



# DREAMS OF LIGHT

THE PROFOUND DAYTIME PRACTICE  
OF LUCID DREAMING

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BOOK EXCERPT

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## INTRODUCTION

In our ordinary life, we're like dreamers believing that the dream we're having is real. We think we're awake, but we're not. We think that this busy mind of thoughts and emotions is who we truly are. But when we actually wake up, our misunderstanding about who we are—and the suffering that confusion brings—is gone.

DZOGCHEN PONLOP

Lucid dreaming and dream yoga are marvelous practices for psychological and spiritual growth. When fully developed, they represent a revolution in higher education, a unique night school. Instead of wasting a third of your life lost in the darkness of non-lucid sleep, you can turn on the internal night light, “stay up” for more of the night, and discover an entire world inside. The possibilities for rapid transformation and boundless learning are breathtaking.

Lucid dreaming is a radical, transformative medium, but like any advanced education it's not always easy. I've traveled the world teaching these nocturnal practices for many years, and people get enthusiastic about the opportunities that await them every night. But without proper preparation, excitement is replaced with discouragement. So much is promised, so little delivered. Some individuals wrestle with attaining lucidity and then sustaining it. Others might have unreasonable expectations or struggle with impatience. Still others grapple with fear or anxiety about what they might find lurking in the dark. You're dealing with subtle states of consciousness in the dark, and the power of habit is never more forcefully unleashed than during sleep and dream. In order to enter this internal institute of higher learning and not drop out, some encouragement and remedial work is needed. This book is here to provide you with that necessary ground.

Mixing metaphors: to deliver the nighttime goods, you need a sturdy daytime vehicle. You need an all-terrain vehicle or, in our context, an “all-states of consciousness” practice. Something that can transport you lucidly from waking consciousness deep into the dark, then deliver you back into the waking state loaded with the insights you’ve gathered from your trip. This is the role of the daytime practice of illusory form. It’s the ideal ATV, a practice applicable to all these states of consciousness.

The relationship of illusory form practice to dream yoga (which includes lucid dreaming) is distinctive. On the one hand, illusory form is the best preparation for dream yoga, as well as the principal remedy for many of the hurdles that accompany that practice. On the other hand, seeing everything as illusory is the fruition of dream yoga. So, illusory form practice frames dream yoga. It’s simultaneously the ideal preparatory practice for dream yoga (which is when it’s called *impure* illusory form) and also its final performance (referred to as *perfectly pure* illusory form). It’s the perfect “fake it till you make it” practice.<sup>1</sup>

My previous book, *Dream Yoga: Illuminating Your Life Through Lucid Dreaming and the Tibetan Yogas of Sleep*, introduced a progression of nocturnal meditations: lucid dreaming, dream yoga, sleep yoga, and bardo yoga. *Dreams of Light* takes a deeper look at the essence of these practices, now held within the larger context of the daytime practices of illusory form. Because illusory form is both the beginning and the end of our path, the preliminary practice for the nocturnal yogas of sleep and also their fruition, it transforms a linear journey into a circle.

Illusory form practices help you discover that the heaven you seek is right here on Earth. The world of form, what many spiritual seekers long to escape, is not the problem. The material world that you’re living in right now is not the issue. Indeed, at the end of the path, the material is discovered to be spiritual. The practice of illusory form deposits you squarely back into the material world, but now with a liberating perspective. It’s the same old place that you left behind when you began the spiritual path, but now it’s seen in a lucid and illuminating light. Turning on that light is our journey in this book.

Since illusory form practice sandwiches dream yoga as both the alpha and the omega, the rehearsal and final performance, it’s the irreducible

practice. This conclusion is supported by classical texts that categorize dream yoga as a subset of illusory form. Illusory form is the main practice, with dream yoga designed to support it.

Anybody can practice illusory form. It's easy. This is great news for those who labor with the subtleties of dream yoga. When you engage in this daytime practice, you will come to the same conclusions delivered by its nighttime correlates. And by gaining proficiency in the practice of illusory form, you may well find yourself having more lucid dreams. You can therefore accomplish the essence of dream yoga through the practice of illusory form. So if you're fascinated by lucid dreaming and dream yoga but struggle with it, the practice of illusory form is for you.

Discovering the illusory and dreamlike nature of reality is the ultimate point, and that summit can be reached by either the daytime or nighttime paths.<sup>2</sup>

## A TWO-WAY STREET

Each one of the nocturnal meditations has diurnal correlates, daily practices designed to match the subtlety of the mind as it's revealed in the dark, and which will come to light in the meditations on the eight consciousnesses described in part 2 of this book. They dilate our meditative eyes during the day. Without the daily meditations, it's difficult to recognize dreaming and sleeping consciousness. It's hard to identify something in the dark that you haven't met in the light of the day. You'll walk right past these states. But if you spend time getting familiar with these subtle states now (the very definition of meditation in Tibetan is *gom*—"to become familiar with"), you will start to recognize them in the dark. What the poet Kabir said of death also applies to sleep and dream: "What is found now is found then." Conversely, for the untrained mind, what is *not* found now is *not* found then.

Illusory form and dream yoga, the diurnal and nocturnal, support each other, so working with both practices creates a kind of staircase between two states of consciousness that eventually lifts you into their fundamental unity. Imagine a staircase in the shape of triangle, wide at the bottom and converging at the top. Waking and dreaming are as far

apart as black and white, night and day when you start to climb this staircase, but the higher you climb, the closer they get. So this staircase is also a bridge. At the summit, illusory form and dream yoga allow you to experience the equality of awareness that Buddhism refers to as “one taste.” In Christian terms, everything tastes like God.

It may seem like a lofty state, but uniting waking and dreaming consciousness is one definition of both lucid dreaming and illusory form. In other words, bringing waking consciousness into the dream state defines a lucid dream; bringing lucid dream consciousness into the waking state (and therefore seeing daily appearances as dreamlike) defines the practice of illusory form. The fruition of both practices is to wake up to the nonsolidity or empty nature of both states.

Illusory form practice and dream yoga open a bustling two-way street with insights flowing in both directions. They are reciprocating practices. What you practice with illusory form meditation will enhance what you practice if you are working with dream yoga; conversely, what you practice with dream yoga will enhance your practice of illusory form.

It’s easy to understand how what we do during the day affects what we experience at night. If we have nightmarish experiences in the day, for example, it’s likely we’ll have nightmares when we sleep. It’s harder to understand how what we do at night can affect what we experience during the day. We know this to some extent when we wake up on the “wrong side” of the bed and a bad night casts its shadow over the day. Or when we just don’t get enough sleep. But the nocturnal practices take this lesser known track of bidirectionality to a whole new level. They show us how to wake up on the right side of the bed every day, and how a good night of lucid dreaming can cast its light upon the day.

With the practice of illusory form, we’re installing a host of pop-ups during the day that will ping into our unconscious mind at night, waking us up to the fact that we’re dreaming, which is essentially alerting us to the illusory nature of nighttime experience. Nighttime lucidity is discovering the dream to be a dream. We’re hacking into previously unconscious and highly classified domains, exposing their true nature: that dreams are not as solid and real as we think. This very insight is what transforms a non-lucid dream into a lucid one.

With the nocturnal meditations, we're similarly installing a host of pop-ups during the night that will ping into our awareness during the day, alerting us to the fact that we're *still* dreaming, and wake us up to the illusory nature of daytime reality. Daytime lucidity is discovering that waking experience is also a type of dream, that things are not as solid and real as we think. We're hacking into what we thought was a fully conscious experience, exposing what we thought was real (that we're really awake, and that the forms we experience in the waking state truly exist) to be an illusion. This insight is what transforms a non-lucid *life* into a lucid one, a shocking exposé that awaits us in the steamy pages ahead.

These domains of consciousness that you're hacking into are highly classified and secretive because the ego doesn't want you to know the truth, what's really going on behind the scenes, or below mere appearance. Ego, as the archetype of ignorance, wants to keep you in the dark, and therefore soundly asleep, tucked into the world of form. In this book we're going to expose and declassify its secrets as we strive to open up, release, and "declassify" form. We're going to transition from a world of reified form into a realm of illusory (de-reified) form and show you why that transition is so important.

So with these diurnal and nocturnal practices you will come to see what has kept you in the dark, and therefore spiritually asleep, day or night. For the awakened ones who have developed this constant lucidity, there is no essential difference between waking, sleeping, dreaming, and even dying. Christian theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

When the sun goes down, it is time for another natural thing to happen, as the slower, quieter, and more tactile rhythms of nighttime open doors that remain shut during the day. No doubt there are frightening things behind some of those doors, but there are also stunning things. Eventually, with some practice, one learns that all these doors open on the same room. . . . Darkness is not dark to God, the night is as bright as the day.<sup>3</sup>



## RIGHT VIEW

Buddhism stresses the importance of “right view,” the first factor of the Eightfold Noble Path.<sup>4</sup> The fact that it’s the first of the eight factors suggests its importance. Without a proper view, it’s hard to know where you’re going, let alone how to get there. Right view in its traditional context refers to philosophy, outlook, or school of thought, as when we ask, “What’s your view on things?” But right view also has a more immediate meaning, which is more literal (phenomenological rather than analogical). Here it refers to actually changing the way you see things. In our journey we’ll be engaging both kinds of view, initially creating a philosophical outlook (the view of emptiness) that eventually alters the way you see.<sup>5</sup>

Forms still appear for one who has accomplished these visionary practices, but they are now seen in the light of lucidity. How this might actually be perceived—how an awakened one sees things—is a topic we’ll return to throughout the book.

A common myth about genius is that it’s someone who “knows it all,” a person with vast stores of knowledge. While there are certainly geniuses who have that capacity, a real genius is more of a “see-it-all”: someone who could look at the same thing everybody else is looking at but see it in a unique way. Picasso and Einstein were surely of this ilk. Spiritual geniuses, which is what we aspire to be, are those who see it all. But in a sense they don’t actually see more than meets the eye. They see less. They see that things are *less* solid, *less* material, *less* real.

Is there anything more transformative than changing the way we see things? Even at an everyday level, when we ingest mind-altering substances, are we not doing so in order to alter the way we see? On a more elevated level, “liberation” in the spiritual sense means being liberated from things, from the world of form. But this doesn’t mean getting rid of form and fleeing to some disembodied heaven. It means being liberated from our current *relationship* to form.

Right view means *complete view*, a view that includes all states of mind. The realization born from this complete view is beautifully expressed by the Indian master Ramana Maharshi:

The sage dreams but he knows it to be a dream, in the same way he knows the waking state to be a dream. Established in the state of supreme reality, the sage detachedly witnesses the other three states—waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep—as pictures superimposed onto it. For the sage, all three states are equally unreal. Most people are unable to comprehend this, because for them the standard of reality is the waking state, whereas for the sage the standard is reality itself.<sup>6</sup>

The nocturnal meditations and the practice of illusory form establish you in the state of supreme reality—what Buddhism calls *emptiness*—where you can then detachedly, but compassionately, witness all manifest states, all form, but without being seduced into those forms.

## THE SIMPLICITY OF ILLUSORY FORM PRACTICE

The modern mind is complex, and there is plenty of complexity in the pages ahead. But the practice of illusory form is simple. In fact, it's so simple that the complex mind might have a hard time buying it. The complexities ahead are designed to meet the modern mind and eventually pound it into submission. Always remember that reality itself is simple. Delusion is what's complicated.

So, don't let the simplicity of the following practices belie their profundity. The more advanced a practice gets, the simpler it is. In the end, complexity doesn't stand a chance against simplicity. A simpleton can disarm a sophist. With a properly delivered and simple stroke, David sent Goliath to the ground in a thud.

The practice of illusory form has three aspects: meditations on illusory body (cutting through forms), illusory speech (cutting through sounds), and illusory mind (cutting through thoughts). "Illusory" is a code word for "empty," so the practice of illusory form is really the practice of emptiness. We'll unpack what "empty" means in the following chapters.

In ordinary life, we relate to the world through body, speech, and mind, and we solidify our experience with our thoughts, words, and deeds. Illusory form practice works with these three gates to dissolve our sense of a solid world.<sup>7</sup> It develops a laser-like gaze that allows us to see through mere appearance and into reality, cutting through the forms, sounds, and thoughts that otherwise trap us in the anguish and discontent of *conventional* life.

Meditation on illusory body is the most intuitive of these three practices. The simple exercise of reminding yourself to see the forms of this world as like a dream will be a recurring emphasis of this book. The practice of illusory body challenges the authority of conventional wakefulness, redefining what it means to be awake during the day. Illusory body meditation uses the power of imagination to create a template that matches reality: the world *really is* illusory. With illusory body practice, you are aligning yourself with that truth.

We're always projecting onto the world. In the practice of illusory body, we use the projecting power of the mind to help us see things the way they really are. Mipham Rinpoche says, "See it with your mind first, then you will see it with your eyes." And Gyatrul Rinpoche says, "By training yourself in seeing the whole of the animate and inanimate world as being without inherent existence, it is not that you are simply superimposing this upon the world. Instead, this practice merely acts as a catalyst for gaining insight into the nature of reality. It begins as an imaginary process, but it leads to a direct perception of reality."<sup>8</sup> You're reprogramming yourself with the truth.

Fortunately, because the world is illusory by nature, developing the good habit of seeing things as illusory happens more quickly than the bad habit of seeing things as solid. This is why Buddhism proclaims that given the right methods, we can attain awakening in one lifetime, even though we've been asleep for eons. It always takes longer to fall asleep than it does to wake up.

The idea of illusory speech may not seem quite as obvious. But like physical forms, words can hurt us when they're hardened. They're not as solid as bullets or bats, but a properly delivered word or phrase packs a punch. When someone says "I love you" for the first time, it makes our hearts flutter. When someone shouts "Fuck you!" into

your face, it stings. Words may not literally kill (even though the shock of words delivering bad news could give us a heart attack), but they can incite us to kill. A “war of words” can spark a literal war.

The practice of illusory speech is about seeing through the solidity of words, cutting through the auditory slings that take us down or lift us up. The culmination of illusory speech practice is to hear with open ears, to listen to everything with equanimity, and thus to not be so affected by what others say. Words can still move us, but only if we let them.

The progression from body to speech to mind in the practice of illusory form is the progression from gross to subtle to very subtle forms. Even though thoughts and emotions are quite formless, they’re the most powerful of forms. Everything we say (speech) or do (body) starts with what we think or feel. Subtle mental content is like the small rudder that directs a massive ocean liner. The tiniest internal shift can have enormous external effects.

We relate to the external world the same way we relate to our internal world. If we’re hard on ourselves, we tend to be hard on others. If we can de-reify the contents of our mind, seeing our thoughts and emotions as dreamlike, our world will soften in kind. The practice of illusory mind therefore focuses on the (subtle) projector, not the (gross) projection.

Illusory mind practice is another way to look at meditation, but with a sharper edge. When we do this practice, it’s important to realize that thoughts are never a problem. Believing everything we think is the problem. Reification is the problem. If left alone, thoughts naturally self-liberate, like snowflakes falling on a hot rock. But we rarely leave them alone. We douse them with the rocket fuel of attention, and off we go into the inflamed dramas and tragedies of life.

In conclusion: how you relate to your mind naturally extends into how you relate to your speech, your body, and your body’s actions. How you relate to your speech and your body also extends into how you relate to your mind. These three aspects of illusory form lift each other up. The better you get at one, the better you’ll get at the others. With practice, you can discover a dreamlike eye consciousness that sees dreamlike forms, a dreamlike ear consciousness that hears dreamlike sounds, and a dreamlike mind that perceives dreamlike thoughts.

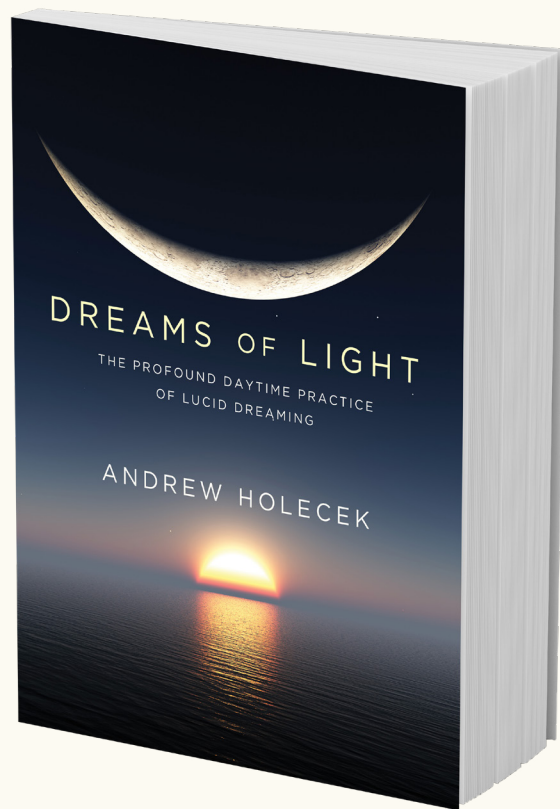
## HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

The material that follows may be hazardous to your egoic health. It is not for the faint of heart. The teachings on emptiness, illusory form, and the sciences that support them pack a punch. Absorbing this punch is best accomplished in stages. To understand, and then experience, emptiness and illusory form, it is traditional to progress slowly. If you try to absorb these teachings too quickly it can be jarring.

Waking up, even in the everyday sense, is not always pleasant. Buddhism advocates “the gradual approach to sudden enlightenment.” It’s more polite to rouse ourselves (and others) leisurely. We’ve all had the experience of being jolted awake from the dead of sleep—dazed, confused, and often irritated. To avoid a rude awakening on the spiritual path, take your time. Otherwise it’s like a bucket of ice-cold water dumped over you in the middle of the night.

My recommendation is to read one chapter or section at a time. Contemplate it, digest it, and gradually incorporate the material by meditating upon it. I have studied and practiced these teachings for decades, yet I found that as I was writing this book I too had to move slowly. When I took my time, the content was by turns intellectually stimulating, emotionally challenging, and spiritually shattering.

While the material flows from chapter to chapter, many of the chapters stand alone, which means you can skip around if you find yourself in quicksand. Part 3 is for those more scientifically oriented, so jumping ahead could hit the refresh button if that’s you. Those who are spiritually inclined may resonate more with the teachings in parts 1 and 2. You will find practices scattered throughout the chapters that follow. Experiment with them. Let your intuition guide you. Allow the teachings to work on you.



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