



DREAMS*

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Dreams are pervasive in South Asian folk literature. Folk beliefs about dreams in South Asia are similar to those found in the classical traditions of South Asia as well as in other cultures from around the world. For example, most people distinguish meaningful from meaningless dreams, emphasizing the importance of dreams that occur around dawn and dreams sent by gods over those caused by bodily disorders, such as indigestion. Indeed, most of the dreams in Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* story collection take place at dawn and are sent by the gods. These basic ideas about dreams are also found in ancient texts such as the *Caraka* and *Susruta Samhitas* (medical texts) and in early Buddhist works such as the *Samantapasadika* (I.520-529), *Manorathapuraii* (V.xx.6), and *Milindapanha* (IV.75), while the *Palija takas* are particularly rich in the dreams of women.

Overshadowing these theories in Hinduism, however, is the well-known idea that we are all participating in God's dream of creation. One version of this idea is contained in the *Kurma Purana*, which describes the beginning of this *kalpa* (eon), when nothing existed but a vast ocean and Lord Narayana (Brahma; in other versions, Vishnu) sleeping on the coils of a great snake. As he sleeps, he dreams, and a wonderful lotus grows out of his navel from which arises all that exists; God's dream is the basis of our reality.

Shared Dreams

One type of dream preserved in various stores is the shared dream, a dream that appears on the same night to more than one person. While examples of such dreams can be found in other cultures, South Asia is an especially rich source for them. Examples from the *Kathasaritsagara* include:

- two Brahman cousins who perform austerities to Karttikeya and then receive a shared prophetic dream telling them where to find a guru (I.12).
- three Brahman women, who remain virtuous wives even though they have been abandoned by their husbands, share a dream from Siva (I.19-20).
- a king and queen worship Siva in order to obtain a son, and he appears in both their dreams, predicting they will have a son. Later the queen dreams that Siva gives her a fruit, and this is taken as confirmation of the first dream (II.136).

Shared dreams also occur in Buddhist stories such as the *Mahavastu*, in which the Buddha's father, wife, and aunt all have dreams portending his

departure from home (II.129-131). Another type of shared dream is one that transcends time, as when the Buddha has five dreams said to be the same dreams had by Buddhas of earlier eons recorded in *Lalitavistara* (I.296-297). A second example of this type is the conception dream of the Buddha's mother that is said to have been dreamt by the mother of the preceding Buddha, Dipamkara, mentioned in *Mahavastu* (I.205). Additional examples of such transtemporal shared dreams are contained in the Lotus Sutra and the *Arya svapna nirdeśa nama mahayana sutra* (*bKa' 'gyur*, vol.25, text 48), which describe the dreams of Bodhisattvas. In these examples shared dreams are used to dramatize the essential sameness of all Buddhist heroes; their progress along the path leading to enlightenment is marked by dream signposts. Correspondingly, shared dreams also appear in stories about famous Buddhist religious figures in Tibet. One group of such dreams centres on Padmasambhava's departure from home when both his adopted father and his wife have frightening dreams.

An especially rich text in terms of dreams and folk beliefs is the popular biography of the Tibetan yogi and poet Milarepa (eleventh through twelfth century). This text is actually structured by the dreams that begin and end it, as well as anchor its pivotal centre, when Milarepa passes from being a disciple to becoming a guru himself. It also contains the shared dreams that Milarepa's guru, Marpa, and Marpa's wife, Dakmema, have the night before Milarepa arrives to ask Marpa to be his guru. Marpa dreams of a *vajra* (a tantric ritual implement), while Dakmema dreams of a stupa (Buddhist reliquary), religious symbols appropriate to announcing a Buddhist saint.

Conception Dreams

Some of the dreams presented thus far are also examples of the conception dream, a type of dream frequently encountered in the biographical literature of the Buddhists and Jains. Equally famous are the

Maya, the mother of Buddha, having a dream



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dreams of Queen Maya, the Buddha's mother, and Queen Trishala, the mother of Mahavira, founder of the Jains. In her dream, Queen Maya sees a magnificent white elephant, which, by striking her right side with its trunk, is able to enter her womb. This dream is understood to be a prediction of the birth of a son who will be a world ruler either through kingship or renunciation. Many versions of Maya's dream are among the earliest images preserved in Buddhist iconography and texts, and representations of this dream kept up an even pace with the spread of Buddhism. The Buddhist belief in conception dreams is also well documented in later Tibetan biographies, probably due in equal part to the popularity of Maya's dream and earlier indigenous beliefs.



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Marpa, the founder of the Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism

In the Jain case, on the night that Mahavira enters Queen Trishala's womb she has fourteen sequential dreams of a white elephant, a white bull, a lion, the goddess Sri, a garland, the moon, the sun, a large flag, a vase, a lake, the milk ocean, a celestial abode, a heap of jewels, and a fire. When Queen Trishala tells her dreams to her husband and asks him to interpret them, he says they mean that the couple will have a son who will be a great king. The next day, however, the king sends for the official dream interpreters who, citing dream interpretation books, say the dreams mean the child will be either a universal emperor or a *jina* (a Jain hero). Of particular interest is Trishala's behaviour after her husband interprets her dream. She says, "These, my excellent and preminent dreams, shall not be counteracted by other bad dreams." The narration continues, "Accordingly she remained awake to save her dreams by means of [hearing] good, auspicious, pious, agreeable stories about gods and religious men" (Jacobi, 1968: I.240). Her words and actions are reminiscent of similar ritual activities from the Vedic period, though here they are in relation to auspicious dreams.

Propitiation and Diagnosis

Some of the earliest references to dreams are contained in the *Rg Veda*, in which several hymns appeal to various deities to dispel the effects of evil dreams (II.28.10, V.82.4-5, VIII.47.14-18, X.36.4, and X.16.4). In the *Arthava Veda* other appeals for protection from bad dreams are directed toward healing plants and salves (VI.9, IV.17, and X.3), in part due to a related belief that dreams can reveal the onset of illness. Ancient Indians also sometimes dreamt of the dead, but for them, as in many other cultures, contact with the dead is polluting and such pollution can occur in dreams as well as in the waking



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Fourteen Dreams of Queen Trishala

state. One of the ways to get rid of dream pollution is to transfer it to another object or to associate the dream with something ephemeral. Examples of this kind of thinking are found in the *Taittiriya-Araiyaka*, which recommends a particular grass for removing the effects of bad dreams (X.1.7), and in the *Atharva Veda*, which states, "We transfer every evil dream upon our enemy" (VI.46).

The medical texts of ancient India, the *Caraka Samhita* and *Susruta Samhita* (CS and SS), which are still in use today as part of the Ayurvedic system of healing, use dreams as a diagnostic tool. Sudhir Kakar's recent work has shown the persistence of these ancient ideas and the Ayurvedic approach to the whole person, in which dreams are considered a meaningful part of the person. This is not an idea unique to ancient India—dreams were used as a diagnostic tool by such well-known ancient Greek doctors as Galen and Hippocrates, as well as by ancient Mesopotamian doctors. Significantly, the CS contains many examples of premonitory dreams of disease and death that are similar to those seen in the epics and folktales.

In the SS, dreams seem to be caused by illness as well as being symptoms of it; certain dreams appearing to a healthy person indicate the onset of illness. In other words, a dream may be the first symptom. Fortunately, the text also has recommendations to avert the influence of dreams, such as reciting the *Gayatri*, meditating on a holy subject, or sleeping in a temple for three consecutive nights. It also recommends that "an evil dream should not be related to another," although this is challenged by the evidence of Indian folk and literary texts, in which the detailed telling of dreams, especially those thought to be inauspicious, is a stock device. This does not, however, preclude someone from keeping silent about his or her dreams, and the recommendation itself would seem to be connected to the idea that saying the dream out loud will contribute to or hasten its dreaded effect. The main point, though, is the notion that dreams have a lingering effect that can be avoided by appealing to divine power, an idea that persists from Vedic times to the present.

As we have seen, this lingering effect may also be a source of pollution (such as contact with the dead) or it may be viewed as part of the effluvia of the night that must be purified or washed away during morning ablutions. The philosophical texts treat dreams as effluvia when they assert a negative position, mainly referring to them as useless illusions or as useful only

for signifying how real and powerful a force illusion (*maya*) is in waking life.

In spite of the lively interest in dreams in the Vedas and related texts, few dreams actually occur in the epics, and then they play a very minor role. Two dreams that do occur in Valmiki's *Ramayana* are of minor characters; however, both announce deaths, using the same images contained in the ancient Indian medical texts, for example, seeing a woman dressed in red, dragging someone toward the south. The few dreams in the *Mahabharata* also belong to secondary or even liminal characters such as Karna and Bhishma. Dreams are, however, ubiquitous in the Tibetan epic of *Gesar (Kesar)*, in which the hero continually receives dream visitations from Buddhist deities who offer him advice which he follows.

Divination

Because they link the internal and subjective emotional life of an individual with what appears to be objective outer events and symbols, dreams are believed to be a particularly potent form of

divination. The dreamer is totally engaged in the dream activity and, upon awakening, feels compelled to describe the experience and to seek an interpretation that resolves it. The "objective" quality of dreams is perhaps most clearly expressed when dreamers say they "saw" (*drs*) the dream rather than "had" a dream.

This use of language expresses the idea that dreams are experienced as given to individuals rather than created by them and emphasises the external rather than the internal origin of the dream, thereby lending them a possibly divine authority. This thinking is expressed in hymn 4.9 of the *Atharva Veda* that appeals to an eye ointment, *anana*, for protection from troubled dreams, and in the Tibetan *Tangyur* (vol.25, text 48) that recommends preparing and using a certain eye ointment when seeking an auspicious dream.

At the same time, dreams are a useful narrative device, acting as a *deus ex machina* to shift the action, define character, and express the inevitability of what follows. Not infrequently, they are the vehicles for divine appearances that reassure the audience not only of the immanence of divinity, but of the gods' enduring concern with the affairs of humanity. More research needs to be done on all these aspects of dream life, especially through interviewing living people about their dream beliefs and experiences.



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Milarepa, a twelfth century poet-saint of Tibet

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