetically connect with my teachers. Often they show up with answers for me. In Tibet, there's a tradition of "divination in the dream." Ordinary people with advanced practice can go with a question—for example, about their next five years—dive into the unconscious, and come back with amazing messages.

[Marianne]: It's fascinating that masters come to visit in dreams.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: It could be spiritual teachers, ancestors, or deceased parents. In dream, you can meet anyone. In waking life, you only meet people in physical form, but dream is a different place. People can fly like eagles or walk on water. You can even say "I will meet Christ" or "I want to meet the spirit of the sky," and if you are open, brave, and trust enough, they will come. Are they really there or did you "make them up"? Generally speaking, everything we experience is "made up" by us, so it's not a problem.

[Marianne]: That's so empowering. What would you like readers to take away from your book?

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: When you get the book, don't expect to read it like any other book. Keep it near your pillow for the rest of your life. It will take time to understand everything. Take it as a lifetime journey. My main advice: every night before you go to sleep, be prepared. Slow down in the afternoon, take it easy, less screen time, more peace. Think of every night as a "sacred journey." If you have a good night, you have a good day. Most of the time, we have a bad night because we had a bad day, and vice-versa. We are trying to break that negative cycle.

[Marianne]: Technology today seems to put us in another state of illusion.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Yes. A couple of hours before sleep, don't look at screens. Give a break to your eyes and mind. Sleep more on your right side so you don't press on your heart, which impacts the breath. Take deep breaths. This should become a natural part of your night, like brushing your teeth. People brush their teeth every night to feel fresh, but they go to bed with a mind that is sweating, painful, and exhausted. That's like going to sleep in jogging clothes without showering. Our mind needs a preparation to freshen up—a "mind shower"—to feel clear and then go to sleep.

[Marianne]: Where can our listeners connect with you?

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: We have over 35 centers around the world. Our website is ligmincha.org (l-i-g-m-i-n-c-h-a dot o-r-g). I am also very active on my Facebook, we call it "Cyber Sangha." I have weekly free conversations, and we invite scientists and practitioners. It's a good way to keep contact.

[Marianne]: Thank you so much for taking the time to be on the show.

[Tenzin Rinpoche]: Thank you for having me. I'm very honored.

[Marianne]: It has been such a great honor. We're going to pause here and we'll be right back.

(Outro) I'd like to thank Jason Eastwood at [Guitarfulness](http://Guitarfulness.com) for his inspiring music. Visit guitarfulness.com. You've been listening to *Moments with Marianne*. Visit momentswithmaryann.com for more information.