

DAEMONS AND DRAGONS

"The soul, in sleep, since it is then in a certain way freer from the harassment of the senses, draws together its insight and sometimes seizes upon the truth or probability, even concerning future things." Abelard of Bath.

So far, the history of dream interpretation has taken us to the world of nature spirits, where waking and dream worlds were part of the same reality. Then it took us to a culture where a 'Mother Goddess' represented nature and demanded of humans to respect and accept *her* messages as if they were omens representing *her* immediate needs. After that we visited the world where ancient gods, with the help of kings and prophetic philosophers, decided on the unknown, and dreams became hidden messages to be interpreted through either magic or acumen. From then on people have never been free of this tension between wonder and reason whenever they have had to handle the unknown, and thus also the content of their dreams.

This meant that they had to decide whether dreams spontaneously arose from inside the body, or came from an 'outer or divine' source. Were dreams the creation of an independent mind created inside the body, or did they reflect the influences of a transcendent and universal intellect? In other words, were dreams a product of an inherent mind that exists in all living humans, or did they contain impressions that originated from an unknown realm beyond human existence? Notice however, that in both cases the mind was seen as independent of basic bodily matter.

As discussed in the previous essay about the time when people became aware of the tension between wonder and reason, we see that over time communication with the gods, as projections of the unknown, seemed to work so well that humans not only survived 'against' nature, but prospered in large kingdoms and civilisations. In spite of short periods of inspired democracy in Athens, Rome, India and China, the overall tendency was the development of strict hierarchical systems in society as well as in individual thought patterns. This was based upon divinely motivated instructions which placed divine rule above human needs, rulers and scholars above ordinary people and obedience above individual creativity. This, however, had the effect that people started to feel divided in themselves, as if living according to two opposing images of reality, that of divine decree and that of their own physical needs. The only way out was to create a universal law based on a world run according to logic and rational order; a divine force that demanded the same judiciousness from human beings as from itself.

Over time the logical attributes projected on these monotheistic divinities and their regal sages trickled downwards, and human consciousness developed a dimension of the mind that became a more independent form of conscious reasoning. This paved the way for the development of a consciousness that not only understood nature out there, but could also control human nature inside. In other words, we see a time during which an 'external' or 'divine' image of cogent command over instinctual and emotional chaos supplied the motivation for further expansion of human consciousness. The body and its instincts became unimportant, or even became seen as the source of human suffering, while mind and its freedom from nature became an ultimate objective. In most cultures this presented humans with the possibility of existing as an individual mind or soul even after the demise of the body.

The value of dreams and their interpretation confirmed this world view. Directly or indirectly, people had to consciously blend an outer divine principle that took charge of dreams and their messages with the possibility of an independent inner mind which was also free from the constraints of an unpredictable nature and instinctual body. Let us explore a few examples.

voice of angels...

"For God may speak in one way, or in another, yet man does not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls upon men, while slumbering on their beds, then He opens the ears of men, and seals their instruction." The Bible, Job 33:14-18

For Christianity in medieval Europe, the view that dreams were a part of the natural body dwindled to the point where dreams were only seen to have prophetic value and deserve attention when sent from God. Although the

practice of dream incubation was still used in Catholic churches under certain circumstances, it was now God who 'came down' to talk to people, not the spirit of the dreamer that ascended and travelled to the realm of various gods. Even the messengers of God, like the Virgin Mother or angels, came down to the dreamer.

Especially in the Byzantine, dreams were seen primarily as a form of communication with God, who ensured health and well-being. The concept of a vision, in waking state or in sleep, was important in the decision-making of kings, politicians and priests, but always because it was God's will. Saints appointed by the church could mediate, but interpretation was actually unnecessary because the inner life was merely explored to confirm the grace and intervention of God or Christ.

Tertullian (c160 – c225 CE), for example, already redefined how dreams should be interpreted and acted upon so that they would fit the Christian context instead of 'pagan' needs. He pointed out that

Amongst ordinary people dreams were still interpreted, but in a direct associative manner. Whatever was said or done in a dream was seen as a message about some specific conduct expected from the dreamer. Examples, from a medieval writer on dream interpretation: if a dreamer dreamt about a priest falling asleep on his bed, he would become a friend of the priest and the Church. Or, if the dreamer dreamt of a naked woman it could mean his wife's death.

it was the soul that dreamt, that dreams revealed the future via divine intervention, but that demons were the common cause of nightmares (I use the archaic spelling for daemon, to broaden the ambiguity that lingered throughout medieval times about those independent forces of nature that could detach the human soul from pure or heavenly divinity). By about 300 CE the Church banned official dream interpretation. Under the auspices of the Church, dreams lost their foothold in medicine, and by the fifth century they were essentially seen unreservedly as part of religious faith.

For **St Augustine** (354-430 CE), dreams indicated the moral status of the soul and the state of grace of the dreamer. Dreams thus became more important in the conversion of saints and in their struggle against

the desires of the flesh. Dreams belonged to the soul, and were no longer supposed to express the inner needs of the body. It was the body that slept, but the soul that dreamt. Dreams also had to be understood in terms of their qualities and not mere content – were they good or evil, from God or from the devil? The dreamer took the willing or unwilling position between good and evil, between the immanent body and transcendent divine.

However, a few medieval medical philosophers still maintained some degree of body-centred and self-initiating dream explanations and categories. Although **Calcidius** started to bring dreams into the divine realm, he still took a middle ground where dreams were seen as 'spiritual' but originating in the dreamer's own inner world. His influence was later strengthened by the views of **Macrobius**, whose extensive

In the Christian era, the soul became the seat of morality, and dreams, as indicators of the soul's status, were no longer in the hands of the physician. Sexual dreams, especially, were squarely blamed on daemonic activity. Monks were actually encouraged to think 'shameful' thoughts in a controlled waking state (*logismoi*) to prevent daemons from using them during the night - a practice called "disclosure of thoughts". It was thus a form of prophylactic confession to keep the night dreams pure.

scholarly works such as *Saturnalia* and *Somnium Scipionis* dominated views on dream interpretation after the fifth century. Macrobius divided dreams into *somnium* dreams which needed some form of interpretation; *visio* dreams which were prophetic visions, but of mundane events; and *oraculum* dreams, for which an authoritative figure, often related to the church, was needed to give advice about the dream content. He talked disparagingly about so-called lower

dreams, associated with the body. Diabolical dreams, however, were associated with excessive food and drink, and it was seen to be difficult to distinguish the content of these dreams from a true warning based upon divine intervention.

This attitude towards dreaming meant that the most challenging decision for healers in medieval times was to decide whether dreams originated from the divine or from malevolent daemons. Although mediation through saints such as **St. Cosmos** and **St. Damain** could link dream interpretation with medicine and healing, such healing was essentially an outer '*gift of healing*' granted by Christ to the saints. Any interpretation of dreams was expected to include a citation from the Bible. Although God could send dreams to everyone, any personal explanation of dreams was, like all pagan divination, unreservedly condemned.

St Augustine (354 - 430 CE), for example, was adamant that an individual had no effect on the content of his or her dreams. All illness was part of a divine plan received from God, and dreams were no longer seen as part of an inherent language of the body. Because the immortal soul was no longer of the body, miraculous cures initiated by saints or even kings had the sole purpose of bringing people closer to the Church. Dream interpretation completely shifted over to religion while medical practice moved in the direction of Galen's medical codes about sleep hygiene.

This did not mean that there wasn't still the underlying confusion between basic, but conflicting views when dream content was implicated in health and healing. Ordinary people kept on asking: could dreams indicate an ailing body? Were dreams not a message from God, the universal physician, to cure a sickness of the soul? Was illness a sign of individual sinning against the greater good? Were bad dreams a warning from the divine or merely the work of the devil?

It is important to remember that during medieval time medicine was practiced by midwives, female herbalists, clergy, medical astrologers and alchemists. In fact alchemy was the scientific leg of medicine and the forerunner of our modern bio-chemistry based medicine.

In fact, towards the end of the Middle Ages the role of dreams became quite ambiguous and complex again. Apart from the question of whether dreams were angelic or daemonic, they were once again found to have a human side and a use in medicine, and from the eleventh century we have many examples of dreams being included in medical diagnosis and treatment. Even medical astrologers and church philosophers started to consider the likelihood that dreams could be caused by natural imbalances in the body.

One such late medieval writer on medicine and philosophy, **Hildegard von Bingen** (1098-1179), found it hard to exclude the personal and individual aspects of dreaming from daily practice. She adjusted her view to also include the inherent moral state of the dreamer, apart from external daemonic influences or the grace of God. In other words, the dreamer's sadness, anger, values and daily actions could have an effect on her or his dreams. In the thirteenth century **Brigitte of Sweden** described a similar interaction between heavenly visions and earthly perceptions in dreams.

Hildegard of Bingen was a good example of someone who combined folk tradition with Christian belief. In her medical work *Causae et Curae* she confirmed the role of nature itself in health and healing. However, she also maintained her belief that a poor relationship with God brought about illness. The cure for illness was handled through natural herbs and medicine, but the cause of illness was not in the hands of people, and the relationship with God was paramount. This view helped most people (and medical scholars) to cope with the dissonance between the practicality of 'pagan' medicine and the spiritual logic of the Christian religion.

St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) saw dreams as completely natural in their origin, and this included the dreamer's bodily condition. He felt that it all depends on the starting point of a dream. He divided dreams into internal dreams and dreams with an outer source. Inner dreams he then again divided into those that were similar to the dreams of animals, and thus merely remnants of the day's impressions, and those which originated in the body's disposition but were shaped according to individually imagined symbolism. Those dreams with an outer source he also divided into two categories. One group consisted of dreams caused by the direct effect of the environment on the body of the sleeper, and the other group were dreams that resulted from the influence of the spiritual energy from God, an angel or even the devil, on the inner world of the dreamer.

St Thomas was a student of the most prolific medical writer of medieval times in Europe, namely the monk and alchemist **Albertus Magnus** (1193/1206-1280). Magnus used dreams directly to read the state of the four humours of the body (see **Galen** in our essay 'Between Wonder and Reason'), including their associated conditions such as dryness, damp, coldness or heat. Dreams were thus officially part of his medical diagnosis. Another medical practitioner and scholar, **Vincent of Beauvais**, also declared outright that the clarity of dreams correlated with the dreamer's physical condition.

Eventually, the translation of the works of Aristotle into Latin during the thirteenth century, and the availability of the writings of Avicenna from Arabia, brought an end to an era of denunciation of the human body and its effect on dreams. Aristotle's belief that dreams are only from the body and signify what is going on in the body as well as in the individual mind of the dreamer became increasingly prevalent, and the individual body and mind started to play a greater role in the interaction between everyday reality and

the realm of the unknown. Because the imagination of the dreamer became accepted as a source of dream

In the writing of both Dante and Chaucer we see how the imaginative element took its place between the divine and the mundane, bringing them together into the same field of experience. In the Nun's Priest's Tale, Chaucer cleverly handled the opposite ideas about dreams of his time. Opposites such as daemonic and divine, evil and grace, truth and false were still strongly defined, but there appeared the temperance of a middle zone. Lady Pertelote thinks Chauntecleer is cowardly because he shows fear of his dreams. She tells him he dreamed because he ate too much and that it is well known that dreams have no meaning; he simply needs a laxative. Chauntecleer however, quotes authorities who maintain that dreams have a very definite and divine meaning.

content, a dream was now seen as something created in a personal space between body and mind. It was no longer only false or true, inside or outside, but both; now it was truly real and symbolic at the same time.

This new dualism about dreams provided a great stage for the art of late medieval times. Unfortunately the ambiguity also reduced trust in the usefulness of dreams in medicine, and the medical writers from the Renaissance warned people not to place too much value in

the ability of a dream to predict or heal.

Nonetheless, in Europe, the Middle Ages ended with dreams no longer strictly seen as happening on a transcendental plane that was free from a body and its restriction to time and space.



the seventh gate...

"Up from Earth's Centre through the Seventh Gate I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate, And many a knot unravelled by the Road, But not the Master-knot of Human Fate." Avicenna.

Medieval Arabian and Islamic writers also placed dreams strongly in the context of a culture where a universal principle of creation and reason was in control of human existence and fate. In other words, divine providence or God was in charge of all things, including dreams, in a universal manner.

During the early Islamic period (661–750 AD), most Muslims believed that Allah provided healing from illness, but scholars in philosophy and medicine often viewed healing, and thus also dreams, in a dualistic way. While medieval Islamic scholars described and classified both the cause of dreams and their interpretation according to the strict rules of religious or theological convention, we see, especially from the ninth century onwards, a compelling development in medicine as a science in the Muslim world. A system of healing was created that incorporated clinical analysis, hospitals and surgical procedures. This meant that the body became central to healing and illness, but that dreams - even their medical application - shifted away from medicine towards the fields of philosophy and metaphysics.

Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Sirin Al-Ansari (653–728 CE), a renowned ascetic of Al-Basra, was particularly acknowledged for his extraordinary skill in interpreting dreams. He still combined the moral

and ethical aspects of dream interpretation with technique and individual meaning by reciting *Surahs* (chapters) from the Qur'an. He demanded that lay people should always seek help from an established Muslim scholar to interpret their dreams. Although he himself hated books, his teachings were written down in an extensive work of 25 sections, called *Great Book of Interpretation of Dreams (Tafsirul Ahlam al-Kabir)*.

Abu Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn 'Ishaq as-Sabbāh al Kindī

(c. 801–873 CE) wrote a lot about dreaming, but is seen as the father of Islamic and Arabic philosophy, not medicine. Nonetheless, he incorporated much of the view of Aristotle in his writing on dreams, and adopted a naturalistic view of dreaming and prophetic visions. In other words, he admitted to the importance of human imagination and to the possibility that people, especially those with 'pure souls', can recognise the 'hidden form' of things when they perceive them as a physical or sensory reality.

Ironically, Islamic scholars were more astute readers of Plato and Aristotle than early Christians and they managed to combine the views of these classical philosophers with those of Islam in a perceptive way. Abu Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn 'Ishāq aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ al-Kindī wrote extended works on medicine, mathematics and philosophy. Like Galen he became a source of medical and pharmaceutical knowledge for centuries to come. He designed, for example, a mathematical scale for consistency in drug treatment by doctors.

Another influential Persian physician and philosopher of this early era, **Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi** (854 CE – 925 CE), or Rhazes in Latin, was less impressed with the early Greek philosophers and actually criticized both Plato and Aristotle in his *The Comprehensive Book on Medicine (Kitab al-Hawi fi al-tibb)*. He was also not shy about correcting Galen according to his own observations in medicine. No wonder that he became known as the father of Islamic medicine, and was seen as the greatest physician of medieval times. However, he does not seem to have written much about dreams. It could be because most of the information we

Avicenna (see below), also a physician and philosopher, later stated that Muhammad ibn Zakariyyab al-Razi was ignorant of metaphysics and should have stayed with urine and stool testing or surgery.

have about him focuses on his incredible advances in strictly 'medical' subjects such as chemistry, disease patterns, ophthalmology and pediatrics. He also clearly stated that although he believed in the existence of God and the soul, he

preferred *human reasoning* rather than prophetic religion for understanding the biological world. He nonetheless defined a 'psychological' facet of medical science, which he then divided into physical and spiritual components, and demanded that a physician should master both the physical and spiritual sides with regards to the healing of the body. Only the spiritual aspect of medicine allowed for the concept of daemons that could have invaded the bodies of mentally disturbed people. His view on dreams and their interpretation therefore also showed signs of the dualistic split between mind and body that appeared during late medieval thinking.

Al-Farabi (872–951 CE), another important Persian scientist and philosopher, was the first to distinguish outright between dream interpretation as a means to communicate divine intervention, and the exploration of dreams as individual natural processes of the body. His work, 'On the Cause of Dreams', paved the way for **Avicenna** and his advanced view on the place of dreams in medicine.

Abū Ali al-Husayan ibn Abd Allāh in Al-Hasan ibn Ali ibn Sīnā or **Avicenna** (980–1037) wrote the well-known Canon of Medicine (Qanun fi 't-tibb), which became the most influential work in medicine since

Galen. In this work he expanded the prevailing medical theory of Galen about the different categories of bodily temperament and included emotional factors, mental abilities, personal self-awareness, moral mind-set and also dream content. To accommodate his theories on the soul and self, especially the way they present in relation to dreaming, he gave great importance to the ability of imagination. To imagine (*yatakhayal*), the mind/soul (*al-nafs*) had to be distinct from or beyond the body (*jism*). This placed dreams more within the realm of the soul or spirit. He believed that certain knowledge from the unseen (*al-ghayb*) could be received in dreams but this demanded a balanced body and mind, including total equilibrium in the four humours. However, to him the universal God was more concerned with the unfolding of the greater world and not the individual particulars of people. Dreams, therefore, could be individually examined to understand the particular problems of a dreamer. This made dreams part of everyday health conditions. However, he warned about the tendency to link images in a one-dimensional or linear way. To him there was a clear distinction between accidental and essential dream content and the medical practitioner should be able to know the difference. Avicenna could therefore already be seen as a proper dualist who saw mind and body as two separate entities. Philosophy was a science of the mind or soul and thus a primary science. Medicine and medical dream analysis belonged to the secondary sciences such as astrology. Avicenna saw himself primarily as a theoretical philosopher. However, because the body and soul needed each other for their existence, - the soul giving life to the body and the body giving the substance for the soul to exist - he also saw fit to become widely involved in the practice of medicine and the medical interpretation of dreams.



Avicenna, Canon of Medicine, NLM MS A53, fol. 368b

Other writers from the Muslim world had to deal with Avicenna's major contribution from then on. **Abū I-Walīd Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Rušd** (1126 - 1198 CE), or **Averroes** in Latin, followed Avicenna in writing extensively on natural philosophy and medicine. He wrote a medical encyclopaedia (*Kulliyat*), for example, and compiled all the works of Galen for the Muslim world. Also important is the fact that he strengthened the dualistic view on dreams - separating body and mind to understand dreams. To him people had a divine soul which they shared with all humans and an individual soul that was not eternal. He thus tried to reconcile Aristotle with Islam while criticizing Avicenna for distorting pure Aristotelian thought with Plato's theory of ideas.

By the fourteenth century **Abū Zayd 'Abdu i-Rahman bin Muhammad bin Khaldūn Al-Hadrami** (1332-1406 CE) or **Al-Khaldun**, softened the dualism a bit by stating that dreams were merely images created by the mind's predisposition for imagination. These images were originally stored inside the mind via a process of perception. To these images the ability of clear thinking was then applied by the mind in absence of further sense perception whenever the observer fell asleep. This reminds us strongly of a modern neuro-scientific view of dreams.

However, by the fifteenth century, in spite of the blooming of new ideas in the European Renaissance, it seems that the dynamism and inventiveness of Muslim medical sciences and natural philosophy had started to dwindle. Prophetic medicine took over from Aristotelian essence and most Muslim writers on health and healing ended up being clerics rather than philosophers or physicians. Practices mentioned in the Qur'an took precedence over natural views, and diagnosis and healing focussed on a pious diet, moral lifestyle, bloodletting, prayers and invocations.

While the Muslim world was open to a healthy balance between the spiritual and bodily effects of dreaming during the first millennium CE, it eventually developed a resistance against natural body processes in favour of strict divinely inspired control.



a screen and partition

"The corporeal element in man is a large screen and partition that prevents him from perfectly perceiving abstract ideals; this would be the case even if the corporeal element were as pure and superior as the substance of the spheres; how much more must this be the case with our dark and opaque body. However great the exertion of our mind may be to comprehend the Divine Being or any of the ideals, we find a screen and partition between God and us." Guide for the Perplexed, by Moses Miamonides

The Judaic view on dreams during the Middle Ages similarly regarded dreams as divine communications best understood by prophets. Although people could interpret dreams, the final analysis rested with God. It was accepted, however, that dreams may contain falsehoods, depending upon the level of righteousness of the dreamer. This meant that some credit was given to the inner world of the dreamer.

In fact, by the time of the writings of Maimonides we again see an Aristotelian tendency to divide dreams into categories according to their function and source. The everyday individual type of dream interpretation was now a counterpart to the opposing view that dreams were based on the Talmud. Either a person is shown in his or her dreams that which is somehow contained in daytime senses and thoughts, or dreams could be a pure form of prophecy:

"...Sovereign of the Universe, I am Thine and my dreams are Thine..."

Two works that had a great influence on the Jewish approach to dreams during early medieval times were the Zefer Yetzirah (*"Book of Creation,"* ספר יצירה) and the Zohar (*"Splendour,"* זוהר). Here dreams were interpreted according to their truth and falsehood as well as whether they derived from evil forces or from the soul of a righteous person.

Modern scholars disagree on the origin of both works. The Zefer Yetzirah is traditionally ascribed to the patriarch Abraham, but some modern historians believe it might have an early medieval origin. The Zohar is seen as a book on the mystical aspects of the Torah that probably originated during the 2nd century CE (at least in its oral form). It addresses the true nature of God, the origin of the universe and the relation of the soul to and 'true self' to the God.

However, many of the more classical rabbis, including **Maimonides** (1135 C.E- 1204) viewed the mystical or philosophical slant of these works as superstitious and a violation of pure Judaic Talmudic principles. Maimonides was considered to be the greatest physician of his time. He tried to reconcile the natural viewpoint of Aristotle with the teachings of the Torah. He defined two types of intelligent mind: one that is dependent on the body and its material nature and another that is independent of the body, - an emanation from a universal mind or intellect (*noûs poietikós*). To Miamonides there would always be a 'screen and partition' (his own words in his fascinating work 'Guide of the Perplexed') between the divine being and the human mind. This screen is the corporeal body. Because of this screen, he did not believe that dreams could bring new knowledge exclusively from an outer divine source. Although he did not attribute cognitive significance to dreams in the sense of an analytical process which could introduce new ideas or knowledge which was not previously known, he accepted that even prophetic dreams happened because of the attention that was given to the detail and the knowledge that the dreamer already had of the will of God. Dreams, to him, were also more a function of the imagination, which was the storeroom of daily sensual and mental impressions. Here we notice a similarity to the outlook of Avicenna and of modern neuroscientists.

Unfortunately, Miamonides' view was not well-accepted in the more traditional circles, and as late as the thirteenth century scholars like Jacob of Marvège (late 12th-13th century), a saintly cabbalist from France, saw dreams as a form of direct communication from God. He accepted that one would be granted answers in dreams, but only after seclusion and prayer.

Maimonides' work led to a lot of intellectual debate amongst the late Medieval Jewish scholars. On the one hand there was still the idea that in order for someone to be a prophet, and thus have prophetic visions or dreams, God must intervene. He, on the other hand, believed that anyone has the potential to be a prophet by building an inner understanding of God through study, meditation and will - by developing a prophetic state of mind. He defined two types of intelligent mind: one that is dependent on the body and its material nature and another that is independent of the body and an emanation from a universal mind or intellect (*noûs poietikós*).

In his work, *Responsa Radbaz*, he wrote: "O Supreme King, great, mighty, and revered God... command the holy angels charged with replying to questions in a dream to give a true and correct reply to the question I ask before Thy throne of Glory"

Again we see the need to reduce the dualistic tension between dreams originating from the body and dreams coming from an independent mind by accepting the universal and overriding authority of a divine principle or God that is in charge of both.

to whatever it burns...



"As the one fire, after it has entered the world, though one, takes different forms according to whatever it burns, so does the internal Ātman of all living beings, though one, take a form according to whatever He enters and is outside all forms." (Katha Upanishad, 2.2.9)

Discussing the relationship of people with the unknown and its effect on dreams in Indian culture

during the medieval stage is not possible in a few paragraphs, and definitely beyond my ability and overall knowledge. It would need extensive essays just to integrate the diversity and evolution in the major schools of thought alone. However, it is imperative at least to include a few notes about a culture where the study of consciousness and its effect on everyday life was more comprehensive than anywhere else in the world.

The development of consciousness from a wonder-reason perspective in classical India was quite similar to that of classical Greece and Persia, and in most Indian schools of thought there seems to be no clear difference between classical and medieval attitudes towards the wonder-reason interaction. I have the impression that the search for pure knowledge and the complex conscious exploration of the unknown demanded such advanced thought patterns that a simple either-or interpretation was predominantly absent.

There was also not a single, comprehensive principle in Hinduism that distinguished it from Buddhism or Jainism in terms of our bio-analytic exploration of dream interpretation. The reason could be the fact that the concept of *Pramāna*, which was more concerned with the gaining of accurate knowledge, rather than emotional or moral faith, was central to all Indian philosophy. In other words, in India, even more than in other medieval cultures, close scrutiny reveals again the need to limit an emotional sense of self and reduce the unbearable tension between the impulsive desires that arose from human arrogance in the face of nature, on one hand, and a deep respect for the logical order and foresight that became associated with the unknown on the other.

Here in India the notion of an unaffected absolute was carried by the essential principles of **Brahman** as highest Universal Principle or Ultimate Reality - the innate essence of everything that exists inside, outside and everywhere - and **Ātman** as eternal self - an innermost and absolute soul. They were central to the Indian explanation of the cosmos and its relationship with human consciousness, and never represented a true transcendent-immanent split. Indian culture always accepted an unchanging oneness in all existence, universal as well as personal. Even so, some schools of thought in late medieval times saw **Brahman** - especially in the theistic form of Brahma - as eternal reality in a conceptual framework similar to a transcendental divine, a primordial reality that created, maintained and also withdrew within the universe. This could resonate to some degree with the view of other medieval cultures. However, to many other schools of thought Brahman was identical to Ātman and thus also inside every living being. Buddhism even rejected the idea of an eternal self altogether and adopted the doctrine of *anatta* or 'non-self', accepting that belief in a universal soul was the source of *dukkha* (suffering and pain) and that essential being was 'emptiness'.

Historically, the diverse schools of thought that flourished in classical and medieval India were divided into two groups, the *āstika* and *nāstika*. The *āstika* or orthodox schools of thought saw the Vedic scriptures with the premise that *ātman* exists as authoritative, while those schools that did not accept the authority of the Vedas were classified as the *nāstika*. Amongst the *āstika* the most prominent schools of thought recognized a dualistic unknown or universe where matter (*prakṛti*) and consciousness (*puruṣa*) were distinct realities - consciousness here a cosmic spirit and not mere individual awareness. Fusion of the two led to 'intellect' (*buddhi*) and the emergence of ego consciousness (*aḥaṣkāra*) in living beings. Practically,

for well-being, a human being needed a vast knowledge about his or her essential existence, and given the limited time and energy available, he or she should at least learn a fraction of true reality in the quest for liberation (moksha).

This made dreaming important in the realization of the principles mentioned above. In the Mandukya Upanishad, which is part of the Vedic scriptures, dreaming was described as one of three distinct states that the self or soul

experienced during a lifetime, along with the waking state and the sleep state. Dreams were also given two distinct meanings: one where dreams were expressions of inner desires and the other where the soul leaves the body and is guided from beyond personal consciousness until the body awakens again.

As in other medieval cultures the idea of a personal good-evil choice became part of the conscious relationship with the unknown and thus also of the handling of dreams. Dreams were seen as having

auspicious benefits or inauspicious effects according whether the dreamer's karma was in a state of maturity or of retributive justice. They could thus be linked to the level of concentrated thought of the dreamer as well as to future events. To understand and use the second kind of dreaming, complex or appealing rites were often necessary, while for the first kind concentration to see through the underlying processes that created the images was enough.

The medieval Buddhist philosophers [Nagarjuna](#) (~200 CE), [Vasubandhu](#) (4-5th century CE) and [Candrakirti](#) (7th century CE) wrote extensively on the rejection of *ātman* in favour of the doctrine of *anatta* and about how the belief in a concept of self caused a state of *Avidya* (ignorance) and prevented true emptiness (*Śūnyatā*). Nagarjuna's presentation of dreams also formed the basis of available knowledge during the third and fourth century in India.

In Buddhism, especially, the development of a discriminating mind with untainted insight through tranquillity and concentration became a crucial element in the proper use of dreams. Although emotions were seen as illusions to be liberated from, dreams were not illusions, only depictions of the illusory world. It was the responsibility of the dreamer to remain in a state of self-awareness while dreaming and to purify dream images from personal suffering and bondage.

Thus, here the notion that all human beings and living creatures had the same essence of reality as the objective universe was adopted to fulfil the need for human consciousness to liberate itself from the tension between wonder and reason. Uncorrupted self-knowledge about such an invisible and pure absolute is necessary to understand all human experience, including that of dreams.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa or Srimad Bhagavatam from sixth to eighth CE [Vedanta](#) literature confirms the personal responsibility for dream content that is inherent to the Indian mindset: "When the living entity awakes from deep sleep, he is the same person. This is certain because of four proofs: 1) the living entity continues his unfinished karma, 2) he retains memory of his identity, 3) the scriptures so describe him as returning to the same body, and 4) he is bound by the scriptural injunctions (i.e. it is enjoined that the jiva cannot attain liberation while in the state of deep sleep, so he is obliged by sastra to return to the body from that state." (Vedic Scriptures 3.2.9; Srimad Bhagavatam 11.3.39, 11.13.27,28)



beyond the eight borderlands...

"My body is in accord with my mind, my mind with my energies, my energies with my spirit, my spirit with nothing. Whenever the minutest existing thing or the faintest sound affects me, whether it is far away beyond the eight borderlands, or close at hand between my eyebrows and eyelashes, I am bound to know it. However, I do not know whether I perceived it with the seven holes in my head and my four limbs, or knew it through my heart and belly and internal organs. It is simply self-knowledge." (Liezi Chap. 4, tr. Graham 1990:77-78)

Early medieval China saw profound adaptations in conscious experience, resulting in the secure logic of Han Confucianism. However, soon renewed attention to 'Learning about the mysterious Dao' or *xuanxue* (玄學) began to also increase a sense of wonder, in concert with the well-ordered and rational moral code of Confucius. *Xuan* implies the profound wonder or mystery of a universal transcendent and creative principle and *xuanxue* refers to the study of the unfathomable. As in the West, the fragmentation of secure social and political structures inspired people to search for an incorruptible transcendental certainty. The rituals and morality sanctioned by the old sages as well as the morality of Han Confucianism did not work that well anymore. Actually, the orthodox teaching of the sages and classical works was not rejected, but merely opened up into a metaphysics that allowed for intellectual discourse, leading to the 'golden age' of the Zhengsi period. However, even with this new interest in the abstract and obscure, leading scholars in China never moved away from their commitment to everyday ethics, order and harmony. The result was a new united China, starting from the Sui dynasty (589 CE) and peaking during the Tang dynasty, which became the most sophisticated society in medieval times.

Early Chinese philosophy can be divided into: the ancient (ca. 1000 BCE-588 CE), the medieval (589-959 CE) and the Renaissance (from 960 CE). Ancient Chinese philosophy, (like that of the Greeks) was dominated by a spirit of fundamental humanism rather than a theistic world view. Medieval Chinese philosophy was dominated by the soul-seeking contemplation of the Daoist and diverse Buddhist teachings, with the Daoist doctrines of 'non-being' (wu) and self-abstention (*wuyu*) rendering the Buddhist 'emptiness' (*sunyata*) and self-deial (*wuwo*) more acceptable to the Chinese mind. The Renaissance of Chinese philosophy lasted nearly a thousand years and mainly revolved around an opposition between Neo-Confucianism with its theoretical exploration of mind (*xin*), reason (*li*), human nature (*xing*) and life force (*qi*), and classic Confucianism with its emphasis on practical and moral handling of society.

Two main philosophical issues of the time had direct bearing on the handling of dream content. One was the relationship between "words" (yan 言) and "meaning" (yi 意) and the other between a person's "capacity" (cai 才) and inborn "nature". Philosophy always had a practical and social aim. In fact, the 'Yangzhu' chapter of a Daoist text of uncertain origin, the Liezi, indicated that it was pointless to challenge the unalterable and mysterious Dao, for all that a human being could obtain through his or her own effort was a life of comfort, enjoyment and material abundance.

It is impossible to find the exact word for *xuan* in translation. It is actually a colour depicting heaven, and the Yijing 易經 (Book of Changes), states that "heaven is *xuan* and earth is yellow."

At the same time Buddhism flourished once it reached China from India via the Silk Road, a lucrative trade

route. Buddhism provided the emotional stage that the Chinese people needed during those chaotic times of barbarian invasion. However, it was tempered with the social order of Confucianism while also assimilating the mystic symbolism of Daoism. This threefold combination created a form of Buddhism in China that inspired a new literature and philosophy based on harmony between inner and outer worlds. Furthermore, all phenomena were seen as interconnected and interdependent, stretching over time and place. Chinese Buddhism thus managed to inspire both ordinary people as well as metaphysical scholars.

There is popular saying that Chinese people are Confucian during the day and Daoist at night. This seemingly comfortable split between practical and poetic outlook was also visible in their handling of dream content.

An intuitive acceptance of an inner source for dreaming allowed the search for meaning to enter into the daily experience of order and wonder. Dreams, in the Liezi, were classified according to the waking state associated with the dream. There was the neutral dream associated with a waking state free of strong emotion. Then there was the nightmare with a state of panic or fear, the dream of longing in a time of continual thinking, a happy dream when joy was experienced, and the sleeping dream that took over from a waking state of daydreaming.

Dreams were also seen as knowledge that was free from time and space. However, a dream image, like any other symbolic sign, was influenced by the dreamer's mind and would be an omen only when it became part of the dreamer's conscious attention. Especially when dreams were interpreted in terms of health, the feeling after the dream was seen to be as important as the content. In the lives of ordinary people dream interpretation was thus often still handled in a shamanistic way where the 'healer' acted as mediator between the dimensions of spiritual and ordinary life. Dreaming related to the unknown as a spiritual or religious principle was seen as more complex, and dreams might leave the dreamer with a sense of evil and good beyond personal need. Dealing with this ambiguous aspect of dreams was more relevant in the lives of spiritual practitioners who aimed for perfection than in those of ordinary people. The fundamental aim here was to become liberated from illusory concepts of oneself and to untangle the self from daily influences.

So, although medieval Chinese culture did not try to refer dreams to a divine entity free of human dualism, it still linked dreams to an unfathomable creative principle that was beyond human scrutiny and just had to be accepted.



oracle or illusion...

"May God turn every dream to good for us! For to my mind it is a wonder, by the cross, what causes dreams by night or by morning; and why some are fulfilled and some not; why this one is a vision, and this a revelation; why this is one kind of dream, and that one is another, and not the same to everyone; why this one is an illusion and that one is an oracle." Geoffrey Chaucer, House of Fame

It is clear that in medieval times people still struggled

to deal with the vulnerability of conscious reasoning and logic when facing the mysterious and unpredictable. In placing a high value on obedience to divine law and command, they also needed potent images for those experiences that caused harm and seemed to be evil. In the West, nature and the bodily desires that were associated with a mother goddess or the creative goddesses of previous conscious stages were no longer seen as positive, but rather projected either onto a mythical dragon - an exaggeration of the serpent

Chinese medical scholar Lei Xiao (AD 420-477) wrote *"For using dragon's bones, first cook odorous plants; bathe the bones twice in hot water, pound them to powder and put this in bags of gauze. Take a couple of young swallows and, after taking out their intestines and stomach, put the bags in the swallows and hang them over a well. After one night take the bags out of the swallows, rub the powder and mix it into medicines for strengthening the kidneys. The efficacy of such a medicine is as if were divine!"* Kidney *yin* deficiency is related to bizarre dreams.

consort - or upon personal daemons that lurked in dreams and illness. In the East, however, where the receptive energy of nature was less threatening and complimented an outlook of 'dualistic monism', both the serpent and dragon kept their mythical representation of wisdom, maintaining its role as 'the way that brings eternal change'.

In terms of dream interpretation, most cultures similarly dealt with the wonder-reason-conflict by placing dreams beyond both wonder or reason, beyond the miracles of nature and beyond the playground of personified gods. Parallel to the way in which the sun moved to the centre of people's universe, the inner light of the soul also started to become the essence of people's conscious connection with the unknown. But, just as the sun could only be experienced through its matter-less rays before the era of telescopes, so too the soul could only be experienced as if originating from a matter-less source beyond the senses of the human body.

In other words, although dreams were no longer vague messages from invisible gods 'out there', they were still words spoken to and from an exalted soul; a soul worthy of communication with a supreme being 'out there'. Even in those cultures that did not conceive of an immortal soul free of bodily restraints, dreams were still associated with a mysterious sense of being that was beyond the endeavours of the body and mind of an individual human. As the soul became more abstract and immortal, so the relationship with the content of dreams also became abstract and free of time and place. What was good became the voice of God, angels or *xuan*. All of this was beyond human functioning and thus could not play out in everyday life. Those dream images and their effects which were unacceptable became vague daemons and had to be repressed back inside - hidden from real life and preferably from the dreamer him/herself.

However, ordinary people and medical philosophers could not avoid working with the value and accuracy of dreaming in everyday life. When dreams were not unmistakably prophetic and thus from a divine realm, they had to be ascribed to the dreamer's imaginative mind. It was the only way dreams could be neither from the body, nor from the outside. By the late Middle Ages writers like **Chaucer** portrayed dreams as if they cannot come from the divine without aid from human imagination. A different sense of consciousness appeared, and we notice an increasing aspiration in people to think for themselves and to gain freedom from this reign of the 'divine'.

Similarly to this historical stage in human conscious development, many individuals currently consciously take on nature and its unknown with a dualistic sense of self that is based upon a division between spirit

and matter, between divine rule and human limitation, between good and evil. Dreams and their content are either used as prophetic and thus beyond any personal input, on the one hand, or treated as unimportant messages that interfere with daily life. The tension between wonder and reason is still partially in the hands of a greater universal unknown, which could influence dreams and their effect as if from 'outside'.

However, we also see the early signs of a subsequent view where the dualistic nature of dreams is completely associated with the realm of an individual mind in ordinary human beings, and dreams either become rational explanations of an unconscious imagination, or random consequences of everyday brain activity.

Images :

- The Church, the Bride of Christ and Mother of the Faithful in Baptism. Illustration to *Scivias* II.3, fol. 51r from the 20th-century facsimile of the Rupertsberg manuscript, c. 1165–1180.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meister_des_Hildegardis-Codex_004.jpg
- Avicenna from the Canon of Medicine Psychology in medieval Islam. The Book of Healing Philosopher Islamic Golden Age, ibn al-qayyim calligraphy PNG clipart.
- Depiction of Maimonides teaching students about the 'measure of man'.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Measure_of_men.jpg
- Bhagavata Purana:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bhagavata_Purana,_translated_by_E._Burnouf_Wellcome_L0020721.jpg
- Ngarjuna, conqueror of the Serpent:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nagarjuna_Conqueror_of_the_Serpent.jpg
- Central Asian monk teaching East-Asian monk; China, 9th century.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Central_Asian_Buddhist_Monks.jpeg
- Copernicus sun
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Planisphaerium_Ptolemaicum_siue_machina_orbium_mundi_ex_hypotesi_Ptolemaica_in_plano_disposita_\(2709983277\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Planisphaerium_Ptolemaicum_siue_machina_orbium_mundi_ex_hypotesi_Ptolemaica_in_plano_disposita_(2709983277).jpg)

Also see:

[Do we dare to dream](#)

[Do we dream to live](#)

[Dreamt into Existence](#)

[The Goddess Speaketh](#)

[Between Wonder and Reason](#)

[The Light of Reason](#)