

Dharmette: Dreams and Mindfulness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 1, 2012

It occurred to me to say a few words about practicing mindfulness with dreaming. This topic comes up once in a while, especially from people on meditation retreats. There's some idea that dreams are "The Royal Road to the Unconscious." There are unconscious processing, thinking, impulses, and intentions operating in us. I don't know if Buddhism has a theory of an unconscious, but it doesn't take a lot of reflection to realize that we certainly have subconscious processing inside of us that we aren't really conscious of: our intentions, motives, feelings, and emotions. Or hormones operating at different times that motivate us to think about or react to what we're doing.

Sometimes it's a mystery to people why they do what they do, and what motivates them. Part of having a wise life is to have access somehow to these deeper currents of thoughts, motivations, feelings and perceptions. Even with perceptions, we don't necessarily even perceive things as they really are. We often think we're seeing objectively, but our perceptions are already overlaid with concepts, preconceived ideas, and bias.

How do we access these deeper currents that drives us? Some people believe that dreams can be the way. There are whole schools of dream analysis. It might be useful sometimes when clearly remembering a dream to analyze it, or reflect on the content. But from the point of view of mindfulness practice – especially on retreats where all we're doing is mindfulness meditation – we're not interested in analyzing the content, or the thoughts, or the pictures of the dreams.

Rather, if there has been what's felt like an impactful dream, the idea is to sit up in bed, and meditate with the emotions that linger from that dream. Whatever lingering feelings there are in the body become the entry point. So you would sit up and feel, doing mindfulness of emotions. Feel them in the body, really going into the body, really feeling what's going on, being very present in the moment. Put aside what happened in the dream. What lingers of the dream in the present moment is what's interesting. Be there and feel that.

For example, there can be dreams that are frightening. So then you would get up and sit with the fear, and be present for the fear. There can be dreams full of desire. Then you would sit up with the desire. What lingers from the dream becomes the focus of attention.

This goes along with the basic principle of mindfulness – being present for what is, what your experience is – as opposed to what you think it is, or the analysis of it. Then you're focusing on the body and on the emotions – on what is going on here. What I've found, for both myself and many people I've taught, is that it's not that dreams are the "Royal Road to the Unconscious," but it's the body that is. It is mindfulness of the body, being connected to the body, and feeling what's going on physically.

It's doing mindfulness of emotions – and feeling the emotions in the body. Then you learn how to hold that, and be present in a careful, direct way for what's going on. Then, what opens up, what unfolds, what reveals itself is what needs to be known in some deeper way. You don't have to do a lot of analysis – or even any analysis. Rather, it's the careful, present moment mindfulness that allows you to begin feeling and sensing in a deeper, deeper way what is actually motivating and driving you.

The added benefit of feeling these things in the body allows them to relax, resolve, dissolve, unfold, and settle out in a way that isn't as easy if we stay in the analytical mode of trying to figure out, understand, analyze or interpret the dream, or whatever else we're involved in. If we settle and feel in a very simple way, eventually we can start seeing the places where we're attached, where we're caught, where we're somehow frozen. And then we can begin to relax, relax, relax in a deeper way.

Some people find that on a meditation retreat, they stop dreaming. They might dream regularly at home, but something about the process of the retreats – something happens, and their dreams actually stop, or they don't remember them. Other people find the opposite. In ordinary life they don't remember their dreams, or their dreams are not very interesting. But on retreat, their dreams become more vivid, stand out, and are remembered more clearly. Why is it different for different people? Who knows all the factors of the inner mental ecology that

come into play?

There is neither a right way nor a wrong way to be. It's not like you're supposed to remember your dreams, or you have to remember them, or you shouldn't have certain dreams. But if you're interested in exploring yourself in relationship to dreams through mindfulness meditation practice, then try sitting up in bed. Sit up in bed; close your eyes; or get up and do walking meditation. Be very present for what lingers, for what stays from that dream. See what happens with that, what opens up.