



LAMA SURYA DAS

TIBETAN DREAM YOGA

STUDY GUIDE

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Lama Surya Das.

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Conscious in Your Dreams

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Also by Lama Surya Das:

Books

Awakening the Buddha Within: Eight Steps to Enlightenment. New York:
Broadway Books, 1997.

Awakening to the Sacred: Building a Spiritual Life from Scratch. New
York: Broadway Books, 1999.

With Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche. *Natural Great Perfection: Vajra Songs and
Dzogchen Teachings.* Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1995.

The Snow Lion's Turquoise Mane: 155 Wisdom Tales from Tibet.
San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1992.

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For more information on Lama Surya Das' teaching schedule, contact:

Dzogchen Foundation
PO Box 400734
Cambridge, MA 02140
Phone (617) 628-1702
www.dzogchen.org
www.surya.org

For a free catalog of audios, videos, and music, please contact:
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WHAT IS A DREAM?

“Tibetan Buddhism considers sleep to be a form of nourishment, like food, that restores and refreshes the body. Another type of nourishment is *samadhi*, or meditative concentration. If one becomes advanced enough in the practice of meditative concentration, then this itself sustains or nourishes the body.”

— His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama

Dreams are a significant part of our life. They are as real and unreal as life itself. Dreams are extremely personal – and transpersonal, too. Our dreams are a reflection of ourselves: in dreams, no matter how many characters appear, we meet ourselves. Dreams are mirrors to our soul. They can help us to better understand ourselves, our world, and the nature of reality. Dreams introduce us to other dimensions of experience. Here, time and space are much more

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liquid and plastic; they can be shaped and reshaped almost at will. Dreams hint of other worlds, other lives. They are a glimpse of our afterlife.

Everyone dreams, although not all dreams are remembered equally. Fifty-six percent of Americans have had a lucid dream – that is, a dream in which one is aware that one is dreaming. Twenty-one percent say they have a lucid dream once a month or more. Meditators report vividly clear, self-aware dreams weekly and even more often.

How Dreams Can Help Us

Great healers have long recognized the power of dreams to inform and support us. Hippocrates said, “Dreams are one of the most important ways to diagnose a patient’s illness.” Sigmund Freud’s turn-of-the-century work, *The Interpretation of*

Dreams, marked the beginning of the era of modern psychology and psychoanalysis.

Certain dreams can convey valuable information to the dreamer. A week before the event, Abraham Lincoln dreamed that he would be assassinated. The emperor Constantine dreamed of radiant Greek letters spelling the name of Christ and was converted, leading to the dramatic conversion

*“Dreams are the
royal road to the
subconscious.*

*Dreams are
the guardian
of sleep.”*

— Sigmund Freud

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of the entire Byzantine Empire. I, myself, have received messages, teachings, and blessings through my dreams from the spiritual masters I have known and loved in this lifetime.

Some contemporary psychologists consider lucid dreaming a valuable practice for personal growth. This model is, however, different from Tibetan dream yoga. The spiritual practice goes deeper, helping us work with the great passages of life and death. Tibetan dream yoga teaches us how to navigate the groundlessness of moment-to-moment existence, which typically makes no intellectual sense. It is at this level that we cut through the illusory nature of mind and truly experience our marvelous human existence.

Cultivating our innate ability to wake up within the dream can:

- Increase clarity and lucidity, both waking and sleeping
- Help us realize the transparent, dream-like nature of experience
- Free the mind
- Release energy blockages and accumulated tension and stress
- Loosen habits and make us more open, attuned, and flexible
- Unleash and mobilize creativity

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- Bring repressions and denials into consciousness
- Clarify and dispel confusion
- Solve problems
- Reveal the process of death and rebirth
- Heal and relax us
- Expose fantasies
- Unlock aspirations and potentials
- Facilitate direct encounters with our shadow nature
- Provide spiritual blessings, visions, and guidance
- Help open our innate psychic capacities
- Remove hindrances and obstacles
- Help prepare (rehearse) us for death and the afterlife

AWAKENING WITHIN THE DREAM

The seminal Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu dreamed he was a butterfly. Upon awakening, he wondered whether he was a man who had dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was a man. Chuang Tzu's musings underscore a fundamental truth: life is like a dream.

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Spiritual life is about awakening from the dream of unreality. The word *buddha* itself is from the word *bodhi*, “awakeful.” Buddhist wisdom and practice help us to awaken to who and what we truly are, and to recognize the difference between the real and the unreal in our daily life. All of our spiritual practices are designed to awaken us from the daydream of illusion and confusion, where we are like sleepwalkers, semiconsciously muddling our way through life.

Self-knowledge through spiritual awakening helps us become masters of circumstances and conditions, rather than victims. This is why the Armenian spiritual master Georgy Gurdjieff said: “Contemporary man is born asleep, lives asleep, and dies asleep. And what knowledge could a sleeping man have? If you think about it and at the same time remember that sleep is the chief feature of our being, you will soon understand that if man wishes to obtain knowledge, he should first of all think about how to awaken himself, that is about how to change his being.”

South American shamans call this awakening from the dream of life “shapeshifting”: entering into a spiritual journey with the explicit purpose of

*“All that we see
is but a dream
within a
dream.”*

— Edgar Allen Poe



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transformation. Shapeshifting and other forms of conscious dreamwork can, through regular practice, help us experience other realms of existence, visit our dear departed, and achieve spiritual mastery.

Australian aborigines say we all live in the dreamtime: we are like dream characters, living out our lives beyond the illusion of being born and dying. Tibetan masters call this dreamtime the *bardo*, or intermediate stage. Bardos exist between the ending of one state and the beginning of another, such as birth and death – or death and rebirth. Dreaming, too, is a bardo, marking the seemingly unstructured zone between waking and sleeping.

“Dreams are a reservoir of knowledge and experience, yet they are often overlooked as a vehicle for exploring reality.”

— Tarthang Tulku
yoga practice

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Tibetan Buddhism is unique among Buddhist schools in teaching us how to awaken within the dream and how to practice spiritually while sleeping. This is the essence of Tibetan dream yoga, and the focus of all the practices associated with it.

The Yoga of the Dream State, an ancient Tibetan manual on the

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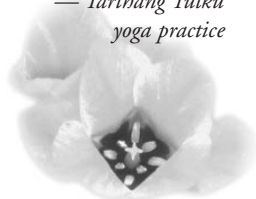
practice of dream yoga and lucid dreaming, teaches that we can learn five spiritually significant wisdom lessons through assiduously practicing this path of awakening:

- Dreams can be altered through will and attention
- Dreams are unstable, impermanent, and unreal – much like fantasies, magical illusions, mirages, and hallucinations
- Daily perceptions in the everyday waking state are also unreal
- All life is here today and gone tomorrow, like a dream; there is nothing to hold on to
- Conscious dreamwork can lead us to the realization of wholeness, perfect balance, and unity

For centuries, Tibetan masters have taught their students how to use dreamtime and dreamspace to further spiritual progress by increasing awareness during the dream state. *Tibetan Dream Yoga* brings you these same techniques for realizing the five wisdom lessons and reaping the benefits of awakening within the dream.

The Six Yogas of Tibet

Tibetan dream yoga is one of the renowned Six Yogas of Tibet, an ancient Buddhist teaching that originates with the enlightened yogic adepts (*siddhas*) of ancient India. These yogas (or practices), utilized for



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a millennium by all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, help us to utilize the body/mind/spirit as a vehicle for awakening and enlightenment – by day, by night, and in the afterlife (bardo).

The Six Yogas are:

- Inner heat (mystic incandescence) yoga
- Illusory body yoga
- Dream yoga
- Clear light yoga
- Bardo yoga
- Conscious transformation yoga

The Six Yogas tradition was first brought to Tibet thirteen hundred years ago by the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava, founder of the Ancient School (*Nyingmapa*) of Tibetan Buddhism.

Padmasambhava himself received the teachings he codified as The Yoga of the Dream State from a mysterious yogi named Lawapa. In ensuing centuries, as Buddhism grew and flourished in Tibet, Marpa the Translator and other Tibetan sages made the grueling journey on foot to India to study from yogic masters, then brought the teaching back with them.

Through practicing the Six Yogas, we come to realize the infinite emptiness/openness, ungraspability, and luminosity that is the true nature of reality. Dream interpretation, the use of dreams for predictions

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and healing, and the development of psychic powers and healing abilities can arise naturally from the continuous practice of dream yoga and the related yogas (especially clear light, inner heat, and illusory body).

The Spiritual Benefits of Tibetan Dream Yoga

His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has this to say about awakening our dream body and using it for spiritual progress and development: “There is said to be a relationship between dreaming, on the one hand, and the gross and subtle levels of the body on the other. But it is also said that there is a ‘special dream state.’ In that state, the ‘special dream body’ is created from the mind and from vital energy (*prana*) within the body. This special dream body is able to dissociate entirely from the gross physical body and travel elsewhere.”

One way of developing this special dream body is first of all to recognize a dream as a dream when it occurs. Then you find that the dream is malleable, and you make efforts to gain control over it. Gradually you become very skilled in this, increasing your ability to control the contents of the dream so that it accords to your own desires. Eventually it is possible to

“Dreams are real as long as they last. Can we say more of life?”

— Henry Havelock Ellis



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dissociate your dream body from your gross physical body. In contrast, in the normal dream state, dreaming occurs within the body. But as a result of specific training, the dream body can go elsewhere. This first technique is accomplished entirely by the power of desire or aspiration.

There is another technique that arrives at the same end by means of prana yoga. These are meditative practices that utilize the subtle, vital energies in the body. For these techniques it is also necessary to recognize the sleep state as it occurs. (See Additional Resources, page 22: *Sleeping, Dreaming and Dying: An Exploration of Consciousness with the Dalai Lama*, by Francisco Varela.)

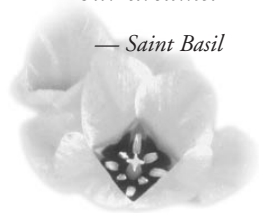
Sleeping and Dreaming

According to sleep researchers, we typically experience four stages of sleep.

- Hypnagogic sleep – the state of drowsiness we experience as we begin falling asleep
- Ordinary sleep – here, we enter a true sleeping state, but can still be easily awakened

*“Let sleep itself
be an exercise in
piety, for such
as our life and
conduct have
been so also of
necessity will be
our dreams.”*

— Saint Basil



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- Deeper sleep – vital functions slow down, and we are more likely to sleep through disturbances
- Deep sleep – muscles are totally relaxed, and it would be difficult to wake us up (we only spend about fifteen percent of our sleeping hours at this stage)

It takes about an hour to cycle through all four stages; then we go back in reverse order to stage 1. Before beginning the cycle again, however, we experience rapid eye movements (REM) under our closed lids. Research shows that this is when we dream. We spend twenty to twenty-five percent of our sleep time in this state.

In order to practice dream yoga, we must introduce awareness during the periods of REM sleep (which last from a few minutes to half an hour). If we can identify that stage while asleep – perhaps with the help of an assistant or a dream-light device – we can further incubate, develop, and enhance the awareness practice of becoming conscious and lucid within the dream state.

Dreaming

Tibetan dream yoga texts teach us that, in general, there are three types of dreams:

- Ordinary, karmic dreams, arising mostly from the day's activities, and from previous life activities, thoughts, experiences, and contacts

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- “Clear light” dreams: spiritual visions, blessings, and energy openings
- Lucid dreams, which are characterized by awareness that one is dreaming

Under these three broad divisions, dreams can be divided into a further six categories:

- Dreams of events that occurred while we were still awake
- Dreams about other people, alive or dead
- Forgotten elements emerging from the subconscious
- Archetypal content, evocative symbols, and so on
- Extrasensory perceptions, prognosticatory dreams, and omens
- Radiant, luminous, spiritual dreams

Recurrent dreams, nightmares, dreams of death, and other kinds of commonly reported dreams all fall within the first four dream categories. In the interests of developing deeper awareness of your dreams, you may find it helpful to identify the category that applies whenever you recall a particular dream.

The Practices of Tibetan Dream Yoga

It is important to create a spiritual context for the practice of Tibetan dream yoga. Lucid dreaming can

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easily be misused to perpetuate the problems we experience in our waking lives. For example, one might direct one's dream toward a gratifying encounter or a vengeful fantasy. You will find that the techniques on *Tibetan Dream Yoga* somehow don't work as well when used for such purposes.

Tibetan dream yoga practice comprises three parts:

- Daytime practice, designed to help us recognize the dreamlike nature of all existence and thereby prepare us to experience our dreams as vividly as we do our waking activities
- Morning wake-up practices that help us recall our dreams, and confirm our determination to recall more of them
- Nighttime practice, which prepares the ground for lucid dreaming and spiritual experiences while we sleep

Daytime Practice

During the day, practice these four points:

- Contemplating the body as illusory and unreal

“In approaching illusory phenomena, one practices illusory practice in an illusory way to attain the illusory state of illusory enlightenment.”

— Khyungpo Naljor



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- Contemplating the mind and mental activities as similarly insubstantial
- Regarding the world and all phenomena and experience as dreamlike, insubstantial, impermanent, and unreal
- Recognizing the relativity and ungraspability of intangibles such as time, space, knowledge, and awareness

Reminding ourselves of these four truths throughout our waking hours helps to dissolve the barrier between the dream of life and the sleeping dream. As we become more adept at these practices, we begin to regard our nighttime dreams as continuations of our waking dream – and we learn how to bring habitual awareness to both.

*“Do not sleep
like an animal.
Do the practice
that mixes sleep
and reality.”*

— Tibetan instruction
for dream yoga
practice



Mirror Practice

The following mirror practice is an effective way of perceiving the dreamlike nature of “reality,” and especially of “self.” From time to time during the day, take a few minutes to do it.

1. Stand in front of a mirror and look into your own eyes.

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2. Hold up a hand mirror behind your right or left ear and look at its reflection in the larger mirror. Keep angling the hand mirror so as to fragment and multiply your image as much as possible. Let your mind fragment along with the image.
3. After a few minutes, angle the hand mirror back until you return to the original, single image in the mirror in front of you.

The analogy of a mirror image is, like dreams, traditionally used to describe the insubstantial nature of our everyday experience. The mirror practice helps bring that teaching to life. The fragmented image is the kind we might see in a dream; yet we are seeing it while we’re fully awake – or are we?

Allowing your mind to “fall apart” also helps ventilate the solidity we typically attribute to our world, and especially to our “self.”

Partner Exercise

Here is a traditional dream yoga practice you can do with a partner. This is an immensely useful technique, not only for challenging the distinction between sleeping dreams and the dream of being awake, but also for applying your training to practical, everyday situations.

1. Insult, blame, and criticize your partner. Your partner should listen to all of this as echoes; empty sounds.

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2. Trade places. Now have your partner disparage you, while you practice just hearing the sounds and not taking the words to heart.
3. Try doing this same exercise using praise and flattery instead of blame. In either case, the listening partner should practice not reacting in any way, recognizing what is being said as a dream.

At first, you may find it difficult to maintain equanimity while you do this practice. Stay with it – you will find that doing so yields rich rewards over time.

Wake-up Practice

The moments immediately after waking are the most fertile for recalling dreams. The following practices are designed to support and strengthen your recall. They will also facilitate a mindful transition between the sleeping and waking dream states.

Upon waking in the morning, practice:

- The lion's outbreath – breathing out with the sound “ah”
- The lion-like posture for awakening and purifying – sitting up in bed with raised head and gazing and emphasizing the exhalation, repeating the “ah” outbreath three times
- Raising the energy – standing up, reaching the fingertips to the sky, and repeating the lion's outbreath

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- Entering into mindful reflection on the transition between the states of sleeping, dreaming, and waking reality – coming into the present moment, recording dreams

Thus, you will enter the day recognizing that all things are like a dream, illusion, fantasy, mirage, and so forth.

Nighttime Practice

After going to bed, practice these four points in order to create the conditions for mindful, lucid dreaming.

- Chant the following prayer three times to remind you of and strengthen your resolve to awaken within the dream, for the benefit of the ultimate awakening of all beings: “May I awaken within this dream and grasp the fact that I am dreaming, so that all dreamlike beings may likewise awaken from the nightmare of illusory suffering and confusion.”
- Lie on one side with your legs together and knees slightly bent. Let your bent arm take the weight of your torso by resting your head on your open hand. This is

“There are some who are awake even while asleep, and then there are those who, apparently awake, are deeply asleep.”

— Lalla



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the posture of the sleeping Buddha, as he has been traditionally depicted at the moment of passing into *nirvana* (death).

- Bringing your attention to your throat chakra, visualize your energy rising up out of your body. Feel it rise up from your heart chakra with your breath and pass into your “third eye” or brow chakra: the point between your eyebrows. Visualize it as a full, luminous moon behind your eyes. Go into the light.
- Visualize the letter “A” (symbolizing infinite space) on the surface of the moon.
- Notice whatever images begin to appear on the sphere of light behind your eyes.

Deepening Your Practice

To progress still further in Tibetan dream yoga,

- Pay careful attention to your dreams
- Record your dreams in a dream journal upon waking each morning
- Recognize recurrent images, themes, associations, and patterns

*“You beings on
earth who are
deep in slumber
... Stop sleeping!
Wake up!
What are you
waiting for?”*

— *The Zohar*



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- Contemplate the archetypal, symbolic content and meanings of your dreams
- Reflect on the similarities and differences between night dreams, daydreams, fantasies, visions, ideas, projections, and so on
- Wake yourself up during the night to reaffirm your resolve to awaken within the dream and grasp the fact that you are dreaming
- Sit up in meditation posture while sleeping to maintain continuous awareness while inducing and incubating lucid dreaming
- Have a dream assistant at hand to guide you while asleep, helping you learn to retain conscious presence during dreams
- Use the DreamLight developed by Dr. Stephen LaBerge to stimulate lucid dreaming during REM sleep (see Additional Resources, page 21)
- Meditate alone in darkness to develop the inner clarity of the Clear Light Mind – the mind unaffected by illusion
- During the day, maintain awareness that everything you experience is like a dream
- Chant the dream yoga prayer by day and by night to help reinforce your intention to awaken within the dream

THE LIFELONG PRACTICE OF TIBETAN DREAM YOGA

Like any spiritual practice, Tibetan dream yoga will reveal more substantial benefits the longer and more consistently you practice it. In the Buddhist tradition, however, discipline alone is not enough to bring your practice fully alive. Motivation – the reason you practice in the first place – is considered as crucial as technique and commitment.

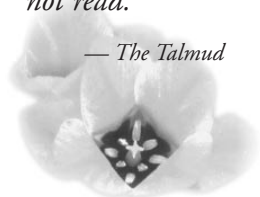
You will have noticed that the Tibetan dream yoga chant includes an aspiration to help free all beings of their suffering. This intention lies at the root of all Buddhist practice. The underlying teaching is that all living beings are interconnected: none of us can be completely free so long as any of us is still asleep.

As you practice Tibetan dream yoga, recognize that the suffering you seek to alleviate through spiritual practice is, in fact, universal. Recognize, too, that the more awake you are, the more helpful you can be to

those you care about – in fact, to everyone you come into contact with. Practice with the intention of working with your own individual part of the whole, in order to bring all of human awareness to a new level. In this way, you will derive the greatest possible benefits from your dream yoga practice.

*“A dream not
interpreted is
like a letter
not read.”*

— *The Talmud*



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Ancient Tibetan Dream Yoga

Norbu, Namkhai Rinpoche. *Dream Yoga and the Practice of Natural Light*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1992.

Wangyal, Tendzin Rinpoche. *The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1998.

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Dalai Lama, H.H. the. *The World of Tibetan Buddhism: An Overview of Its Philosophy and Practice*. Tr., ed., and annotated by Geshe Thupten Jinpa. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995.

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LAMA SURYA DAS

... lived and studied with the great spiritual masters of Asia for almost thirty years. He twice completed the traditional three-year *Vajrayana* meditation retreat in a Tibetan monastery in southern France. A leading spokesperson for the emerging Western Buddhism, he is a *dzogchen* lineage holder and the founder of the Dzogchen Foundation. A poet, translator, activist, and full-time spiritual teacher, Surya Das lectures and leads meditation retreats and workshops worldwide; brings Tibetan lamas to the West to teach; regularly organizes the annual, week-long Western Buddhist Teachers' Conference with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India; and is active in interfaith dialogue. He is the author of *The Snow Lion's Turquoise Mane*, *Natural Great Perfection* (with Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche), *Awakening the Buddha Within*, and *Awakening to the Sacred*.



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