

Lucid Dreaming: A Window into the Mind?

From ancient tradition to modern science, lucid dreaming remains a controversial practice that Western institutions have yet to embrace. But could it be the key to conquering your nightly quarrels?

Much like tides, dreams sweep over the mind, seizing an unexpected level of control. Gaining control of such powerful currents or becoming aware of your dreams and how you can shape them offers a wonderful experience. The practice of lucid dreaming is enveloped by curiosity, scepticism, and even scientific controversy.

Lucid dreaming occurs when a person becomes slowly conscious within their dream, giving them varying levels of control. This can only occur during REM (rapid eye movement) sleep when dreams are most vivid. While some experience this naturally, others train themselves using varying techniques. One of the more common is reality checks, a process in which you normalise small actions whilst awake that your body cannot replicate in your sleep; whilst asleep, much like an aged videogame, the simulation your mind creates is incomplete and fractured. One typical reality check is pressing your thumb into the base of your palm and observing whether it passes through—something impossible in waking life.

The most common method for increasing the likelihood of lucid dreams is known as the wake-back-to-bed method. As the name suggests, you set an alarm to wake you up 5 hours after you fall asleep. Stay awake for 20 minutes, and then go back to bed. After waking, stay up for 20 minutes before returning to bed, intensely visualising what you intend to dream of. When this time lapses, you drift off to sleep, more manageably entering a lucid state.

Time invested in mastering lucid dreaming is not solely for a parlour trick; studies show that lucid dreaming has been linked to improved problem-solving, reduced nightmares, and enhanced creativity. Psychotherapists have even begun to use this tool in an attempt to address rising mental issues, the chief among them being PTSD and repressed trauma. James Scurry, freelance producer with Sky and core process psychotherapist, highlights its potential in mental health therapy.

“I first encountered lucid dreaming in my early twenties, but at the time, I saw it merely as a psychological curiosity,” Scurry explains. “It wasn’t until I discovered Tibetan Dream Yoga that I realised a far richer tradition was behind it. That transformed everything for me.” The night-time practice goes beyond creating beautiful landscapes and enjoying certain freedoms; lucid dreaming is a profoundly valuable skill for personal growth. Throughout history, lucid dreaming has been celebrated as a significant practice.

As Scurry mentions, dream yoga is a Buddhist technique for practising and harnessing lucid dreams to promote wellness and growth. It encompasses all aspects of lucid dreaming, including methods for preparing oneself in advance, reflection and awareness of what the dreams mean, and how this can be harnessed to improve daily life.

Scurry, accredited by the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP), like many before him, has begun the process of normalising this aspect of treatment, seizing the opportunity for psychological insight and hoping it is an avenue of deep exploration for his patients. “There’s a common misconception

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that lucid dreaming is all about control—about directing the dream like a film director. But in many traditions, especially Buddhism, the focus is on letting go. You become lucid, but rather than manipulating the dream, you observe and learn from it.”

Scurry went into detail about the power he believed lucid dreaming grants someone who may be struggling with repressed trauma or chronic mental health issues. “I’ve worked with clients who suffer from recurring nightmares—whether linked to PTSD or deep-seated fears. They can reframe these nightmares by teaching them to recognise when they’re dreaming, reducing their intensity. Some even learn to turn their persecutors into teachers, facing their fears directly in a way that feels safe.”

Lucid dreaming is an interesting mix of being awake and asleep. During REM sleep, the brain shows activity you usually see when someone is awake. A 2007 study by Russell, Jones, and Miller revealed that using structured techniques for lucid dreaming helped about 61% of people with recurring nightmares. Research based out of Germany showed that lucid dreamers could voluntarily move while dreaming, indicating they have some awareness of their dreams.

Scurry was highly keen to stress the importance of these findings. “We now have neurological evidence that lucid dreamers exhibit unique brainwave patterns—essentially, their prefrontal cortex, the area linked to decision-making and self-awareness, becomes more active. This suggests that lucid dreaming isn’t just an illusion of control; it’s a verifiable state of consciousness that bridges waking and sleeping life.”

In other words, we can evidence the existence of lucid dreaming by scanning people’s brains, focusing on the portion responsible for decision-making and self-awareness; if there is an abnormally high activity, we can prove there is some level of agency or freedom within the dream.

Despite the growing evidence, not all scientific institutions will embrace lucid dreaming research with open arms. “We’ve got peer-reviewed studies in *The Journal of Traumatology*, which is part of the American Psychological Association,” Scurry explains. “But there’s been pushback. A TED Talk on lucid dreaming was published but unlisted, essentially blacklisted. The reasoning? They don’t believe the results—despite these being double-blind trials published in the same journals as other accepted interventions. There’s a certain arrogance in the West about what counts as evidence-based treatment.”

He adds, “If we hadn’t labelled this ‘lucid dreaming’—if we’d framed it differently—I suspect TED wouldn’t have had a problem. It’s fascinating how a practice that has existed for centuries in Eastern traditions is still met with scepticism simply because it doesn’t originate in the West.”

Though often framed as a new psychological tool, lucid dreaming is deeply rooted in spiritual traditions. Tibetan Dream Yoga is the most well-documented, but similar ideas exist across cultures throughout most of Eastern society, each having its own beliefs and practise.

Within Hinduism, dreams are seen as a bridge to higher consciousness, a means of connecting with divine energies or unlocking hidden wisdom. It is one where you gain access that otherwise would not be available until after your passing. Within Sufism, a branch of Islam, dreams serve as a platform to receive divine wisdom and insight. Indigenous traditions could also be described as ‘dream-centric’ with a considerable emphasis on the contents and whom you encounter within the dream.

Despite its deep roots in Buddhism, Dream Yoga isn’t limited to monks. Anyone interested in mindfulness and self-awareness can practice it. “It’s not about having supernatural experiences,”

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Scurry says. “It’s about loosening your attachment to illusions and realising that your perceptions shape dreams and waking life.”

He elaborates on the Buddhist approach: “One of the key teachings in Dream Yoga is that reality is dreamlike. If you recognise the illusory nature of your dreams, you can apply that same awareness to waking life. What are the stories we tell ourselves? What are the fears we cling to? Dream practice can be a powerful way of breaking down those constructs.”

Lucid dreaming is a phenomenon that combines personal experience with scientific inquiry. However, we have yet to understand the full extent of its power and applications. Denying thousands of years of practice spanning numerous cultures seems silly, but many would claim that the burden of proof is yet to be met. If dreams can be shaped and awareness can exist in sleep, where exactly do the boundaries of reality begin and end?

Sidebar - Lucid Dreaming in Practice: A Firsthand Account

For Nish Pranta, a 24-year-old chemical engineering student, it is an ongoing experience, only possible due to a small moment of clarity as he felt he snapped into consciousness amidst a particularly vivid nightmare. Upon discussing with family members back home in the Bagmati province of Nepal, he realised the legacy behind what he had stumbled upon.

“My first lucid dreaming experience was hilarious,” he said. “I was in a meeting room, and out of nowhere, the lights went off. When they came back on, I was half-naked. That’s when I thought, ‘How is this possible?’” To test reality, he swung at one of the anonymous office members. “My hand went straight through him. That’s when I knew—this wasn’t real.” The dream began to distort, and a dark, imposing figure stood above him and warned him: “You’re not supposed to be here.”

Encompassed by his first taste at agency, Nish researched and became obsessed with wake-induced lucid dreaming (WILD). “I tried every day, but my subconscious always kicked me out.” Then, an unexpected guide emerged. “At first, it was just a voice, then a presence. It told me what to do, helping me stay focused.” The figure became an integral part of his dream world. “Whenever I wandered off, it grabbed me and led me back.”

The experience is more than just curiosity—it’s deeply personal. “It feels spiritual like I’m exploring myself in a new way.” Even in his waking life, Nish feels the impact. “With my exams, I’m under a lot of pressure, but for some reason, I feel like I’m headed in the right direction.”

Though too busy to experiment further, Nish remains fascinated. “The struggle is long, but the benefits? Completely worth it.” For those willing to explore their subconscious, lucid dreaming can be profound and transformative.