
IN THAT VERY BODY,
WITHIN THAT VERY DREAM:
SOTERIOLOGICAL DREAMING
TECHNIQUE IN THE
TRADITION OF BUDDHIST
YOGIS

N i n a P e t e k

Exploring the dreamscapes of Buddhism: a brief introduction

The birth of Buddhism out of a dream

In Buddhism, dreams play an essential role as they symbolize pillars of dynamic continuity within the entire tradition and its spiritual framework, simultaneously crafting an alternative history of Buddhism, running parallel to the official recorded facts found in history books. More precisely, the documented history of Buddhism actually finds its origin in dreams. Dreams could thus be defined as a catalyst for the tradition. Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was “conceived” in the dream of his mother, Queen Māyā, and his immediate family members also experienced prophetic dreams that foreshadowed significant turning points in his life, from birth to *nirvāṇa*. In these dreams, the fulfilment of what had been foretold in his mother’s dream gradually unfolded. Thus, numerous dreams in Buddha’s life

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Figure 1: The Dream of Queen Maya (the Buddha's Conception); Pakistan (ancient region of Gandhara), c. 2nd century (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; public domain)

served as an integral link in his quest for and attainment of the highest philosophical insights.

In early Theravāda Buddhism, prophetic dreams held a position of unquestionable authenticity and reality, as they were seen as reflections of inevitable future events, whether near or distant. This tradition of prophetic dreams has persisted throughout the history of Buddhism, revealing a universal pattern with unique expressions adapted to various cultural environments. For instance, in Tibet, this pattern continued to shape the life stories of Buddhist masters, from their conception to *nirvāṇa*.¹ Dream visions, initially confirmed for relevance by *brāhmaṇa* priests and later by Buddhist monks through skilled dream interpre-

¹ Prophetic dreams have played a significant role in legitimizing religious authorities and have consequently exerted a profound influence on broader society, culture, and spiritual tradition.

tation, were considered as glimpses into the future. This definition of dream visions aligns with the term itself, which has evolved in Buddhism to become a general term for dreaming. In both Buddhist and Hindu texts, the term *svapna*, derived from the Sanskrit verb root *svap-* meaning “to sleep”, was conjoined with the noun *darśana*, originating from the verb root *drś-* meaning “to see”, “to look at”, “to observe”. This combination resulted in the phrase “to see a dream”, which came to signify the concept of dreaming.²

In Theravāda Buddhism, the majority of dreams, excluding prophetic dreams, were regarded as an illusory amalgamation of remnants of the day, i.e. impressions and images from waking life, past mental content, *karma* and one’s character. This distorted composition creates a false representation of the self and the world, entangling individuals in ignorance and leading to suffering. For this reason, monks have diligently pursued meditation techniques to attain a state of consciousness in which all mental content, including dreams, becomes absent. During the early Buddhist period, Theravāda nuns unveiled entirely new perspectives on dreams, capturing the impermanent nature of the phenomenal world through their poetic expressions. Their verses, compiled in the collection known as *Therīgāthā*, eloquently drew parallels between the transience of all aspects of reality and the ephemeral nature of dreams. New formulations, such as *supinanteva* (Pal.³ “as in a dream”) and *supinopamā* (Pal. “as a dream”), which are also commonly found in later Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, became integral components of the Buddhist dream vocabulary. The role of dreams was thus reassessed, particularly in the context of the Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*), emphasizing the ontological sameness of all living beings, devoid of immutable essences, and thereby sharing an identi-

² This formulation is already found in the Pali texts (Pal. *supina passati*), e.g. in the *Milindapañha* (“Seventy-fifth Question – Dream” (4.75.33-37)). In the Vedic context, the phrase “seeing dreams” denoted the perspective of regarding dreams as occurrences external to the dreamer. Dreams were interpreted as the outcomes of external forces, be they gods, demons or spirits, over which the dreamer possessed no influence, rendering them mere passive observers (refer to Kelly Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World’s Religions* (New York, London: New York University Press, 2008), 24–25, 36, for instance).

³ Throughout the text, abbreviations are used to indicate the language in which particular term appears, namely in Tibetan (Tib.), Sanskrit (Skt.) and Pali (Pal.).

cal nature of transience. In a manner similar to the Theravāda nuns' approach, the impermanent nature of all phenomena was depicted through diverse metaphors, including dreams, described as *svapnopama* (Skt. "resembling a dream" or "dream-like"). In the realm of ordinary experience, the world was deemed an illusion (Skt. *māyā*), and dreams served as a convenient metaphor to depict the nature of the world and our distorted perceptions of it. As a result, dreams found their place in the Mahāyāna philosophical "experiment" with illusion.⁴ Creation, depicted as a magical illusion, akin to a dream (Skt. *svapnamāyopamā*),⁵ emerged as a novel approach to describe the world within the Mahāyāna tradition. In this context, dreams transcended their role as mere metaphors and took on multifaceted significance. They became an indicator of the dreamer's spiritual progress, a realm of revelation for profound teachings and a meeting ground for various sages. The phrase "to see a dream" gained new dimensions, as sages met one another in dreams, received and assimilated essential teachings, and brought them back to the waking state, illuminating those entangled in ignorance. Dreams became integral components of the life narratives of the awakened individuals, imparting insights that, when transposed into the realm of wakefulness, enrich the comprehension of its diverse dimensions.

Waking up a dream

In this manner, Mahāyāna Buddhism departs from the realm of wakefulness, with its conventional and rigid perspectives, and turns towards dreams for insights. Through the mindful exploration of their

⁴ Skrt. *māyopama*. Vajrayāna Buddhism showcases numerous instances of illusions within its texts, encompassing phenomena such as magic (Tib. *sgyu ma*), dreams (Tib. *rmi lam*), a mirage (Tib. *smig rgyu*), a reflection in a mirror (Tib. *gzugs brnyan*), lightning (Tib. *glog*), an echo (Tib. *brag cha*), a rainbow (Tib. *ja 'ishon*), the moon in the water (Tib. *chu zla*), a city of *gandharvas* (Tib. *dri za'i grong khyer*), water bubbles (Tib. *chu bur can*), visual distortions (Tib. *mig yor*), clouds (Tib. *sprin*), miraculous apparitions (Tib. *sprul pa*), etc. See also the discussion on the twelve illusions in Buddhism: Jan Westerhoff, *Twelve Examples of Illusion* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵ See, for example, *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra*, Parashuram Lakshman Vaidya, ed., *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Reaserach in Sanskrit Learning, 1960), Chapter II.

content, dreams can serve as a path to spiritual progress. This progression reaches its zenith in the Tibetan branch of Buddhism, Vajrayāna, where dreams assume a central role as a fundamental soteriological technique guiding practitioners toward *nirvāṇa*. This perspective transcends the Theravāda view of dreams as distorted mental fragments that ensnare individuals in ignorance, perpetuating their involvement in *samsāra*, the cycle of birth and death. Especially within the tradition of Vajrayāna Buddhism's eremitic school, the practice of engaging with dreams is referred to as dream yoga. This technique can be seen as a form of dream meditation where the dreamer maintains awareness throughout the dream experience, enabling them to discern all dream images as constructs of the conscious mind. Thus, within Vajrayāna Buddhism, the dream metaphor of Mahāyāna Buddhism is transmuted into a distinctive practical methodology that enables individuals to directly encounter its significance. Simultaneously, the Sanskrit term *svapnadarśana*, signifying "to see a dream", assumes further layers of meaning. In the Hindu tradition, the term swiftly transcends the realm of nightly demon spectacles and ventures into the domain of philosophy. In fact, the term *darśana* has come to designate six distinct Hindu schools of philosophy, encompassing the notions of philosophical insight, the pursuit of truth and the discernment of the genuine nature of reality. The roots of this definition trace back to the revelation of the *Vedas*, sacred texts of the Hindu tradition unveiled to humanity by *ṛṣis*, visionary seers who engaged in *darśana* – the apprehension of timeless philosophical truths. However, this understanding does not stem from a linear thought process; rather, it emerges from a loftier wisdom that transcends the conceptual realm. This wisdom is characterized by intuitive insight and non-contemplative experience. In this context, *darśana* also elucidates the nature of the dream meditation practiced by Tibetan masters. By experiencing the visions within a dream, individuals gain profound insights into the essence of dream phenomena. They then seamlessly transpose these insights into their waking experiences. Just as dream images perpetually shift and evolve, so do all other aspects of reality. However, in the state of ordinary, unaware waking consciousness, where true wakefulness is absent, these elements appear as unchanging and self-contained. Thus, the encounters concealed behind

closed eyes shape a comprehension of the world, lending expression to a truth that often eludes wakefulness amid the commotion of robust yet brittle convictions. By practicing dream yoga, the sages ultimately dissolve the distinctions between wakefulness and dreams, culminating in the liberating realization of impermanence (Skr. *anitya*, Tib. *mi rtag pa*) and emptiness (Skr. *śūnyatā*, Tib. *stong pa nyid*). Thus, the conventional notion that wakefulness equals true awareness has been upended. True wakefulness is found within dreams, serving as a direct pathway to the verge of genuine enlightenment, guiding the transition from ignorance to wisdom. This form of conscious, wakeful dream practice was predominantly undertaken by Vajrayāna Buddhist male and female hermits, commonly known as *yogis* and *yoginīs* (Skr.; Tib. *rnal 'byor pa*, *mtshams pa*, also *ri khrod pa*), living in caves or small huts high in the Himalayan mountains, whose lives were intimately interlinked with the essence of dreams. This is substantiated by countless Tibetan hagiographies, which not only depict Buddhist cartography of dream realms but also trace the path of spiritual advancement, often aligning with the waking dream paradigm of early Buddhism, thus narrating a tale of spiritual growth. Furthermore, within the lives of *yogis*, there exists a distinctive phenomenon known as a “conception dream”. They were not merely conceived within the dreams of their biological parents; rather, they were conceptually envisioned within the dreams of their teachers.⁶ This occurrence took place during a phase when these *yogis* were relinquishing their past lives and readying themselves to embark on their spiritual journey. In a sequence of varied dreams, they envisioned each other, converged within dreamscapes, and effortlessly

⁶ Many Buddhist masters, including Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha, were therefore conceived in their parents’ dreams, known also as prophetic. Queen Māyā’s dream of the Buddha’s conception is described in many texts, such as the *Mahāvastu*, the *Nidānakathā* and the *Lalitavistarasūtra*. The “conception dream” and thus the new “spiritual” birth of the *yogis* is attested in various hagiographies. The most famous such dreams are the so-called parallel dreams of *yogi* Marpa and his wife Dagmena, which are described in the fourth chapter of Milarepa’s hagiography, *The Life of Milarepa* (Tib. *rje btsun mi la ras pa'i rnam thar*) (Tsang Nyön Heruka, *The Life of Milarepa*, trans. Andrew Quintman (New York: Penguin Books, 2010)). The couple’s dream indirectly, through various dream events, foreshadowed the arrival of Marpa’s disciple, and even if Milarepa himself did not directly appear in the dream, it predicted his new “spiritual” birth, i.e. his arrival at Marpa and thus his own initiation into the secret Tantric teachings.

transcended the borders separating them. These dreams transported them into the dream realms of masters long since departed, where they encountered the dreams of awakened predecessors, and also glimpsed into the dreams of all past and future dreamers. Even in the present day, *yogis* and *yoginīs* uphold within their dreams an imperceptible, unheard, often overlooked, yet indomitable thread of Buddhism. This thread has woven its way through countless epochs since ancient times, all the while laying the foundation for aspiring dreamers to journey towards the attainment of *nirvāṇa*.

Beyond wakefulness and dreams

Yogis developed a complex soteriological technique of dreaming, i.e. active, conscious participation in the process of dreaming, based on the recognition of dreams, the attentive observation of dream images, the assumption of power over the dream images, the influence over their content, and the maintenance of the awareness that they are all just dreams, through which the dreamer comes to deeply and directly experience the illusory nature of all dream appearances. *Yogis* thus acquired insights into the nature of dream phenomena, and these insights have been transferred to objects in waking life – such as dream images, constantly changing are also all other things, which in the ordinary state of ignorant, not really awake consciousness, are perceived as permanent and independent. Thus, experiences behind “eyes wide shut” frame their understanding of the world, giving voice to a truth that does not come out in wakefulness amidst the ordinary beliefs. In this way, *yogis*, through the technique of dreaming, have finally blurred the boundaries between wakefulness and dreaming, and arrived at the liberating experience of emptiness and impermanence. They have re-evaluated the common belief that we are awake in wakefulness – we can only be truly awake in dreams, which lead directly to the threshold of true awakening, from ignorance to wisdom.

The soteriological dream technique invites us to a place where supreme truths are revealed behind closed eyes, to the threshold of awakening that steadily slips from under our feet in wakefulness; to dreams that pour light from their worlds into the secret, darkest recesses of our

waking lives, revealing what cannot be seen in the light of day. Moreover, the soteriological techniques of dreams are also important from the broader perspective of the relevance of the doctrines of dreams in the various religious traditions because, long before the development of the sciences dealing with dreams, “religiously minded people all over the globe were studying, experimenting with and theorizing about the workings of the dreaming mind. This is where the study of dreams begins.”⁷ Segments of the ancient soteriological dream technique in the tradition of Buddhist *yogis* are now being integrated into the study of dreams in the fields of psychology, psychoanalysis and neuroscience, shedding light on many overlooked aspects of Western science and giving new meaning to their findings. While not entering into a dialogue with any of these fields, instead remaining within the framework of Buddhism, the present paper seeks to introduce the immense value of dreams for human life, something that is still nurtured in the Buddhist eremitic tradition today and which I have had the precious opportunity to experience for myself. Namely, a significant part of this paper is based on findings derived from my own field research on the tradition of Buddhist *yogis* and *yoginīs* conducted within the Ladakh federal territory in the Indian Himalayas, who are, as they themselves state, first and foremost, dreamers.

Forgotten “marginal” frontiers of philosophy:
madmen, the body and dreams

Starting from the 8th century, the vibrant inception of Buddhism in Tibet was influenced, on one hand, by organized official visits to esteemed Indian monks and, on the other hand, by informal journeys to the realm of Buddhist Tantric masters. It was from these masters’ teachings that the lineage of Buddhist eremitism gradually emerged. Tantric Buddhist hermits and hermitesses, i.e. *yogis* and *yoginīs* – also referred to as *mahāsiddhas* (Skr., Tib. *grub thob chen po*) – engage in solitary meditation within remote hermitages, perched high in the Himalayan mountains. Due to their unorthodox way of life and their mastery of in-

⁷ Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World’s Religions*, 4.



Figure 2: *Yogi* in his hut up in the Himalayan mountains near the Sakti village; Ladakh, India (Photo: Nina Petek)

tricate psychophysical methods, they have earned the moniker of “madmen” (Tib. *smyon pa*).⁸ From its inception to the contemporary era, the lineage of autonomous Buddhist Tantric *yogis*⁹ has forged its distinct trajectory, transcending societal and monastic hierarchies. This spirit of independence is also mirrored in their spiritual pursuits, which differ from those of monks and nuns constrained by institutional structures and rigid curricula. The endeavours of Tantric *yogis* are marked by crea-

⁸ The term was introduced by Tsangnyön Heruka, a *yogi* and Tibetan hagiography writer who emerged from the ranks of the “madmen”. However, the quintessential embodiment of a madman in this tradition is Milarepa. Milarepa exemplified the core essence of eremitism by pushing it to the extreme – a departure from conventional existence, a defiance of societal and monastic norms, and an unwavering dedication to Tantra’s hidden practices, all away from the distractions of the worldly sphere.

⁹ In the rest of the paper, the masculine form, i.e. *yogi*, is used for both genders in cases of more general references.

tivity and unrestrained freedom.¹⁰ From this perspective, the eremitism bears resemblance to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "nomadic science". Like the latter, eremitism defies easy categorization, as it embodies heterogeneity and perpetual transformation. It stands as a form of resistance against institutional constraints, continuously shaping its identity from its unique singularity, disregarding conventional criteria and norms.¹¹ Differing from the monk, the hermit, akin to a nomad, dwells within the realm of the unpredictable, boundless expanse of the desert,¹² in contrast to the structured and enclosed environment of the monastery.

Consequently, contemporary *yogis* predominantly residing in the Himalayas continue to engage in the meditation techniques handed down by their forebears. These practices, drawn in part from the Hindu Tantric lineage, have intertwined with Buddhist philosophy, giving rise to a distinct form of Tantra known as Buddhist Tantra. Much like certain Hindu Tantric systems, Tantric Buddhism not only seeks to surpass institutionalized and normative expressions of religion and established philosophical perspectives but also draws forth and reintegrates from the periphery into the heart of religious and philosophical discourse that which has been relegated, within the established spiritual context, as utterly inconsequential, confining and "marginal" to spiritual progress – encompassing aspects such as the body and dreams. The ascent of a non-dualistic metaphysical framework within Hindu Tantric systems, founded on the negation of a dualistic view of reality, marked a pivotal transformation. This transition was underpinned by an altered perception of the body, which, in turn, played a role in the development of a novel manifestation of

¹⁰ Nina Petek, "Sopotja zgodnjega puščavništva v Egiptu in Indiji [Counterparts of Early Eremitism in Egypt and India]," in *Egiptovsko puščavništvo [Egyptian Eremitism]*, eds. Jan Ciglencečki, Franci Zore and Nena Bobovnik, 179–203 (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete [Ljubljana University Press, Faculty of Arts], 2021), 179.

¹¹ See, e.g. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine* (Seattle: Wormwood Distribution, 2010), 17. See also Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 373, 572–573.

¹² Petek, "Sopotja", 179–180. Desert is a collective term for places defined by the absence of the hustle and bustle of the mundane, be they sandy deserts, forests or rocky Himalayan wastelands.

Tantric Buddhism. In contrast to earlier orthodox systems rooted in the Vedic spiritual realm, such as *sāṃkhya* and the affiliated Patañjali *aṣṭāṅgayoga* tradition, Tantra envisions the body in a distinct light. Rather than viewing it merely as an aggregate of gross matter, disconnected from intricate mental processes, Tantra perceives the body as a hub of refined energies. These energies, when nurtured appropriately, hold immense potential for catalysing a profound spiritual metamorphosis. Even within the context of Hindu Tantric tradition, the idea of “divinization of the body” emerges.¹³ In Tantra, matter is not perceived as a lower form of spirit, as earlier orthodox systems suggested. Rather, it recognizes that matter encompasses subtle layers, including energy centres (*cakras*) and channels (*nāḍīs*). This composition allows for its transformation from the mundane to the divine through diverse practices. This notion of “divinization of the body” is indeed inherent to the philosophy of Tantra. Hence, the body becomes an active participant in elevated spiritual endeavours, playing a role in attaining profound insights and liberation. This insight leads us to the realization that, within Tantric systems, philosophy is engendered not solely through the mind, but also through the body itself. And so are dreams.

Just as in the early Hindu philosophical systems, the body was perceived in early Theravāda Buddhism as a dwelling for old age and mortality (e.g. *Dhammapada* XI.5). It did not hold a significant, active role in the meditative pursuits that culminate in *nirvāna*. However, this perspective undergoes a dramatic transformation within the context of Tantric Buddhism. A distinct perception of the body within Tantra is intricately connected to a fundamental re-evaluation of the significance of dreams. Disordered dream content emerges from the consciousness (*viññāna*), and dreams, particularly those that the dreamer is acutely conscious of and that lead to profound revelations, manifest solely through the engaged involvement of the body, which exerts an influence on the cognitive processes. As the body and its latent capacities become awakened, so do dreams – simultaneously, as the body assumes a central role in philosophical discussions and prac-

¹³ See Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2005).

tical methodologies, the dreaming of transformative dreams guiding toward *nirvāṇa* emerges. This process also brings forth the potential for comprehending these dreams. The “restoration” of the body and its inherent potentials within both the theoretical and practical realms of philosophical discourse, along with the simultaneous recognition of the remarkable capacities of dreams, has prompted a reassessment of the very notion of *nirvāṇa*. In contrast to the teachings of Theravāda Buddhism, which propose a gradual journey towards perfection over multiple lifetimes as the pathway to attaining the ultimate state of being, Tantric Buddhism presents an alternative perspective. According to Tantric teachings, this supreme state can be realized within a single lifetime, irrespective of past *karma*. This notion was eloquently conveyed by the *yogi* Milarepa: it can be achieved in this very body, in the present life.¹⁴ Hence, Tantric systems have been recognized as an expedited, yet simultaneously more precarious route, to *nirvāṇa*. This is because they unveil the latent mental and physical potentials within humans, possessing the profound ability to eliminate the negative repercussions of previous actions and attain the loftiest philosophical insights.

Tantric meditation practices within Buddhist eremitic tradition: the six dharmas

This preliminary notion of the body and liberation, which first germinated within the Hindu Tantric systems, found a wholly unique manifestation within the spiritual landscapes of Buddhism through the endeavours of the Bengali *mahāsiddha* Tilopa (988–1069). Recognized within Buddhism as the first *yogi* to catalyse the tradition of accomplished Tantric Buddhist masters achieving *nirvāṇa* within a single lifetime, Tilopa reimagined and implemented this concept. Drawing inspiration from early Theravāda, Mahāyāna and select Hindu Tantric doctrines, he established a framework of soteriological practices that continue to be embraced by *yogis* to this day, encompassing methods

¹⁴ This idea is expressed in several places in Milarepa's hagiography (Heruka, *The Life of Milarepa*, especially in the tenth chapter).

such as the practice of lucid dreaming. The methods, referred to as the six dharmas or six yogas (Skt. *ṣaḍdharma*, Tib. *chos drug*), were imparted to Tilopa by enigmatic Tantric masters.¹⁵ He meticulously structured these techniques into a comprehensive system, subsequently unveiling them to his disciple Naropa (1016–1100), who undertook the responsibility of transmitting them. Given that Tilopa’s teachings, akin to all Tantric doctrines, were regarded as clandestine wisdom, accessible solely to a chosen few due to their intricate nature and the earlier mentioned exploration of uncharted psychophysical abilities that necessitated skilled mentorship for their proficient development, these teachings were safeguarded within the lineage of the original Buddhist *yogis* through oral transmission (Tib. *snyan brgyud*) from teacher to disciple.¹⁶ The entirety of this tradition continues to rely on this pattern of transmission in the present day. Consequently, the original teachings of Tilopa have endured in mere fragments, collectively known as *Ṣaḍdharmopadeśa* (“Instruction on the Six Teachings”). These fragments hold the esteemed status of being an authentic source within the lineage of Tantric techniques pursued by the *mahāsiddhas*. Naropa’s exposition on the six dharmas, slightly more extensive than Tilopa’s fragments, has also been preserved. Within the tradition, these teachings are recognized as the “Six Dharmas of Naropa” (Tib. *na ro’i chos drug*).¹⁷ These texts have been the focus of extensive commentaries by Tantric masters, who have offered thorough interpretations of the

¹⁵ In most discussions of the meditation system, the term “six yogas” has been adopted. Both terms are used in this paper, with the term “dharma” referring to the teachings related to fragments and commentaries, and “yoga” referring to descriptions of the practical aspects of a particular technique.

¹⁶ The very nature of the doctrine is extremely complex and, as such, incomprehensible to most people; however, this method of preservation has also protected it from misinterpretation and distorted understanding. Applying theory to practice and verifying what one has learned within their own experience is the most important method of progressing towards liberation, since it is impossible to acquire ultimate insight through discursive knowledge conveyed in language alone.

¹⁷ It is noteworthy that while lesser-known than the renowned male figures, *yoginī* Niguma played a significant role in their propagation as well. Niguma is believed to have studied Tantric practices alongside Naropa. Some accounts even suggest that she might have been his sister or ex-wife (for further details, refer to Nina Petek, *Na pragu prebujenja. Svetovi sanj v budizmu* [On the Threshold of Awakening: Worlds of Dreams in Buddhism] (Ljubljana: Beletrina, 2022), 273).

meditation techniques within the framework of Buddhist philosophy. They have also furnished these teachings with meticulous practical instructions. Naropa and the *yoginī* Niguma transmitted *dharmas* to their disciple Marpa Lotsawa (1012–1097), who became the initial Tibetan proponent of the tradition. Marpa subsequently imparted these teachings to Milarepa (1052–1135), who, in turn, recognized Gampopa (1079–1153) as the most fitting successor. Gampopa authored comprehensive commentaries on the six dharmas, which were initially compiled and published in 1520 as *Dags po'i bka' 'bum* (*The Manifold Sayings of Dags po*)¹⁸ in xylograph print format. Furthermore, Gampopa skilfully amalgamated teachings and Tantric practices into the monastic framework of the *bka' gdams pa* (transliterated as *kadam*) lineage. This integration, in turn, shaped the monastic order of *bka' brgyud* (transliterated as *kagyū*), which absorbed the practices of the earlier *yogis* into its structure. Simultaneously, running alongside the monastic order, the tradition of self-contained eremitism persisted and remain vibrant even today in the Himalayan regions. Incorporating an unfettered form of eremitism within the monastic order has facilitated the conservation of the ancient secret practices of *yogis*. These practices were originally transmitted orally but eventually led to the creation of an array of commentaries and practical guidance for successive generations of *yogis*. In addition to the existing fragments of *yogis'* writings and discourse on their practices, a wealth of hagiographies (Tib. *rnam thar*) exists. These hagiographies are composed of factual depictions of the lives, teachings and practices of hermits, offering invaluable insights into the concealed realms of this esoteric tradition. This genre of literature presents a unique perspective, akin to a portrait, capturing the spiritual evolution within the life of a *yogi* who aspires toward *nirvāṇa*. Occasionally, the hagiographies resemble records of dream diaries, as they encompass a treasure trove of dream-related content encompassing diverse dream

¹⁸ The book is named after Gampopa, whose middle name was also Dakpö Lhaje (Ulrich Timme Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism. A Textual Study of the Yogas of Nāropa and Meditation Mahāmudrā in the Medieval Tradition of Dags po* (Tokyo: The International Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2015).

encounters, techniques and experiences among *yogis*.¹⁹ Namely the pursuit for a guru was often shrouded in mystery – prior to disciples actually encountering their teacher, they were often guided within the realm of dreams, ultimately leading them to the master. In their dreams, they also encountered significant teachers from the past, who imparted vital teachings to them.

Therefore, the subsequent segment focusing on the conscious dreaming technique entails an examination of Tilopa's fragments compiled as *Ṣaḍḍharmopadeśa*,²⁰ along with chosen commentaries from Gampopa's *Dags po'i bka' 'bum*, specifically the chapter *Dags lha sgam po* (abbreviated hereafter as DK.A.),²¹ and findings derived from my own field research conducted within the Ladakh federal territory in the Indian Himalayas. This research was underpinned by various methods, including extensive and in-depth interviews with Ladakhi *yogis* and *yoginīs*.

The six dharmas, encompassing an array of meditative psycho-physical practices, consist of the subsequent techniques: inner mystic heat (Skrt. *cāṇḍālī*, Tib. *gtum mo*), illusory body (Skrt. *māyākāya*, *māyādeha*, Tib. *sgyu lus*), dreams (Skrt. *svapna*, Tib. *rmi lam*), radiant light (Skrt. *prabhāsvara*, *ābhāsvara* Tib. *'od gsal*), intermediate state (Skrt. *antarābhava*, Tib. *bar do*) and transference (of consciousness) (Skrt. *samkrānti*, Tib. *'pho ba*). Each of these techniques embodies a dynamic synthesis of various Tantric elements, rooted in the concept of an intrinsic link between the body and the mind. Within each of these techniques, the subtle body, comprising the *cakras* and energy channels known as *nāḍīs*, which facilitate the flow of energies, assumes a highly significant role. Additionally, the incorporation of breathing techniques

¹⁹ See also Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions*, 100–107, and hagiographies of *yogis*: Tsang Nyön Heruka, *The Life of Marpa the Translator. Seeing Accomplishes All*, trans. the Nalanda Translation Committee under the direction of Chögyam Trungpa (Boulder: Prajñā Press, 1982), Fabrizio Torricelli and Ācārya Sangye T. Naga, trans., *The Life of the Mahāsiddha Tilopa* (New Delhi, Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2003) and Jampa Mackenzie, Stewart, trans., *The Life of Gampopa. The Incomparable Dharma Lord of Tibet* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1995).

²⁰ The paper draws upon a compilation of fragments as presented in Fabrizio Torricelli, "The Tibetan Text on Tilopa's *Ṣaḍḍharmopadeśa*," *East and West* 46, no. 1/2 (1996): 145–166.

²¹ The paper is based on Gampopa's comments collected in Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*.

(*prāṇāyāma*), guru-dedicated prayers, visualizations and a spectrum of psychophysical methods are integral. These techniques find their origins in the Hindu Tantric tradition and bear relation to the practices of *hathayoga*. The practices undertaken by *yogis* and *yoginīs* in solitude, following rigorous preliminary techniques and guided by their teachers, are structured hierarchically. This signifies that mastery of each successive technique is contingent upon complete proficiency in the preceding one. Furthermore, familiarity with the other practices becomes indispensable for a comprehensive grasp of a particular technique. Thus,



Figure 3: Hermitage, where Ladakhi *yogis* practice various meditation techniques; the Leh area, Ladakh, India (Photo: Nina Petek)



Figure 4: Meditation cave in Saspol; Ladakh, India (Photo: Nina Petek)

prior to examining the soteriological technique of dreaming, a concise overview will be provided for the two preceding practices: inner mystic heat (*gtum mo*) and illusory body (*sgyu lus*).

Before dreaming: the techniques of inner heat and illusory body

a) Yoga of mystic heat and other preliminary practices

The practice of inner mystic heat serves to arouse the energies of the subtle body within the realm of the so-called gross physical body. The very essence of the practice is encapsulated in its name, *gtum mo*. Here, *gtum* conveys the notion of “heat”, while *mo* signifies “mother”. “Heat” symbolizes the fervour, the flame, the potency of ascetic endeavour that incinerates obstacles to enlightenment, such as patterns of wandering thoughts. “Mother” aptly portrays the role of this technique as the cor-

nerstone, the quintessence, from which all ensuing practices emanate. Fervour and flame also symbolize the illuminating radiance that dispels darkness – namely, ignorance – ushering in enlightenment. Beyond the symbolic connotation, this practice effectively generates bodily heat within the *yogi*, a tangible manifestation of its impact.²² Prior to commencing the inner mystic heat technique, the *yogi* should have received training in *guruyoga* (Skt., Tib. *bla ma'i rnal 'byor*) – the practice of venerating the guru – wherein one directs all thoughts towards their teacher. Additionally, proficiency in *mahāmudrā*, which entails meditation on emptiness, is also crucial. Some sources also mention deity yoga (Skt. *devatayoga*, Tib. *yiḍ kyi dam tshig*, contr. *yiḍam*), a practice akin to *guruyoga*, albeit centring on a specific deity. In this practice, meditation is paired with diverse visualizations of the chosen deity, aiming for a profound identification between the *yogi* and the deity.

By immersing themselves in a visualization of the selected deity, the meditator establishes a deep connection, gradually adopting the deity's identity and consequently, harnessing its associated powers. However, the practice of deity yoga requires prior initiation by a knowledgeable teacher or *guru*. During the initiation process, as observed in Hindu Tantra, the teacher embeds the deity within the individual's body through *mantra* recitations. This significant act lends a sacred quality to the meditator's physical form. In the ritual of initiation, mere approval from the teacher is insufficient; confirmation of initiation by the deity themselves is also required, often occurring within a dream. Instances have arisen where a deity, appearing in a dream, declines to initiate a disciple, signalling that his readiness for the process has not yet fully matured. Hence, dreams play an integral role within the initiation process, serving as either a fundamental component or the ultimate af-

²² In this manner, the technique's spiritual objectives align with practical outcomes, a revelation I encountered through the *yogis* of Ladakh. In the contemporary tradition of Ladakhi hermits, *gtum mo* belongs to the category of so-called winter techniques, meaning that it is practised mostly in winter, as the production of heat in the body enables them to survive the harsh Himalayan winters. Simultaneously, the *yogis'* practice is also collectively conducted within the parent gumpa Hemis, the central monastery of the Drukpa Kagyu school in Ladakh. During winter, accompanied by the head yoga teacher, *guru*, and head *lama* of Hemis, they embark on a journey to Tso Moriri Lake in the bitterly cold eastern Ladakh region of Changthang, where temperatures plummet to as low as –25 degrees Celsius.



Figure 5: Visualisation of Buddhist deities, a mural in the secret temple of Lukhang, Tibet, 17th century (Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

firmation, marking the true commencement of the disciple's spiritual journey.

Within the realm of preliminary practices, the method of thought analysis holds significance. Here, the *yogi* engages in analysing the essence of thoughts, striving to perceive them in their authentic, bare state and devoid of any sense of permanence. Immediately prior to engaging in *gtum mo*, the *yogi* is required to undertake a sequence of preliminary physical exercises. Notably, within this sequence, the practice of breathing techniques (*prāṇāyāma*) and the visualization of sacred *mantras*, *cakras*, and *nāḍīs* assume vital roles (Tilopa [*gtum mo* 6–8]). The *gtum mo* technique is linked to the navel *cakra*, facilitating the equilibrium and flow of vital energies throughout the body (Tilopa [*gtum mo* 9]). This serves as the foundational cornerstone for all subsequent psycho-physical practices.²³

Consequently, the body becomes infused with the dynamic engagement of consciousness through visualization, eliciting responsive reac-

²³ The technique is also related to *karmamudrāyoga* (Skt., Tib. *las kyi phyagrgya*), which is based on sexual union with a partner or simply on the visualisation of this union, which stimulates the awakening of energies in the body and a feeling of bliss.



Figure 6: *Yogis* practising various meditation techniques; Milarepa (bottom left) practising *gtu mo* and the transference of consciousness; mural in the secret temple of Lukhang, Tibet, 17th century (Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

tions to these mental images and giving rise to a generation of inner warmth. The method of invigorating energy and warmth circulation within the body facilitates a revitalization of its latent potentials, concurrently serving to neutralize adverse *karmic* imprints like animosity, instincts, physical cravings and attachments. This paves the way for the emergence of a sensation of joy and compassion towards all sentient beings (Skt. *karuṇā*, Tib. *snying rje*). Consequently, the outcome of the inner mystic heat technique is also referred to as the experience of blissful warmth (Tib. *bde drod*). As per various sources, once the *yogi* attains complete mastery over the practice, they encounter shimmering effects before their eyes. Visions encompass smoke, flames, unclouded skies, radiant sun and moon beams, the harmonious convergence of the sun and moon, and even rainbows.²⁴ Following a fruitful technique session,

²⁴ Herbert V. Guenther, trans., *The Life and Teaching of Naropa* (Massachusetts: Shambala 1999), 60.

the *yogi* engages once more in the practices of *guruyoga* and *mahāmudrā*. Mastery of the inner mystic heat yoga serves as a strong foundation for commencing the practice of the illusory body (Tib. *sgyu lus*).

b) Illusory body yoga and meditation on the impermanence of phenomena

Before embarking on the second phase of the Tantric soteriological system, the *yogi* is required to engage in supplementary preliminary practices rooted in Theravāda Buddhism. These practices include meditations on impermanence and mortality (such as *maraṇasati* and *asubha bhāvana*). This deepens the *yogi*'s grasp of the theoretical doctrine concerning the impermanent nature of all phenomena, highlighting that notions of autonomy and enduring permanence are but illusions stemming from the misperceptions of an unenlightened consciousness confined within dualistic thought patterns. This technique shares a profound connection with the Mahāyāna doctrine that underscores the illusory essence of both external phenomena and one's individual existence. It further aligns with the illusory quality attributed to dreams and the surreal nature of the *bar do* experience. In certain commentaries, the practice of dreaming is even recognized as an integral facet of the illusory body technique, for it serves to profoundly enhance the realization of the fleeting essence inherent in one's psychophysical continuum and all phenomena within the world.

Prior to engaging in this practice, the *yogi* assumes a meditation posture and situates an object before them, one that serves as a reminder of their own body or reflects it, much like a mirror. Subsequently, the *yogi* begins audibly critiquing himself while attentively observing whether feelings of sorrow or ease arise. The objective of this practice is to attain a state of equanimity. Therefore, it should be diligently pursued until all emotions have ceased to exist. In doing so, the practitioner acknowledges the illusory nature of all emotions and proceeds to delve into the examination of other objects. In this process, the practitioner contemplates and engages in meditation on the dreamlike, illusory quality of objects as they manifest in everyday perception (Tilopa [*sgyu lus* 16–18]). Furthermore, he focuses on exploring the nature of the twelve examples of illusion (Tilopa [*sgyu lus* 22]), which may involve scruti-

nizing phenomena like the structure of an echo or one's own reflection in a mirror.²⁵ Consequently, by acknowledging the authentic essence of external phenomena, the *yogi* shifts his focus to his own body, comprehending its composition along with the sensations of pleasure and discomforts that course through it. This realization leads to an understanding of the impermanent nature that underpins all facets of his existence. Subsequently, the *yogi* initiates the visualization of his body transforming into the likeness of the selected deity's form. This mental transformation is further intensified by positioning an image of the deity before him or aligning it in a manner that allows its reflection to appear in the mirror placed in front. The latter practice embodies a form of deity yoga, wherein the *yogi* offers praises to the reflected image in the mirror and attentively monitors for any arising emotions. The absence of emotions signifies the attainment of practice's perfection, as the *yogi* recognizes the emptiness inherent in all things, including his own body and the bodies of the deities. This marks the realization of the genuine essence underlying all illusory manifestations, namely the Buddha-nature or *śūnyatā*, while simultaneously initiating the profound exploration of the Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of the equivalence between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. The practice culminates with the recontemplation of illusions (Tib. *sgyu ma maya*) while in a seated meditation posture.²⁶

²⁵ This technique, as evidenced in the Tilopa fragments (Tilopa [*sgyu lus* 19–20]) (Torricelli, “The Tibetan Text on Tilopa’s Śaḍdharmopadeśa.”), is performed using a mirror and the image of the deity Vajrasattva. It is practiced in this way by Ladakhi *yogis* even today, using a bowl of water and placing the image of Vajrasattva so that it is projected onto the surface of the water in the bowl through a mirror. Then *yogi* begins to meditate on the image in the water until he realises that the nature of this image is identical with all that has been created, through which he identifies with it.

²⁶ Yoga of the illusory body is extremely important for all subsequent practices, including *bar do* and yoga of the transmission of consciousness, because it enables *yogis* to direct consciousness towards enlightenment, *nirvāṇa*, and thus to escape rebirth in *samsāra*. Moreover, at the time of death, the separation of the subtle body from the gross body is easily accomplished due to training in the practice of the illusory body, while during the lifetime of *yogis*, the latter separation is deepened in dreams.

The soteriological method of dreaming: awakening the veiled waking consciousness within the realm of dreams

The intricate soteriological technique of dreaming (Tib. *rmi lam*), involving purposeful and conscious engagement within the dream state, relies on the method of identifying dreams as dreams. This involves closely observing dream images, exerting influence over their narrative, and sustaining the awareness that they are mere manifestations of the dream realm. Through this process, the dreamer gains profound and immediate insight into the illusory essence of all dream phenomena. This understanding is then carried over to the state of wakefulness upon awakening.²⁷ In conjunction with the succinctly introduced role of the body, which, when appropriately nurtured, impacts the dynamics of conscious dreaming, the theoretical, philosophical and practical dimensions of the dreaming technique are rooted in the teachings of a prominent Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition. Specifically, these principles draw upon the philosophical framework of the *yogācāra* school, particularly Vasubandhu's elucidation of the nature of consciousness (*viññāna*). Certain concepts from this school will be introduced as we delve into the analysis of the four stages encompassing the lucid dreaming process.

The progression of dreaming encompasses three distinct phases: (1) slumber (Skt. *nidrā*, Tib. *gnyid*), (2) dream (Skt. *svapna*, Tib. *rmi lam*), and meditative immersion within the dream (Skt. *samāpatti*, Tib. *snnyoms 'jug*), comprising four stages, and ultimately, (3) awakening from the dream (Skt. *prākṛta*, Tib. *tha mal*). The onset of lucid dreaming and the capacity to introspect within dreams, as highlighted earlier, necessitate sufficient sleep and the establishment of conducive conditions for it. This, in turn, demands a rigorous and unavoidable preliminary regimen. Consequently, prior to delving into the examination of the four phases of the dreaming technique, a concise overview of the “pre-dreaming training” is presented.

²⁷ Even in regular dreaming, it is often the case that we suddenly experience a flash of lucidity at the centre of a dream, i.e. we become aware that we are dreaming, but this is not a matter of being trained in the control of our own dreams; the practice of lucid dreaming is an extremely complex technique, linked to other meditation techniques.

Adequate sleep and preliminary “dream training”

The notion of surpassing chaotic dreams, leading to the emergence of lucid dreams, as underscored in fragments attributed to Naropa, was subsequently continued in the evolution of the tradition. This development was accompanied by a series of guidelines outlining the preparations for sleep.²⁸ The importance of preparing for sleep has been emphasized in Gampopa’s writings and numerous other commentaries. Provided below is a succinct summary of certain instructions sourced from Gampopa’s commentaries (Tib. *Dags po’i bka’ bum*) as well as insights shared by Ladakhi *yogis* who persistently adhere to these guidelines in the contemporary era.

a) Waking up a subtle body before dreaming

Prior to commencing the lucid dreaming technique, ensuring a restful night’s sleep holds paramount importance. The duration of sleep should not be excessively prolonged; instead, it is advisable to incorporate several shorter intervals of slumber. A significant portion of the discourse surrounding this topic also delves into the inquiry of which segment of the night is most conducive for facilitating a fruitful dream process. If a *yogi* does not experience issues related to fatigue or sleep troubles, he has the flexibility to engage in the practice at any point during the night. However, if such challenges are present, the optimal time is during the period between dawn and sunrise. This interval is characterized by a well-rested body, a clear mind, and complete digestion of consumed food. *Yogis* are advised to opt for a tranquil and isolated sleeping environment. Aside from considering the external factors of timing and location, the crux of a prosperous dreaming technique lies in the preparations for dreaming. These preparations are most effectively conducted during the daytime or in the moments preceding sleep. Before going to sleep, *yogis* ought to strengthen their devotion to their teacher, avoid heavy meals, embrace solitude and maintain a keen

²⁸ In his commentary, Tsongkhapa calls the preparation for sleep “the clear light of sleep yoga”; see Glenn H. Mullin, *The Practice of the Six Yogas of Naropa* (Ithaca, New York: Shambala Publications, Snow Lion Publications, 2006), 138.

awareness of all sensations and thoughts. This involves meticulously observing everything perceived in the waking state, encompassing sights, sounds, sensations and scents. Such attentiveness augments the likelihood of being able to discern dream images more distinctly during the night. This underscores the continuity between perceiving images in the waking state and within dreams. Subsequently, they ready themselves for slumber by reclining on their right side and reaffirming the purpose of the impending sleep: to endeavour to discern the dream with utmost clarity during the dream process. Following that, they envision a five-petaled lotus within the throat *cakra* region, centring their attention on these five petals containing the sacred syllables of a luminous *mantra*. They gradually shift their focus from one syllable to the next in a deliberate manner. During the visualization practice, they concurrently engage in breathing techniques (*prāṇāyāma*), sourced from the Hindu *hathayoga* tradition, focusing in particular on holding the breath for as long as possible. By means of controlled breathing, they direct the body's energies towards the throat *cakra*, thereby establishing a stable foundation for the practice of lucid dreaming. Dreams are intricately tied to the throat *cakra*, and the dream experience materializes through the skilful manipulation of energy, a technique interwoven with the concept of the subtle body as mentioned earlier. As they transition into slumber, *yogis* envision a sphere of white light (Tib. *thig le*) positioned between their eyebrows.²⁹ This concluding practice at the threshold of wakefulness facilitates a gentle descent into light sleep and aids in the evolution of typical dreams into lucid dreams – those in which they possess a distinct awareness of the dream nature. Upon entering sleep, they remain poised for dreams to unfold, and as the dreams commence, they meticulously acknowledge each and every image that materializes. If *yogis* encounter difficulties with this technique, they are advised to thoroughly analyse the underlying reasons while awake. Subsequently, they can either reattempt the process, or engage in additional preparation for the practice. Various challenges and hindrances (Tib. *bar chad*, Skrt. *antarāya*) often manifest for adept *yogis* engaged in diverse practices, originating from a multitude of factors.

²⁹ Segment DK.A.Tsa.4, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 383.

b) A few more obstacles in the dreaming process

Outlined below are succinct descriptions of some of the more prevalent hindrances. Fatigue results in profound, unbroken sleep, impairing dream recall, while the lack of drowsiness poses an even more prevalent challenge. In such instances, *yogis* can choose to visualize either a luminous red *om* syllable, radiating throughout the expansive throat *cakra* region, or a gentle, softly glowing white sphere, approximately the size of a thumb, positioned between their eyebrows within the crown *cakra* area. Through this approach, *yogis* induce a state of drowsiness, causing their consciousness to blend with the luminosity, and gradually descend into the realm of dreams. While doing so, the emphasis on the luminosity should not be overly intense, as it could potentially divert their attention away from slumber. When faced with challenges in recollecting dreams, they should maintain wakefulness by closely observing their immediate surroundings. They should envision that all the elements of their surroundings are akin to those in a dream. Afterward, they can endeavour to return to sleep. Another frequent issue is the lack of dreams, for which the same techniques as those suggested for difficulties with sleep and absence of drowsiness are recommended. If, despite practicing the exercises, a *yogi* still cannot recall the dream or fails to distinctly recognize the dream images, he should retreat into profound solitude. Engaging in activities such as jumping, dancing or running while exclaiming “This is a dream, this is a dream!” at the highest volume possible can also be employed as an approach.³⁰

The *yogi* can also venture to a place that invokes fear or danger, such as the brink of a precipice, gaze into the abyss and affirm to himself that everything before him is merely a dream. As he prepares for sleep, he should emphatically affirm that this time he will achieve success, experiencing lucid dreams wherein he recognizes every detail of the content. Even for those who, despite undergoing such additional training, struggle to identify the dream, there remains a remedy. They should cultivate a sense of humility.³¹ Moreover, a solution exists even for those facing such challenges: they should devote themselves to daily prayers direct-

³⁰ Segment DK.A.Tsha.9, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 394.

³¹ Segment DK.A.Tsha.9, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 394.



Figure 7: *Yogi* jumps and screams: “This is a dream, this is a dream!”; mural in the secret temple of Lukhang, Tibet, 17th century (Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

ed towards their teacher and the Buddha. Following this, within the throat *cakra* region, they can visualize sharp blades slicing their body into fragments. Subsequently, in their mind, they offer these pieces as a sacrifice to the Buddha and all sentient beings. This is followed by the *mahāmudrā* practice.

Additional instances of challenges are also detailed in the commentaries. For example, if a *yogi* experiences bliss within lucid dreams but becomes entangled in attachment, giving rise to emotions, this situation can turn “the whole practice into a *samsāric* affair”.³² In this context, failure arises as he is unable to achieve an experience of emptiness due to his emotional entwinement. When confronted with such challenges, the *yogi* should place both hands over their eyes and gently turn them upward, while simultaneously easing the mind’s turmoil by directing attention towards the heart *cakra*. This technique is meant to induce a robust sensation of both bliss and emptiness on a physical level. When merged with the concurrent practice of the illusory body technique, it culminates in a heightened comprehension of

³² Segment DKA.Tsha.9, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 395.

all phenomena as manifestations akin to dreams, originating from consciousness (*viññāna*), as frequently elucidated in Vasubandhu's teachings concerning consciousness (e.g. *Vimśatikāvijñaptimātratāsiddhi* 16, 17). Through this *process*, the *yogi* also transcends various forms of attachment and fear, encompassing even the apprehensions of practice failure and the consequent cycle of rebirth in *samsāra*. To further dispel this type of fear, he should repeatedly remind himself of the concept of the equivalence between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, a theme found in numerous Mahāyāna Buddhist *sūtras*, and frequently emphasized within the *madhyamaka* school (as seen in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XXV. *Nirvāṇaparīkṣā*).³³ *Nirvāṇa* is equal to *samsāra* as perceived by Siddhārtha Gautama and innumerable other buddhas. Insight into their equality is a redemptive revelation and a novel mode of existence within *samsāra*. Hence, within the perspective of the enlightened, the world assumes a different guise. What is regarded as fiction by ordinary

³³ The doctrine of emptiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism had implications for the very concept of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, *nirvāṇa* does not mean ontological transcendence as it was conceived in Theravāda Buddhism, namely as the thirty-second stage of reality, which is absolutely beyond all *samsāric* realms (although it was neither spatially nor temporally defined, but was defined as beyond). There is no ontological difference between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, because *nirvāṇa* is not a transcendence, a supreme state beyond *samsāra*, but an infinite linearity, an immanence, without any trace of anything metaphysical. All the transcendence we are so diligently seeking is already here, in front of us. The radical transformation of ways of perceiving the world has also had consequences for the validity of metaphysical truths; metaphysics thus becomes a fictional, delusional construct. With Buddha's Mahāyāna *nirvāṇa* thus "loses" its transcendent character and becomes immanent. It is present in everything, omnipresent in *samsāra* as a latent potential; we all carry within us our potential *nirvāṇa*, which is only awakened at the moment of enlightenment. The shift from *samsāra* to *nirvāṇa* is therefore merely an epistemological shift, not an ontological one; it is a shift in the way the world is perceived, an awakening to emptiness. Everything is actually the same, remaining as it was, but at the same time so radically different – through the glasses of emptiness. *Nirvāṇa* is simply the realisation that *samsāra* is empty, accompanied by a feeling of bliss. The difference between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, from the conventional, empirical point of view (*saṃvṛtisatya*), is merely this: to be in *samsāra*, i.e. to be involved in the mechanism of rebirth and death, is to see the world as a collection of separate and autonomous entities that are solid, unchanging, whereas to be in *nirvāṇa* is to see things as impermanent and empty. When an individual perceives the emptiness of *samsāra* instead of its fullness (in the sense of substantiality, solidity, impermanence), *samsāra*, in this sense the whole phenomenal world, is transformed into *nirvāṇa*, which in turn also takes the individual out of *samsāra* as a cycle of birth and death, fuelled by ignorance, in which both the epistemological and the ontological aspects are intimately intertwined (Petek, *Na pragu prebujenja*, 164).

individuals takes on the mantle of reality, while the reality perceived through conventional modes of cognition assumes the semblance of fiction. Conversely, this has also impacted the preconceived understanding of the connection between dreams and wakefulness. The illusory frameworks that shape both states are fashioned by the same, as Vasubandhu terms it, a “magic wand of consciousness” (as evidenced in his treatise the *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*). This explains why wakefulness does not inherently possess a superior epistemological status compared to dreams. Within the eremitic tradition of Buddhism, this correlation is elevated to the point where dreams, due to their heightened ability to dissolve discursive thought patterns compared to wakefulness, are ascribed a greater soteriological significance than mental processes occurring in the awakened state. The internalization of the concept of the ontological equivalence between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* holds paramount importance in surmounting the fear of death, a fear that is further attenuated through the practice of conscious dreaming.

An issue frequently highlighted by commentators and *yogis* themselves is the occurrence of premature awakening from dreams. The *yogi* might wake up just as they commence observing the dream images. For instance, if awakened during the night, they should refrain from opening their eyes. Instead, with unwavering resolve, they should re-enter their dream realm, resolute that on the next occasion, they will not abruptly awaken from their dreams. When waking up in the morning, they should look closely at the reasons why they woke up too early – which can include external circumstances such as noise, heat or cold, too heavy clothes, etc. – and do their best to eliminate them the next time they go to sleep. With every awakening, it is essential for them to contemplate the essence of their dreams and whether they have effectively recognized them. Throughout the day, they should fortify their conscious intent to distinctly identify the images within their dreams. Additional concerns pertain to the manifestation of fragmented and disorderly dream images, stemming from the aggregation of distorted mental contents engendered by consciousness during wakefulness. The *yogi* overcomes these by engaging in breathing exercises and maintaining a resolute commitment to lucid dreaming.

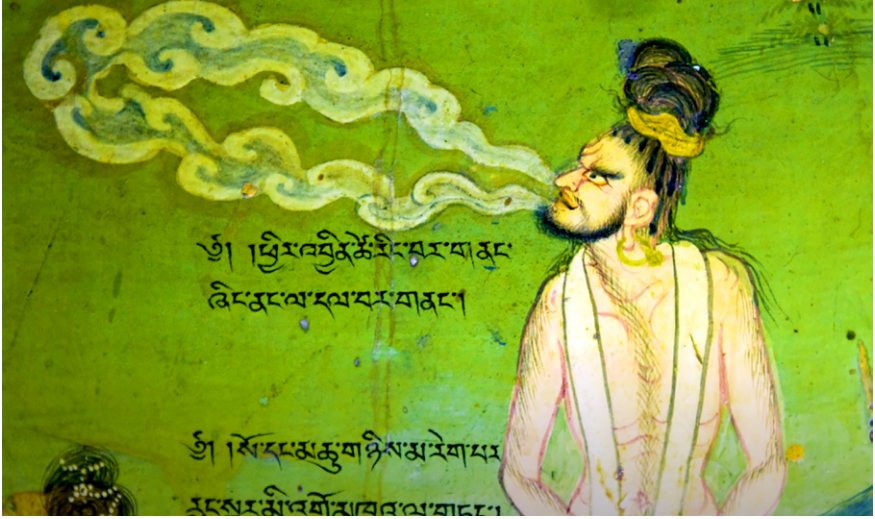


Figure 8: A *yogi* practising breathing techniques; mural in the secret temple of Lukhang, Tibet, 17th century (Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

Apart from the resolute conscious determination, the practice of the yoga of radiant light plays a vital role in fostering the occurrence of lucid dreams. While described in the Tilopa and Naropa fragments as a practice conducted subsequent to the dreaming technique, the notion of its utility as a prelude to the actual dream practice is also indicated in numerous commentaries. Prior to contemplating the dream during wakefulness, *yogis* should exert themselves to “seize the radiance” (Tib. *’od gsal zin par bya*),³⁴ subsequently directing their attention towards visualizing the five syllables within the heart *cakra*. This method is also recognized as the “*mahāmudrā* practice for the dream state” (Tib. *phyag rgya chen po rmi lam du bsgom pa*).³⁵ Hence, it is typically practiced before sleep, often while lying down. During this time, *yogis* centre their focus on envisioning the sacred syllable *hūm* within the heart *cakra*. This syllable radiates a powerful light, and they shift their attention sequentially from one syllable to the next. Through

³⁴ Segment DK.A.Pa.8, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 353.

³⁵ Segment DK.A.Pa.8, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 353.

the consistent application of this technique, *yogis* are poised to swiftly transition into a dream state. The practice of radiant light yoga aids in intensifying the clarity within dreams and concurrently sustains a heightened awareness even during profound sleep. Furthermore, upon waking, their thoughts remain impeccably lucid. If they awake during the darkness, their surroundings become vividly apparent, and the recollection of their dreams remains distinct.

The four stages of dream yoga

The efficacy of the lucid dreaming technique is hence contingent upon the preliminary groundwork delineated earlier. The actual practice of lucid dreaming encompasses four distinct stages. The initial stage involves recognizing the dream, often termed as “capturing, seizing the dream” (Tib. *rmi lam bzung ba*). In this phase, *yogis* become aware that they are within a dream and maintain consciousness throughout the dream sequence. The second stage encompasses the creation of dream images and the acknowledgment of their illusory essence (Tib. *rmi lam yongs su sbyang ba*). The third stage pertains to comprehending the illusory character of dreams (Tib. *rmi lam sgyu mar shes par bya ba*), while the fourth stage involves contemplating the authentic nature of dreams (Tib. *rmi lam gyi de kho na nyid bsgom pa*). The concluding stage entails awakening into wakefulness, wherein the *yogis*, leveraging a sophisticated dream technique, perceive this state through an entirely distinct lens, viewing it “with the glasses of the emptiness” experienced within the dream.

a) Capturing the dream

The initial stage of the dream process involves the distinct recognition of the dream as being just a dream. *Yogis* immerse themselves within their own dream realm, akin to veiling dream images like images on a screen. Through this process, they come to recognize themselves as both the dream’s creator, originating from their consciousness (*vijñāna*), and as an observer of the dream’s contents simultaneously. This aspect is also mirrored in the fragments attributed to Tilopa:

When you recognize dreams as dreams,
 you always attend (*bhāvanā*) to [their] deep sense.
 Tilopa [*rmi lam* 25–26]³⁶

The following part of the fragment already alludes to the second stage of the technique, which involves attentively deciphering the significance of dreams and delving into their contents.

b) Mastery in recognising the illusory nature of dreams

This stage of deepening lucid dreaming is also referred to as dream purification, as its essence lies in intensifying the recognition that all dream images are indeed illusory. To grasp this technique, it is worthwhile at this point to briefly delve into the doctrine of consciousness, the origin of all mental contents in both wakefulness and dreams, as well as the birthplace of liberation.

- The nature of (dream) consciousness

Vasubandhu (320–380), one of the main exponents of the *yogācāra* school, specifically dedicated his efforts to deliberations concerning the diverse manifestations of consciousness (*viññāna*). The fundamental philosophical foundation of the school is the doctrine of “consciousness only” (*viññaptimātratā*), signifying that everything we perceive, whether in the external realm or within our own inner self, originates from consciousness and its cognitive processes. Hence, there exists solely the reality of consciousness, and objects outside of consciousness lack independent existence from it. It is essential to underscore that the doctrine of consciousness alone does not negate the presence of the external world; rather, it implies that the encounter with objects in daily experience is essentially a creation of consciousness. This concept emphasizes that the phenomenal world does not exist in the manner it perceives itself. The apprehension of conscious phenomena hinges upon the circumstances of its “storehouse consciousness” (*ālayaviññāna*), a reservoir of imprints amassed across all preceding lifetimes. These imprints carry forward into subsequent existences and, under specific circumstances,

³⁶ All translations of the Tilopa fragments from Tibetan into English are given in Torricelli, “The Tibetan Text on Tilopa’s Śaḍdharmopadeśa,” 145–166.

mature or trigger in the subsequent life, shaping mental contents. This establishes a connection between the past, present, and future within the realm of human experience. Serving as the foundation for mental processes, it holds the residues of the past that influence the present, thus shaping the future. Concurrently, it acts as the repository of consciousness and the birthplace of dreams.

Vasubandhu characterizes the objects within the phenomenal world, as perceived by consciousness, as illusions (*Vimśatikāvijñaptimātratā-siddhi* 1). He further elucidates the origin of all mental representations that arise in both waking and dreaming states through the doctrine of the evolution of consciousness known as *vijñānapariṇāma*. The term *pariṇāma* signifies progression and transformation, denoting a departure from the prior state. It pertains to the inherent character of consciousness, a concept discernible within Abhidhamma Buddhism, wherein consciousness is conceived as an array of fleeting occurrences that shift from one moment to the next. Consciousness is not a static and immutable entity; rather, it emerges anew in every moment and simultaneously varies in each instance, carrying latent imprints from its preceding states. This unceasing stream of transformation embodies its essential ontological essence through interaction with the senses and the external world, consciousness constructs representations that encompass dream content. This content emerges from *karmic* imprints stored within the storehouse consciousness, interwoven with the impressions from waking experiences, all amassed within the same storehouse.³⁷ Vasubandhu elucidates the essence of consciousness by drawing upon the *trisvabhāva* doctrine, which outlines the three facets of consciousness' nature. In its typical, unillumined state, consciousness embodies conceptualization (*parikalpitasvabhāva*), denoting an imaginative quality. This conceptualization serves as the foundation for

³⁷ The storehouse of consciousness could be compared to Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, a place where various memory traces and archetypes are stored, but *ālayavijñāna* only includes the personal unconscious, as it is merely a collection of one's past *karmic* history and varies from person to person. What is universal, according to the teachings of Buddhism, is that which arises from the accumulated traces in the storehouse of consciousness, i.e. ignorance, which causes suffering; therefore, the main technique of human meditation efforts is to purify the storehouse of past impressions.

its dualistic thought patterns, fostering a divide between itself and the external realm. Consequently, consciousness perceives objects as autonomously real, while concurrently sensing its own distinctness from the rest of existence. The second alteration in consciousness, known as *paratantrasvabhāva*, surpasses the deceptive notions of objects existing autonomously. It emerges from perceiving the interconnectedness of phenomena that unfold within consciousness. This understanding acknowledges the causal relationships between mental constructs and also recognizes the seamless continuum between mental experiences in both wakefulness and the dream state.

In the same manner that waking consciousness engages with the world based on its *karmic* potentials and the stored predispositions within the storehouse consciousness, dream consciousness follows suit, as there exists a seamless connection between these two states. Negative *karma* also extends its reach into dreams, mirroring the ethical condition of the dreamer. These adverse effects are encapsulated by the term *upaghātava*, which can also be understood as a seminal outpouring within a dream triggered by encountering an unreal dream image. In line with Buddhist philosophy, encountering such an occurrence within a dream is construed as a manifestation of negative moral disposition, characterized by intense emotions, and carried over from the waking life into the realm of dreams. Suffering is engendered by consciousness itself through its representations, and it is in alignment with this process that individuals make choices, consequently finding themselves situated within a particular realm of reality. Vasubandhu asserts that the perception of an object can emerge even in the absence of an actual external object (*Vimsatikāvijñaptimātratāsiddhi* 16). He draws a comparison to dreams – just as in dreams, a phenomenon materializes before us for a brief moment and then vanishes, similarly, such transience can occur with an object in the waking state. The fleeting essence of the object causes its dissolution, yet its imprint persists within consciousness. Even amidst diverse circumstances, an individual can continue to envision its presence. Instances of perception without actual objects encompass a range of dream visions, encounters, and journeys.

The third transformation of consciousness, *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva* (“perfected nature”), represents a state of consciousness that unveils its

inherent dynamics, beholding both the world and itself in their genuine form – emptiness.

When dissecting the dynamic framework of consciousness, Vasubandhu employs several analogies that draw parallels between wakefulness and dreams, as well as the objects we perceive within each of these states. In its typical condition, consciousness engages in perception through the lens of impressions and memory, unaware that these do not truly reflect reality; much like a dreamer in an ordinary dream remains oblivious to the fact that the images witnessed are mere illusions (*Vimśatikāvijñaptimātratāsiddhi* 17). One comes to recognize this upon awakening, drawing an analogy between two forms of enlightenment – just as a dreamer emerges from slumber and comprehends that the images were mere phantasms, born of their dream-consciousness, similarly, in wakefulness, by engaging in meditative practice, they awaken from their misconceptions and apprehend that all representations are simply products of their consciousness. According to the teachings of Tantric Buddhism, however, consciousness can solely attain its ultimate and genuine modification (*pariniṣpannasvabhāva*), namely its emptiness, within dreams, subsequently transferring these insights into the realm of wakefulness.

- The creative activity of consciousness

Prior to reaching the ultimate stage, which involves the conclusive transformation of consciousness and the subsequent transference of insights into wakefulness, *yogis* assess the potency of their boundless consciousness through testing within dreams.³⁸ Through the diligent practice of inner heat and illusory body techniques, they attain complete mastery over their consciousness, preventing them from generating dream images based on accumulated impressions. The latter could be defined as a technique of managing or controlling one's own dream process. Ordinary dreamers, or those who remain in the first, clouded modification of their own consciousness, cannot choose what to dream about or change the content of their dreams, but merely indulge in

³⁸ Vasubandhu illustrates the potent power of consciousness with the example of the story from *Rāmāyana* about *ṛṣi*, the seer who burnt down a forest by sheer force of his consciousness (GRETIL, “*Vimśatikākārikā*,” accessed July 22, 2023, http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/corpustei/transformations/html/sa_vimzatikAkArikA.htm, 20).

watching what is conjured up on the night-screen, with no possibility of getting up, turning off the screen and leaving the “bad film” behind, while *yogis*’ training in Tantric techniques enables them to do extreme things in their dreams that are not possible in the waking state. As an illustration, if a *yogi* dreams of water, he possesses the capacity to wilfully transmute it into fire; if his dream entails something diminutive, he can morph it into something substantial, or even replicate a single entity into an infinite multitude. This technique relies on delving into the dynamic framework of consciousness that gives rise to dream imagery and the associated emotions. It entails a meticulous examination of the emergence and dissipation of dream constructs, allowing *yogis* to perceive that all dream manifestations are illusory and devoid of inherent substance. Consequently, this practice helps *yogis* transcend attachment to these manifestations.

This technique is also known as “illusory dream actions” and, as *yogis* of Ladakh taught me, encompasses two categories: mundane and supramundane acts. In the mundane aspect, *yogis* are capable of engaging in ordinary tasks, visiting commonplace locations or executing actions within a dream that remain beyond reach in waking life. For instance, they can journey to revered terrains or transfigure diverse entities, including themselves, into different forms. This practice facilitates the insight that the constituents of the dream realm lack autonomous existence, as they are intricately interwoven, each imbued with the quality of emptiness. The technique of controlling one’s dream process encompasses the act of imbuing dreams with a specific reality from within the dream itself. This entails a deliberate choice within the dream to embark on journeys to uncharted domains – traversing detailed landscapes, such as a voyage around the world or venturing into celestial realms.

In these ethereal expanses, one engages in conversations with deities, absorbing their teachings and counsel, while experiencing an overflow of bliss and an ecstatic quiver throughout the body. Moreover, they have the ability to journey to diverse Buddha’s realms, where the dreamer frequently assumes the guise of a Buddha.³⁹ Gampopa’s commentary,

³⁹ Projection of dreams into the realms of celestial or Buddha’s realities is a common technique used by many *yogis* as well as lamas; for example, Lama Wonton Kyergangwa projected

flowers and lotuses shower down, radiating exquisite luminance. Within this realm, the dreamer offers homage and attunes to the Buddha's prayers. Within such dreams, it is imperative for the *yogi* to recognize that all these celestial dimensions are akin to illusions, akin to rainbows or the moon's reflection upon water. This recognition further reinforces the concept of the equanimity between *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.

Another significant method employed for what are often referred to as dream journeys and encounters with Buddhas is the practice of visualization. Prior to engaging in the actual *gtum mo* technique, *yogis* undergo training in the following visualization approach:

The seed-syllables (*bīja*) of the five families (*pañcatathāgatagotra*), are [taken as visualisation] supports (*ālambana*). Then, [in sleep] the *buddha*-fields (*buddhakṣetra*) and the *buddhas* will be seen.
Tilopa [*rmi lam* 28–30]

Yet another prevalent method involves the metamorphosis of *yogis* into *maṇḍala* deities, characterized by distinct body hues and numerous limbs. This practice is preceded by preliminary visualizations of a *maṇḍala* that portrays the entire universe, centred on Mount Meru. Consequently, within a dream, through deliberate intent and conscious manipulation, *yogis* have the ability to transmute themselves into various forms: a bird, a lion, a king, a house, a mountain, even a Buddha, altering the scale of these images. They can soar through the sky, bound onto the moon or sun, or plunge into a profound abyss without sustaining harm. They can summon the sun or the moon to the earth with a single step, traverse through flames unscathed, explore profound depths and expand their presence across the entire expanse of the universe.

- Illusory body yoga and dream body

The effectiveness of mastering the technique of executing illusory actions within dreams is shaped not solely by visualization, but also by the practice of the illusory body yoga. This facet involves altering one's own dream body, thereby enhancing the perception of the transient nature of the psychophysical continuum, alongside recognition of the impermanence inherent in all phenomena. For instance, this practice

entails the ability to purposefully transform external objects, like transmuting water into fire, earth into the moon, or even converting a bird into a tiger. The yoga of the illusory body constitutes an essential component within this overall practice. The practice of acknowledging the ever-changing nature of both entities and oneself, the perpetual process of emergence and transformation, holds significance not only during life but also during the dying process and the intermediate state of *bar do*.⁴⁰ Hence, the illusory body technique and dream practice complement one another, synergistically guiding towards the transcendence of discursive thinking and dispelling the myriad of illusions that stem from it. The capacity to embark on these journeys is intertwined with the unique and refined dream body that *yogis* assume, effectively disengaging from the gross physical form. In this context, the physical techniques for awakening dormant energies hold a significant role, aiding in this separation process. It is important to highlight the distinction between typical dreams originating in the unawaken, “gross” body of an ordinary dreamer, and those stemming from the deliberate manipulation of energies within the subtle body. In the latter case, the subtle body undergoes transformation within the dream itself, resulting in a nuanced dream experience. The subtle dream body similarly becomes evident in the *bar do* state, drawing parallels to the shamanistic concept of a dream soul disentangling itself from the material realm to manifest remarkable phenomena. This notion finds resonance, for instance, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakoṇiṣad* (4.3.11), emphasizing that during a dream, an individual momentarily departs the physical form to adopt the dream body, enabling the soul to forge a dream realm distinct from the material entities within the phenomenal world.

The cultivation of diverse supernatural abilities and the practice of dream journeys serve to fortify the recognition of dreams’ illusory essence. Ultimately, these endeavours aim to culminate in their cessation, ushering in the dissolution of all conceptual constructs. This transformative process leads to the transition of con-

⁴⁰ The recognition of the four emptinesses is also crucial, whereupon the consciousness of the fourth emptiness projects the illusory body into the *maṇḍala*, after which there is the disappearance of both the dreamer, the Buddha, and the *maṇḍala*.

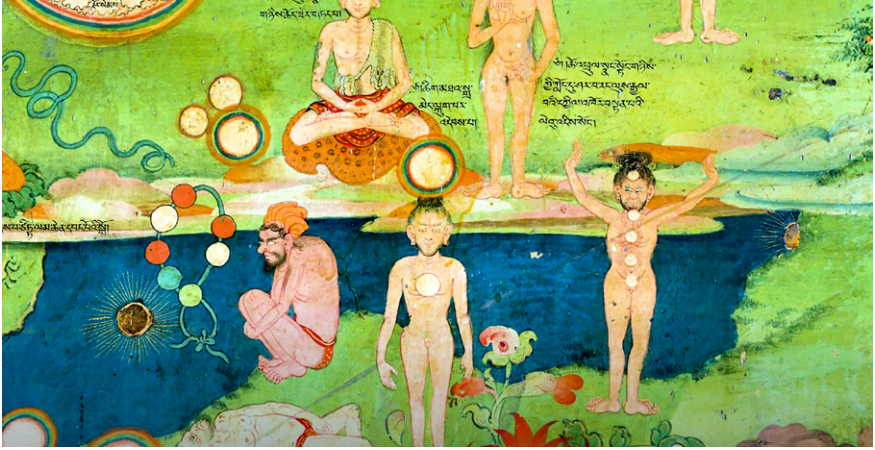


Figure 10: A subtle, illusory and dream body; mural in the secret temple of Lukhang, Tibet, 17th century (Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

ceptual modification *parikalpitasvabhāva* into *vijñāna*'s pristine state (*pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*),⁴¹ marking the culmination of the dreaming journey.

c) Awareness of the illusory nature of dreams

Upon mastering the aforementioned techniques, *yogis* advance to the third stage of acknowledging and deepening the understanding of the illusory nature of dreams. This phase encompasses meditation that perceives all phenomena as enchanting illusions and dreams (Skt. *svapnamāyopamā*, Tib. *rmi lam sgyu ma lta bu*). This practice is also called training in *māyā* (Skt., Tib. *bslab pa*), i.e. illusion, the most important part of which is the practice of overcoming any kind of fear.⁴² A method to further enhance this practice involves the induction of unsettling dreams, wherein *yogis* must discern the dream's true nature

⁴¹ See for instance »Vasubandhu: *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa*« (GRETIL, accessed July 22, 2023, https://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/corpus/tei/transformations/html/sa_vasubandhu-trisvabhAvanirdeza.htm).

⁴² It is therefore also referred to as the recognition of illusion and the overcoming of fear (Tib. *sgyu mar bying gyis brlab cing yang ba spang ba*), Segment DK.A.Pa.9, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 354.

as a mere illusion. This process serves to intensify the realization of the dream's illusory essence. This method primarily revolves around generating deliberate actions within the dream to assess one's adeptness in surmounting fear. For instance, deliberately engaging in unsettling acts within the dream, confronting formidable entities, walking into flames or descending into an abyss, all while maintaining the awareness that these events have not genuinely transpired. Through this process, *yogis* arrive at the realization that dreams remain mere illusions, dispelling the necessity for fear, as everything within them is a product of imagination. Whenever a thought emerges within the dream, suggesting that the dream's authenticity might be plausible – such as when fear takes hold of a *yogi* – he should promptly examine the fear's essence within the dream context itself. This process leads them to reaffirm that the cause of the fear is completely void of reality, rendering all apprehensions redundant. Hence, *yogis* maintain a distinct awareness within the dream itself, acknowledging that they cannot be scorched by the fire, carried away by a flood or torn apart by a dog.⁴³ This form of dream-guidance, underscoring the illusory essence of both dreams and waking experiences, ultimately fosters an understanding of the inherent non-existence of the substantial nature within all existence. *Yogis* comprehend that dreams constitute nothing more than a deceptive and illusory manifestation of consciousness (*parikalpitasvabhāva*). The entirety of the phenomenal realm reveals emptiness, and consciousness itself bears resemblance to a dream-like image. *Samṣāra* and *nirvāṇa*, akin to the unreal mirage enticing a thirst-driven deer (Skt. *mṛgatṛṣṇā*, lit. “deer-thirst”),⁴⁴ are recognized as unreal appearances. Consequently, nothing is genuinely bounded, thus, there exists naught to liberate.

In this manner, *yogis* employ a form of vigilant contemplation of dream images, akin to the meditation *sati*, a detached observation of thoughts within Theravāda Buddhism. However, in this instance, the

⁴³ Segment DK.A.Pa.9, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 354.

⁴⁴ *Mṛgatṛṣṇā* is the name given to a Fata Morgana, an optical phenomenon in the atmosphere. The term was coined on the basis of the specific situation in which the phenomenon mostly occurs, namely in a vast desert where the sun mercilessly scorches the sand beneath it, creating the illusion of water, which drives the thirsty deer to make an hour-long run to get some refreshment.



Figure 11: *Yogis* observe dreams and discover their creative potentials; mural in the secret temple of Lukhang, Tibet, 17th century (Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

practice unfolds within the dream state itself. Through this practice, *yogis* unveil the illusory essence of these images, surmount the imaginative transformation of consciousness and consequently eradicate negative *karmic* imprints even within the dreaming process. However, it is important to emphasize that at this stage, they have not yet attained the ability to directly perceive emptiness as the foundational essence of all phenomena. They remain within the domain of what could be called the conceptual dream universe. This parallel can also be drawn to experiences in the waking state – when we observe a reflection in a mirror, we recognize its illusory nature, yet we are still incapable of grasping its true nature directly, free from any conceptual blending.

d) Contemplation on the true nature of dreams

In the ultimate phase of dream yoga, having achieved proficiency in deciphering the authentic essence of dream images, eradicating emotions within the dream and concurrently surpassing all attachments, a state of non-dualistic awareness is reached. This entails a non-conceptual understanding (Tib. *rigpa*), where consciousness undergoes a metamorphosis into its fundamental and pure state (*pariniṣpannasvabhāva*).

Consequently, *yogis* perceive solely the serene and unblemished luminance of consciousness – the primal Buddha nature – characterized by emptiness, devoid of dream narratives and without the presence of the dreamer. This state is precipitated by a preceding examination of the *yogis'* dream consciousness, culminating in the revelation that all exists within a consciousness that is uncreated and boundless, akin to an unfathomable ocean or an endless cosmos. Thus, a shift occurs from a consciousness comprised of conceptual frameworks (*parikalpitasvabhāva*) to a consciousness which understands the interconnectedness of mental phenomena (*paratantrasvabhāva*) and finally to a consciousness devoid of any mental constructs (*pariniṣpannasvabhāva*), akin to the vacant expanse of the sky. At this stage, the dream progression undergoes a metamorphosis into a non-conceptual contemplation, specifically a meditation on suchness – the genuine essence of the dream. This practice concurrently fosters an awareness of the suchness inherent in wakefulness (Tib. *chos nyid*, Skt. *tathātā*, also *dharmatā*). The obscured conceptual consciousness (Tib. *kunzhi namshe*) inherently generates duality and engages in the play of dualism. In truth, the foundational element of consciousness is the boundless interplay of dualistic perceptions of the world. This incessant interplay consistently generates novel experiences, meticulously storing them within the repository of consciousness known as *ālayavijñāna*. In the final stage of dream yoga, *ālayavijñāna* undergoes complete purification, allowing *yogis* not only to comprehend the mechanism of consciousness but also to perceive it in its true form – as empty. The emergence of non-dual awareness within the dream realm signifies a manifestation of enlightenment within the dream itself. This awakening not only unveils the emptiness inherent in all things but also reveals the Buddha-nature – the fundamental essence of all phenomena.

At the end of the dream: journeying towards waking consciousness and the end-of-life dream

In the final phase, *yogis* extend these dream revelations into wakefulness, where they perceive all phenomena and encounters as devoid of inherent substance, possessing the illusory quality akin to dream im-

ages. They perceive the entirety as a dream and dreams themselves as nothing but dreams.⁴⁵ Consequently, dreams guide *yogis* towards the realization of the “dream-like” nature inherent in everyday existence and lead to authentic awakening. This journey encompasses a transition from illusory wakefulness and ignorance to a comprehension of wakefulness’s mechanisms and thought processes. This progression ultimately surpasses ordinary experiences, bringing forth the recognition that there exists no absolute separation between dreams and wakefulness. The reason being, the inherent nature of objects as perceived in our ordinary consciousness during wakefulness aligns with the nature of objects within dreams, as they both stem from the same consciousness. In this manner, the correlation between wakefulness and dreams mirrors the ontological unity, the absence of any differentiation, which aligns with the Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective that characterizes all phenomena. Both states, like all else, bear the profound imprint of emptiness, the great seal that defines them. The practice of dream yoga is intricately intertwined with the doctrine of emptiness, representing a means of deepening one’s experiential understanding of emptiness, which is an enduring supreme wisdom.

a) Dreams and *bar do*

Through scrutinizing dreams as inherently dream-like, illusory, and transient, *yogis* discern not only the character of mental states and phenomena in wakeful existence but also those that emerge within the intermediate state between death and rebirth (*bar do*). In addition to its impact on the final technique, dream yoga also assumes a pivotal role in the subsequent practice known as radiant light yoga. Notably, this practice is engaged prior to dream yoga, and concurrently, the proficiency gained in dream yoga augments the adeptness in training for radiant light yoga. Both techniques, dream yoga and radiant light yoga, hold immense significance during the process of dying. They empower *yogis* to sustain awareness and identify the illusory character of consciousness-generated images even in the moments of dying or the subsequent post-death phase, specifically within the intermediate state between

⁴⁵ Segment DK.A.Ki.5, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 524.

death and rebirth (*bar do*). Within the Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition, six distinct intermediate states are recognized: firstly, the *bar do* during the transition between death and rebirth; secondly, the *bar do* to the luminous phase that promptly ensues death; thirdly, the *bar do* of becoming, encompassing the journey towards rebirth; fourthly, the *bar do* of birth and death, signifying existence within a reality contingent upon one's *karma*; fifthly, the *bar do* of dreaming, encapsulating the states of slumber and awakening; and finally, the *bar do* of meditation. Within the framework of the six dharmas, the term *bar do* denotes the distinct practice associated with the interval between life and rebirth,⁴⁶ epitomizing *yogis'* accomplishment in spiritual pursuit and proficiency in the six yogas during their lifetime. Hence, the consciousness experienced in wakefulness, dreams and death remains identical – the very consciousness that engenders illusions. The *yogis'* task lies in further cultivating this understanding, even within the intermediate state.

Discussions concerning the six dharmas and the *Bardo Thödol* (*Liberation in the Intermediate State Through Hearing*, more commonly known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*) encompass elaborate depictions of the process of dying and the encounters within the dying phase. Death and the act of dying are frequently likened to the condition of dreaming. However, it is important to note that this comparison is more than just a metaphor. In truth, the very essence of the dying process mirrors the efficacy of the dream practice itself. Throughout their lifetime, before nearing the threshold of death, *yogis* can, through the potency of their consciousness, even access the state of *bar do* within their dreams. Entering *bar do* through dreams during life further deepens their terminal lucidity. The discussions centred around the six dharmas also encompass the delineation of associated techniques practiced by *yogis* within dreams. These include recognizing all images as illusory dream manifestations, cultivating extraordinary capacities like telepathy, envisioning potential future incarnations, embarking on diverse dream expeditions to both familiar and unfamiliar realms. In these journeys, *yogis* engage with individuals and entities unable to perceive or hear them, initially evoking a sense of trepidation. However, they swiftly discern that they

⁴⁶ This *bar do* occurs seven weeks before a new birth.

exist within an intermediate state, realizing that everything they encounter stems solely from their own consciousness. Within Gampopa's writings, the notion is conveyed that those with the capability ought to engage in the practice of *mahāmudrā*. This is because the efficacy of *mahāmudrā* within the *bar do* state is equivalent to a hundred years of meditation conducted throughout one's lifetime.⁴⁷

The transitions between death and new life or liberation, depending on the success of the *bar do* and training in other yogas, are also described. During the process of dying, *yogis* retain a physical form, with the initial stage being the observation of the dissolution of this corporeal body. Through the practice of deity yoga, a subtle body emerges, akin to the dream body, comprising alterations within consciousness (Tib. *yiḍ kyi lus*, Skt. *manodeha*, also referred to as *manomanakāya*).⁴⁸ In this state, the perception of deities manifests, which *yogis*, akin to the practice of dream yoga, acknowledge as manifestations of an illusory nature, all the while sustaining the awareness of their own demise.⁴⁹ As the dissolution of the dream body, or *manomanakāya*, commences, it transforms into *sambhogakāya*. Following the dissolution of the latter, it merges with radiant light, culminating in the emergence of *dharmakāya* – the embodiment of the Dharma, also referred to as the body of bliss (Tib. *de ba chen po'i sku*, Skrt. *mahāsukhakāya*). This signifies the attainment of Buddhahood, i.e. *nirvāṇa*.

The sequence of elemental dissolution during the dying process is likened to the progression of descending into slumber. Similar to how *yogis* progressively “relinquish” their physical form and adopt the termed body of consciousness or dream body, they then encounter these bodies – manifestations of consciousness – within dreams, taking shape as dream images. The dissolution that unfolds during the moment of death comprises two distinct processes: the disintegration of the gross elements and subsequently, the disintegration of the subtler elements. Thus, the dissolution of the bodies is analogous to the dissolution of conceptual systems of consciousness (*paratantrasvabhāva*). In the end, all

⁴⁷ Segment DK.A.Pa.13, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 360.

⁴⁸ *Manomanakāya* is actually a kind of dream *nirmāṇakāya*, a body of transformation.

⁴⁹ Torricelli, *The Tibetan Text on Tilopa's Śaḍdharmopadeśa*, 155.

that is left is the subtle state of pure awareness (*pariniṣpannasvabhāva*), the “radiant light”, in which *yogis* have been trained in the course of their life. Pure light represents the purity of *yogis*’ consciousness and the absence of mental impurities. Individuals approaching death without prior meditation training do not perceive this light; instead, they lapse into a state of unconsciousness where their amassed *karma* unexpectedly triggers a succession of dream-like hallucinations in the intermediate state. Consequently, the individual once more succumbs to the “sleep of ignorance”, takes residence in the womb, and awakens in a subsequent life in a different embodiment. On the contrary, adept *yogis*, through the discernment of unblemished light, sustain this condition and liberate themselves from the cycle of rebirth. In the pursuit of the intermediate state practice, it is imperative for *yogis* to maintain awareness of being within this state. Achieving this awareness is contingent upon the prior practice of dreaming. Dreams essentially serve as a preparatory arena for death and the ensuing liberation. Those who have undergone dream yoga training, who have consistently remained conscious during dreams and identified dream images as illusory and void, will carry this awareness into the intermediate state. There they will recognize the state for what it is – as illusory as everything else – as the ultimate perspective dismantles rigid divisions between life and death.

b) Overcoming emotions through dream yoga

Nevertheless, the proficiency acquired through dream yoga training is equally vital for regulating emotions and discerning their illusory essence within the intermediate state. Throughout the process of dying, *yogis* transcend the array of emotions classified as the three mental poisons (Skrt. *triviṣa*). This capability is honed through their involvement in dream yoga practice, allowing them to discern these emotions as illusory. This awareness triggers a shift toward non-conceptual contemplation (Tib. *mi rtog pa*, Skrt. *nirvikalpa*), ultimately culminating in an embrace of emptiness. The consciousness of individuals approaching death who have not undergone dream yoga training grapples with a diverse range of sensations. The dominance of one of these sensations, categorized under the three poisons, determines the realm of their subsequent rebirth. For instance, greed and avarice result in the birth of

hungry demons (Tib. *yi dags*, Skrt. *preta*), while anger leads to the experience of hellish realms (Tib. *dmyal ba*, Skrt. *naraka*), and delusion (Tib. *gti mug*, Skrt. *moha*) leads to birth within the animal realm (Tib. *byol song*, Skrt. *tiryāṅc*). In this context, the discussions on the six dharma emphasize that *yogis* must exercise caution against becoming attached to the bliss derived from transforming all images and emotions into emptiness. Failing to do so might hinder the attainment of *nirvāna* and instead lead to a return to the cycle of *samsāra*. During the process of dying, the practitioner also gains proficiency in the sexual practices of *karmamudrā*,⁵⁰ which serve as a means for *yogis* to transcend anger, carnal desires and sexual frustration. For instance, during this phase, visions of the father and mother engaged in sexual intercourse may arise. In these visions, an ordinary individual or an untrained dreamer might encounter intense anger and jealousy towards their father and a yearning for their mother.⁵¹ Such emotions could be seen as a latent Oedipus complex even preceding birth, while a contrary emotion could lead to rebirth within a female body. Driven by anger, the person in the process of dying enters his father's body through the anus, thus undergoing a cycle of *samsāric* rebirth. Due to his training in the six yogas, skilled *yogis* successfully overcome the temptations of such visions, remaining calm and unemotional at the vision of his future parents, who will not become that because of his perfection. A less skilled *yogi* might be confronted with a latent desire, for example, for his mother, and struggle with the elimination of that feeling; as a guideline, texts suggest that one should imagine the mother as his Tantric partner, thus transforming sexual desire into sensual and spiritual devotion. If he fails, he can try imagining his father and mother as two deities, and if he is still unable to dispel the otherwise not-so-strong emotion, he is advised to contemplate what he has seen as an image from his dream, and to deepen the idea that it is merely a projection of his consciousness. In the event of repeated failure, other tips are added, including visualising oneself as a deity and meditating on light and emptiness until the *yogi* has banished all emotion and thought. These techniques are also

⁵⁰ Segment DK.A.Khi.16, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 571.

⁵¹ Segment DK.A.Pa.13, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 360.

called “closing the womb door”, because if they are successful, the *yogi* prevents his *samsāric* rebirth.

c) The transference of consciousness

Bar do is followed by a transmission of consciousness, which, depending on the level of spiritual progress, leads either to a rebirth or liberation. Similar to the *bar do*, this practice is further enriched by *yogis* throughout their life and even within the context of dream yoga. Preparations are equally important for this technique, and alongside *mahāmudrā*, the visualization of the syllable *hūṃ* within the heart *cakra* is advised. Following this, a luminous image emerges, radiating from within to the external world. Subsequently, *yogis* perceive celestial realms and divine beings, all of which are eventually integrated into the syllable *hūṃ*.

As an alternative, *yogis* can engage in the practice of consciousness transference within a dream, envisioning their consciousness journeying to higher realms, like the celestial realm of Buddha Vajradhara. Here, they can engage in the practice of *mahāmudrā* even within their dreams. It is important that they see the celestial realm clearly, which is why they need to imagine this kind of journey continuously during the day, leading to a clear vision in their dreams.⁵² In dreams, *yogis* can utilize visualizations to contemplate the dissolution of both the physical and subtle body elements that occur at the time of death. By envisioning the elements of the subtle body and incorporating sacred syllables, this practice can be further enriched through various breathing techniques. In their dreams, they may try their hand at transferring their consciousness to one of the celestial realms, where they appear in the disembodied, completely empty form of one of the chosen deities, much like a reflection in a mirror. Hence, *yogis* can undergo the transference of consciousness into the realm of Buddhahood even within the realm of dreams. During the practice of *prāṇāyāma* techniques, they envision the process of death and visualize the heart *cakra* syllable moving between their mind and dreams, symbolizing the transference of consciousness to an elevated state. At this point, breath becomes in-

⁵² Segment DK.A.Pa.11, in: Kragh, *Tibetan Yoga and Mysticism*, 356.



Figure 12: Visualisation of sacred syllables; mural in the secret temple of Lukhang, Tibet, 17th century (Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

tertwined with light, signifying the fusion of consciousness with the utmost state. Gampopa's commentaries also allude to a technique reminiscent of Hindu *haṭhayoga*, as evident from its meaning, i.e. "strong, forceful transference" (Tib. *btsan thabs kyi 'pho ba*). The Tibetan term *btsan thabs* corresponds to the Sanskrit term *haṭha*, signifying "power" and "force". *Yogis* can also engage in these practices with a dying person. There have also been techniques involving the visualization of consciousness transfer to another body within one of the *samsāric* realms. These methods are primarily employed by those who are less adept and may not achieve Buddhahood upon death. However, mastery of the six *yogas* leads to the unconditioned state, rendering such practices unnecessary. Fragments of Tilopa's teaching also describe the practice of entering a new body after death, whereby *yogis* direct their consciousness from their body into another body (Tilopa, [*'pho ba* 61]). This practice of transference can be undertaken during one's lifetime by directing consciousness towards a recently deceased individual, whose body is still in a fresh state.

d) Dreams on the way to *nirvāṇa*

The connection between dreams and death is apparent in various early Hindu and Buddhist texts, where comparisons between deep sleep and dying are frequently drawn. In both deep sleep and death, individuals encounter a state of darkness devoid of mental activity. Within the context of the Tantric tradition of Buddhist hermits, the process of dying is likened to an enchanting dream realm. This dream world, adorned with forests of illusory images, serves as a final test of the dying person's spiritual preparation, ultimately guiding them towards the realm of the unconditional. Death itself is thus replete with dream-like images, and the efficacy of this process hinges on proficiency in the art of dreaming. As elucidated in the preceding sections, dreaming serves as a crucial foundation not only for itself but also as a pivotal "training ground" for other techniques like *bar do* and the transference of consciousness.

In contrast to early Hindu and Buddhist texts where dreams were associated with leading to death, within the Tantric eremitic tradition, dreams lead beyond death. A proficient dreamer, even in the intermediate state, can unveil the illusory character of all manifestations, guiding them towards the unconditioned state beyond the realms of life and death – *nirvāṇa*. Dream yoga, a practice that purifies consciousness to such a degree that it sustains lucidity even in the intermediate state, can be seen as the ultimate method of salvation, guiding individuals towards a supreme and unconditional state of existence. In accordance with the Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings and the practices of Tantric *yogis*, *nirvāṇa* is inherently present within us all, existing in a dormant state. This latent state reveals the paradoxical nature of our true essence, its immediate presence that is simultaneously the most intricate spiritual realization. The potential to achieve this state perpetually lies ahead of us, offering the opportunity for its attainment. Indeed, in this context, Milarepa's resounding exhortation carries profound significance. In that very body, within that very dream – when, if not now?

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