

Dreams as Koans
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

Here we are in our first dream circle of the retreat. When I was thinking about the reasons we're doing this, what came to mind is that it's already happening. We've already incorporated dreams and dreaming into our practice in quite a deep way that rose spontaneously. It's always important to pay attention to what's actually happening and to work with that.

When I began teaching fifteen years ago, we had inherited this glorious koan tradition that has a disconcerting tendency to want to keep jumping out of the box we received it in. It's amazing to think of the amount of struggle that went into the decision about whether to keep the box lid open or not, and how five minutes after we decided to do that it was so clear there was never going to be any going back from that.

A lot of the jumping out of the box came because of the way people were working with koans, spontaneously — what was occurring with them, what was occurring to them — and their desire to include that in the practice. So the question of 'in the box or out of the box?' became, for those of us who were teachers, do we say yes or no to what is arising in people's practices, and is so powerful? And the answer was that we say yes.

This feels like another instance of saying yes to what is arising in people's practices, particularly because it began with people bringing dreams into work in the room and asking, "Is it all right if we work with this instead of the koan?" It so deepened and enriched the practice to bring in the dream life of those who wanted to do that.

Then in Santa Fe we began spending deep time together, meeting heart-mind to heart-mind in ways not always conscious, not always on the surface, but working underground. As we began to spend more time in that way and those connections underground began to grow, we started dreaming not only about our own practice, but about each other. We began to hear about the dreams people were having about each other, and how sometimes those dreams could feel prophetic or informative : they were saying something true about someone else or someone's relationship with someone else. They were a way of connections happening and

strengthening among people. How glorious that we've become a group of people who show up not only in the meditation hall together, but in each other's dreams, in sleep. So we had a dream weekend last spring, which was a way of dealing with the practice of dreaming and seemed to be helpful to people.

If the first reason is because it's already happening, then the second reason that runs right on the heels of that is, if it's already happening, we should receive this with gratitude. Again, this is something essential in our practice. If something is being given to us, it would be churlish to say, 'No no no. That's *makyō*. That's demon visitation. I should pay no attention to that. Let me get back to the purity of my practice.' The grateful thing would be to say, 'Thank you, and welcome.'

That older way of holding it — that dreams are distractions, not the point, dangerous because we might get stuck in them — is based around a kernel of truth, but I'm going to draw a different conclusion than the conclusion I heard about when I was in training. I don't think that dreams and the kinds of visions we have in meditation are dangerous because they're too much, because they might pull us away from what is true into sidetracking distractions. I think they're dangerous, or can be dangerous, because they're too little. Because if we collapse around an image, a dream, or a meditation experience and think *This is it. Now I've got it*, the danger is that we stop there. And everything after that becomes an attempt to get back to that thing we once experienced.

But if we receive gratefully those profound openings and visionary experiences we have in meditation, and the dreams we have; if we appreciate them; if there is a way we can become intimate with them and an exchange can go on, then we put them down gratefully next to us, leaving space for the next thing to happen. Then the next thing *will* happen : the next meditation experience, the next vision, the next dream, and our practice will roll on and on as a path, a road, not as a fixed location we set ourselves in.

The experiences are happening, so it would be polite to be grateful about that, and to receive them. Here's the third thing : It would also tell us something helpful as we come to understand the true nature of the self, and the true not-nature of the self. You can go about that by trying to annihilate the self, turning away from it, cutting it down, making it bad, scolding it all the time, feeling embarrassed or depressed or discouraged by it. You can do

that. But that is a self trying to destroy a self, and it has never in the history of the universe worked.

Here's another possibility : make the self larger. Make the self so large you cannot recognize it anymore from that cramped view of the self as a problem you used to have. Let the self be what it is, which is everything — your local instance of everything. Each of us is a local instance of everything. That is the nature of the self, the shape that the local instance takes in each of us.

If we choose that direction, which *has* in the history of the universe worked, it's helpful to bring in our dream life, because it's destabilizing of our small, cramped view of what the self is. You take that small view, go to bed, dream and fly and have amazing experiences. You wake up and you can either say, *That is a dangerous delusion and I will think no further on it*, or you can say, *That too is the self*. What does that say about how we usually hold the self? It blows it apart. It makes it impossible to stick to the small and the cramped because every bloody night we have this experience of something else. It's telling us over and over again that it's not that the self isn't real, it's that the self is not what you think it is. Every night for fifty some years, for sixty some years, for thirty some years, every night it tells us that, and every day we reconstitute that small, cramped version of the self. What is up with that?

So let us let in that experience of the self as real, because if life is a dream, if life is a *bardo*, then dreaming is a dream and a *bardo*, and how do we know that one is realer than the other? How do we know that what happens in the daylight hours is realer than what happens in the night? That's just picking and choosing. That's just an arbitrary choice. So let us put that choice down.

Two things I want to remind you to launch us from the dream retreat we did last spring : the first is that in some of the Asian cultures out of which our traditions come, people don't talk about *having* a dream, they talk about *being seen by* a dream. A dream is something that is given to us to see, and we are also seen by the dream. Kind of like a koan. Maybe koans are the dreams we take up in our waking lives, and maybe dreams are the koans we take up during sleep. That's the first thing, that sense of dreams as something given to us and something that sees us.

The second is to remind you of a story : someone was having their first lucid dream and was so excited that it finally happened. They were running around in the dream saying, “I know I’m dreaming! I’m having a lucid dream!” In the dream there was a cab at the curb, and this man went running up to the cab driver, who rolled down the window, and the man said, “I know I’m dreaming! I’m having a lucid dream!” And the cab driver looked at him like, “Okay, buddy, whatever,” rolled up the window and sped away. That’s deeply weird. That dream sequence had an autonomous life. Here was a maniac coming up, talking about being awake inside his dream. Dreams have that power and autonomy. Dreams are one of those places where the bardos cross, the *kayas*, the bodies of the Buddha, cross. Something gets communicated across that membrane. Again, it would feel ungrateful not to accept that when those intersections get made.

We’re going to turn the recorder off now. Let’s allow a lot of silence and space around what we say. I’m going to start with a dream, because that seems only fair if I’m asking you to do this. We’re not going to be analyzing each other’s dreams, but if there’s something that is called from you by the dream, leave a little space and say what is being called from you to say. If it’s a comment on a dream, a way to start is, “If that were my dream, what I would wonder about is ...” If someone has a dream and you have something you feel relates to it, if you had a similar dream or something that’s in the same territory, if you don’t mind, just lay it down next to it. Let’s lay these dreams down next to each other for a bit and see what happens when we do.

Here’s a little seed. This wasn’t a complete dream, just a dream image. It came during the koan retreat we had at the end of October into which we brought dreaming, and the dreams were quite powerful. In the middle of that retreat I dreamt I was in the foreground of a scene in which I was bent over performing some task. Over my left shoulder the sun was shining; it was a beautiful day and there was a group of hang gliders illuminated by the sun, but they weren’t swooping, they were hovering in mid-air, vertical as if they were talking with each other. When I woke up from that dream I knew that the retreat was just fine. All was well.