



Serinity Young. *Dreaming in the Lotus: Buddhist Dream Narrative, Imagery, and Practice*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999, xxii + 296 pages, ISBN 0–86171–158–0, US \$18.95.

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“There would be no Buddha and no Buddhism without dreams.” This concluding statement in *Dreaming in the Lotus* may at first sound like wild exaggeration, yet it aptly highlights the tremendous significance of dreams in Buddhism. Serinity Young’s thought-provoking study of dreams in the sacred biographies of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism makes a very strong case to support that sweeping claim.

Young presents a thorough comparative analysis of dreams in the biographies of the historical Buddha Gautama (c. 562–482 B.C.E.) and Tibetan poet Milarepa (1040–1123 C.E.) and artfully weaves into her text valuable information on historical context and corroborating evidence from medical, philosophical, and ritual texts as well as other sources. Her goal is to allow the sacred biographies to speak for themselves as far as possible (p. 163), and she achieves this aim in large measure. The basic structure of the book is built around several important themes that she traces over the course of almost two thousand years of Buddhist history. The main themes are:

(1) *Dreams are a significant part of Buddhist belief*. The sheer number of dreams that she highlights from the biographical sources goes a long way toward demonstrating this contention. Young shows how, throughout the sacred biographies considered, dreams allow people to experience other

realms as well as the future in order to understand a higher reality and achieve enlightenment.

(2) *Dreams represent an accepted mode of cognition in Indo–Tibetan Buddhism.* Dreams provide a significant mode of acquiring knowledge about the nature of reality at various levels, including death and waking reality.

(3) *Control over dream cognition establishes religious authority.* The types of dream control related to religious authority include the ability to interpret correctly one's own and other people's dreams, the power to cause other people to dream, the capacity to dream solutions to problems and answers to questions, and even the capability to control the events of one's own dreams.

(4) *Some dreams confer the charisma associated with religious authority.* Young illustrates how Buddhist saints narrate their dreams as a way of revealing who they are and their understanding of the dream world. These key dreams reveal crucial moments of change for the dreamers, that is, changes that they were ready for because they understood what the dream portended. This dream-related charisma of the saints stands in sharp contrast with others portrayed in the Buddhist biographies who require the advice of an expert to decipher the meaning of their dreams.

(5) *Dreams play an essential role in the genre of sacred biography in Indo–Tibetan Buddhism.* Young underscores the prophetic role of dreams in these biographies that permits both continuity with the early Indian tradition and innovation in Buddhist beliefs and practices. She strives to show how continuity is achieved by faithfully following the model of behavior established in the life of the founder (as evidenced in the biographies of the Buddha) and how innovations occur when a later generation attempts to express its uniqueness, especially in a different cultural setting (as seen in those biographies which discuss new religious practices such as Dream Yoga).

Young notes that the dreams preserved in the biographies of the Buddha provide a map of the Buddhist dream world for those who would follow the same path, such that all buddhas, whether past, present or future, have the same life story and therefore the same dreams. According to one source, even the mothers of the buddhas have the same conception dream. Given the cyclical nature of the Buddhist concept of time, the same events and the same dreams can happen in different times and places. Thus it appears that the common dream world is available to striving Buddhists as a map of spiritual progress (p. 11).

Young observes that in various Buddhist texts, including the sacred biographies, there are contradictory ideas about the meaning and function of dreams. This resembles to some extent the wide variety of attitudes to-

ward dreams found in Western Christianity, where, on the one hand, dreams have been revered as a privileged access to divine revelation and, on the other hand, they have been condemned as witchcraft and the work of the devil. Young indicates that contradictory views can even appear in the same Buddhist text. In some instances dreams are valued as significant and meaningful communications, while in other passages a warning may be given about the deceptive nature of dreams or they may be cited as a prime example of the illusory and empty nature of reality. Young attributes most of these contending beliefs about dreams to different emphases between elite and popular views (p. 56). She points out that the elite views are usually represented by literate scholar–monastics pursuing esoteric studies, while popular views are set forth by the laity and nonliterate monastics. Both the elite and popular traditions accepted dreams as a meaningful form of cognition, but the elite view added that they are an example of the illusory nature of the world (p. 17). Young also states that there are different tendencies between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist views on dreams: According to some Theravāda texts, only unenlightened people dream, while in Mahāyāna texts dreams are more pervasive and are presented as a positive model of dreaming. Here, as elsewhere, Young carefully nuances her observations and is aware of the complexity of her material. She adds that Buddhism is comfortable with such contradictory opinions about dreams and dreaming largely because Buddhism did not develop a central authority to control interpretation of doctrine.

Of interest to Western dreamers is the idea that South Asian texts refer to “seeing” a dream rather than “having” a dream. Young points out that such language emphasizes the external origin of dreams, that is, that they are given to dreamers rather than created by them (p. 9). This perspective lends dreams a superhuman authority, whether that be considered divine or demonic. Of course, this more objective notion of dreams is also present in traditional Western religious literature where dreams are viewed either as messages of God or the gods or as encounters with the divine itself, even if this concept was not necessarily expressed in terms of “seeing” a dream. The South Asian notion of “seeing” a dream certainly stands in sharp contrast to more recent psychological perspectives on the meaning and function of dreams and dreaming.

Young’s treatment of predictive or prophetic dreams is intriguing, since it links the two oldest dimensions of dreams found in recorded history, namely the precognitive and the divine. She notes that in the sacred biographies, saints have dreams that come true (p. 55) and refers to the ancient Western views of Plato and Artemidorus that a few persons of perfect virtue are considered to have mainly predictive dreams (p. 199). She

also cites various Indian texts that indicate that both Buddhists and Hindus perceived dreaming to be a way of communicating with deities and a way of knowing the future (p. 133). She ties together the divine and the precognitive dimensions concisely: “Underlying the belief in dreams as a source of prophecy is the ancient idea that some dreams are sent by the gods as messages” (p. 7).

Young devotes a chapter to the shared dreams that appear in Buddhist texts. She explains that shared dreams are understood to be about the same event and occur on the same night, though they may differ in content. One of the most significant of these occasions is the night before the Buddha’s departure from home when he sets out in search of enlightenment. While the Buddha has four visions that introduce him to life’s realities and their solution, his father has seven dreams signifying loss, his aunt dreams of a great white ox leaving the city, and his wife has a long frightening dream. All these dreams complement the Buddha’s four visions, and they are truthful portents. Young points out that these shared dreams add power to the story and stress the inevitability of what follows (p. 34). She also indicates that shared dreams contribute to the view that family and clan members are essential parts of oneself and that the dream self exists not in isolation, but as part of a shared realm where individual dreamers and universal symbols meet and merge (p. 52–53). In the sacred biographies, shared dreams demonstrate the validity of dreams, signify the importance of the individual in those dreams, and add weight to the dream’s meaning (p. 94). Young is aware that shared dreams occur in other cultures and are known from certain cases recorded at the dream temples of Asklepios (p. 219), but she notes that South Asia is an especially rich source for them (p. 87).

With this volume, Serinity Young has made an important contribution to Buddhist Studies and to dream research. The book will acquaint students and scholars of Buddhism with important issues about dreams and dream research and how they relate to the Indo–Tibetan religious context. A prime example of this is her discussion of lucid dreaming, in which she underlines important differences between the Tibetan practice of Dream Yoga and the current lucid dream research of Stephen LaBerge (p. 170–171). This excellent work also complements very well a related study, *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities*, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s lengthy analysis of the role of dreams in Indian religion and society. Together, they offer dream researchers crucial historical and theoretical background on dreams and dreaming in Eastern religion.