

Retreats, Dreams: New Transpersonal Research

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Preliminary results of a research programme using qualitative methods to investigate the role of dreams as an indicator of change in people's transformation process whilst on a spiritual retreat are summarised and discussed below. The qualitative analysis involves a thematic content analysis from the dreams of 21 retreatants from a total of 420 days of retreat, and representing a corpus of some 900 dreams. The results presented in sections 3 and 4 below are only a brief summary of the major findings.

Whilst the subject of dreams has received considerable attention over the past few decades through cultural, clinical, social and psychological studies, the literature searches so far have revealed very little information on the subject of dreams on retreat. Clinical studies on the change in consciousness whilst meditating have been reported (Engler, 1984) although no attempt was made to link this with the subject's dream-life within the retreat context. Alchemical studies by Carl Jung (1944, 1954) have shown that dreams can also be used to monitor the stages of transformation in a psychotherapy client. Again, dreams depicting the stages of retreat have not been studied alongside dreams depicting the change of consciousness during the retreat process.

Research Methods

Qualitative, rather than quantitative, research methods are appropriate for studying how the stages of retreat and the state of consciousness experienced are reflected in the retreatant's dreams (Braud & Anderson, 1998). Following each retreat, the dreams were read and re-read until the stages of the retreat process became clear. These stages were then compared with the retreatant's personal record of their experience and with the notes recorded by the guide. Most retreats clearly showed the presence of all four stages in the dreams. In reading the dreams the personal issues and personality aspects had to be put aside whilst considering the themes that reflected the stage of the retreat. A summary of the themes for each stage will be found in Section 3 of this paper. A similar procedure was adopted for examining how the dreams reflected the levels of consciousness attained during the retreat, i.e. particular qualities appearing in the dreams were compared with the retreatant's and the guide's experiences to identify the level of consciousness represented in the dreams. Only the qualities and themes that were common to all retreatants' dreams for a particular level of consciousness were included in the summary of themes, shown in Section 4.

SECTION 2: THE RETREAT ENVIRONMENT

This particular study is concerned with dreams recorded by the subject (the retreatant) whilst on a solo spiritual retreat. The retreatant has no access to reading material or visual stimuli, and remains on silence in a quiet room that has no decoration (plain walls, carpeting). The minimum of lighting is permitted (to read instructions) and an adjacent room is provided for dressing and eating. A bathroom/toilet is also provided for washing. The retreat guide visits the retreatant once a day for approximately 45 minutes. This starts with a silent meditation so that the guide can intuitively pick up a sense of the retreatant's inner world - the guide then shares this verbally with the retreatant. The retreatant then briefly shares their own inner experience of the preceding 24 hours as well as any dreams remembered from the night before. Finally, according to the stage of the retreat process, the guide prescribes spiritual exercises such as meditations, mantras, prayers and psychological or spiritual questions for the retreatant to contemplate/concentrate on. The guide then departs, leaving the retreatant alone for the next 24 hours. A hot, light vegetarian meal is served once a day in the evening whilst for breakfast and lunch the retreatant has access to fruit, cereals, tea, etc. Following this visit, the guide then records the conversations and impressions in a diary. The retreatant then provides a written copy of their dreams and experiences for the guide at the end of the retreat. The retreatant is free to stop the process and leave should he/she so wish. All so far have completed the retreat period they initially committed themselves to fulfil.

The retreats typically can last from six to up to 40 days, during which time the retreatant has the opportunity to explore their inner world and undergo considerable changes in their personality and outlook, as well as having insights into their personal problems. Many record profound inner psychological and spiritual changes on these retreats.

SECTION 3: DREAMS AS AN INDICATOR OF THE SUBJECT'S TRANSFORMATION PROCESS ON RETREAT

There are four basic stages which can be identified in the retreatant's process. These are described below:

Stage One: Turning within

This stage explores the unconscious relationship with the body and the inner psychological life. It includes memories of the past and associated feelings and thoughts that are typically fearful of change and being alone. Obsessive thoughts, claustrophobia, boredom, doubt, and scepticism about the effectiveness of the process also emerge to avoid the inner feelings. There can be anger and frustration because the mind becomes bored with nothing seemingly happening. The retreatant now becomes

conscious of the tension between thoughts directed outwards to the retreat environment and the inward pull of their inner thoughts and feelings.

Dreams recorded during this stage involve a descent into the unconscious and a confrontation with the shadow. Whilst they are often dark and chaotic to begin with they appear to end with dreams of death or dying.

Contact with the unconscious is made through body sensations and the emergence of the more primitive instincts of the psyche: sexuality, aggression, jealousy, envy and splits in their inner world, distorted relationships with the inner feminine/inner masculine, usually come up. Images of animals, reptiles are also frequently experienced. In short, all the usual psychological problems that one sometimes encounters in the therapeutic setting are experienced in the retreat in this first stage and they are reflected in the subject's dreams. The end of this stage is characterised by a lessening and disappearance of these powerful instinctual thoughts, feelings, images and sensations that emerged from the unconscious. This is reflected in the dream imagery and the dreams become clearer and more balanced.

In many cases, the completion of this stage is indicated by dreams of or intimation of sexual union.

Stage Two - The subtle self

Now there is less of a dominance of conscious personal thoughts, ie the conscious mind becomes quieter and more receptive to their inner world as the retreatant begins to move through a series of more subtle states of consciousness. These states are described under section 4 of this paper. The deeper one probes the quieter, the clearer, the more receptive and yet more alive one feels. It is as though the conscious contact with their inner world has enabled them to become conscious of new qualities and a sense of renewal of spirit (energy). Some subjects report experiences of seeing different coloured lights, some extremely intense, hearing inner sounds and seeing a mixture of personal and impersonal imagery emerge spontaneously into the conscious mind.

Instead of the ego disintegrating as a result of a relative absence of environmental stimulation, a stronger and more stable inner sense of self emerges, independent of their environment, relationships and life circumstances. The nature of this new self is reflected in their dreams, ie as they extricate themselves from the tangled and often confusing relationships with people in their lives (past and present) and their identification with their life's problems, their dreams become simpler, lighter and more beautiful, and their self is experienced in terms of a few simple qualities instead of roles and responsibilities.

Now the dreams show a greater subtlety of colour, harmony and this stage usually ends with dreams of marriage - often a white wedding (particularly for those from a

European culture). Also, symbols of snow, white doves, white light appear in the dreams. Dreams of death or people dying follow - in some cases it is the subject's personal death - and this seems to be about the death of their individual separateness from life.

Stage Three: The transcendent state

For retreatants who have had previous experience of retreat, this stage is experienced more consciously. Otherwise, it seems to be unconsciously by-passed, or experienced as an "empty" stage of the retreat.

Stage three begins with an increasing sense of detachment and impersonalness. This is followed by a disintegration of the ego/personality as retreatants find themselves repeatedly "blinking out", having difficulty in concentrating and difficulty even in focusing on any particular thought. Initially, it is experienced as a kind of death of the ego and the conscious mind. This gives way to experiences of completely impersonal imagery that do not seem to be related to the retreatant's personal life. The dreams do have some personal element, such as showing the dreamer to be very innocent or very young (often naked) and yet they are often clearly about other people. Upon exploring the dreams with retreatants, the dreams seem to give them greater insight into other people's problems and the general nature of such problems, as though it were an intuitive archetype or an aspect of their inner life which is emerging as a mirror in which to see the world more clearly.

Stage three also has a transcendental feel to it, as though, according to the retreatants, one is "beyond existence", an experience of timelessness. There is little sense of individuality at this stage, as retreatants experience long periods of virtually no thoughts whilst waves of very subtle gentle feelings pass through them. This inner life becomes as real as the outer physical world.

Few retreatants seem to complete stage three consciously and instead most experience periods of blanking out or unconsciousness and later seem to have moved into the fourth stage, where they begin to experience the stage of reconciling with their physical world, their bodies, and their personal lives.

Stage Four: Awakening in life

Stage four is experienced as a return to the external world and involves a descent of consciousness from the very subtle down to that of the physical body. The dreams show themes of aircraft landing on the ground, eating, celebrating over a meal, being back in their personal life again and of being in city landscapes. It is as though the retreat cycle is being completed as their consciousness returns from its attention to their inner world to re-unite with the outer world, without losing the connection with their inner essence/experience.

To sum up, these dreams reveal the existence of a four stage retreat process, in which the change in their inner world is retained right through to the end of the retreat and beyond, i.e. the subject does not revert back to their original state of conscious awareness (when they began their retreat). Post-retreat interviews show that something of this inner transformation/change lasts in the retreatant for several years after the retreat. This is more emphasised in the case of long retreats.

SECTION 4: DREAMS AS AN INDICATOR OF INCREASINGLY SUBTLE LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SUBJECT

Another distinct feature of the dreams on retreat has been the changes in level of subtlety in the dreams as the retreat progresses from stage 1 to stage 3. It seems there are at least seven major degrees or levels of subtlety characterised by the qualities experienced in the dream through the characters and the background landscape. These correspond closely with the retreatant's experience of an increasingly subtle sense of self as the retreat proceeds. For example, in the early stages of retreat, it is as though the retreatant has entered the dark underworld of their inner life. Later, this changes to move beyond this underworld through to a more subtle, innocent and almost angelic sense in the dream and in the sense of self. Later, in some cases, this is followed by a very subtle sense of being beyond the existential state, i.e. the sense of the dreams (and the sense of self) having a timeless, very pure and impersonal quality to them. In stage 4 the dreams show a progression in which the contents of the previous stages are carried through into this culminating fourth stage, a return to the physical world.

The notion of dreams on retreat as an indicator of the seven possible levels of consciousness that can be attained emerged by comparing the dream material and experiences of the retreatant and the guide with the classical seven levels outlined in a variety of spiritual traditions (see references 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9).

The seven levels, which are all beyond the usual scope of waking consciousness, are identified by the following characteristics/qualities:

1. Level one:
the
instinctual
mind/self
Dreams are quite chaotic, showing the instinctual nature. Themes are a mix of fears, oppression, sexual conflicts, temptations. Whilst the retreatant is often conscious of these themes, through mental images, thoughts and feelings in the waking state, they also experience drowsiness and poor concentration as though they are in a trance-like state. Stage 1 of the process.
2. Level two:
creative
mind/self
The mind becomes very clear and creative. The retreatant feels more awake and alive. Dreams show the artistic and creative side, humour, creativity and a greater clarity. Instinctual nature disappears from the dream content. The mind world, ie the

way they think about people, their personal issues, likes and dislikes, are shown in the dreams. This is experienced at the beginning of Stage 2 after the rebirth dreams.

3. Level three: Retreatant becomes innocent. Influence of the mind lessens. Dreams show qualities/themes of beauty and harmony in the loving self people and natural landscapes. A more joyful, loving heart-like nature emerges in the personality. Retreatants feel less connected to the body and more subtle. This is experienced in Stage 2.
4. Level four: Initially encountered themes are negative, ie distortions of the personality are shown in dreams (crookedness of their nature, fear of power, wilfulness, anger, rage). If these issues are acknowledged and resolved in their personal lives following the retreat then in subsequent retreats the dreams show themes like justice, wisdom, compassion, truthfulness. The retreatant initially experiences a real struggle of dark versus light, between the distortions in their personality and their deeper inner (soul) nature. Resolution of this struggle is often shown by dreams of celebration, carnival, festivals, etc. Now the retreatant starts to feel more peaceful and is still in Stage 2.
5. Level five: Issues of self image come up. Feelings of being unworthy of the spiritual quest. Dreams show innocent children in them, the angelic/ religious self along with religious symbols like the cross, churches, altars, etc. Later, qualities of peacefulness, sacredness, splendour (of a landscape) emerge. The retreatant begins to feel ecstatic and yet it is contained inwardly.
6. Level six: Retreatant becomes very detached, impersonal, complete disinterest in body, outside world. Feels very pure, inside. the pure self Dreams initially show landscapes of snow, white doves, etc. This Stage 2 culminates with dreams of weddings or marriage.
7. Level seven: There is a seventh level beyond the above mentioned six levels which is characterised as completely impersonal, out of life, and has a transcendental, quality beyond existence to it. the transcendent state (Timeless.) The start of this state is indicated by dreams of the subject (retreatant) dying. A few of the more experienced retreatants have reported having seemingly unconnected and unworldly images flash in front of them. The sense of self begins to disintegrate. This is Stage 3 in the process.

As the retreatant completes the fourth and final stages of the retreat process, these levels of subtlety are encountered in the reverse order and yet something of their profoundness and depth is retained by the end of the retreat, i.e. the retreatant goes away with a deeper understanding of themselves and a more profound and deep stable sense of self that is now relatively independent of the conditions of their life and of their causal origins (family, history, etc). This is to do with the carrying over of a sense of eternity within themselves without it showing any evidence of ego inflation, narcissism or wish fulfilment. There is a firm sense of conviction on the part of the retreatants in follow-up studies that these experiences have lasted, although the intensity of the experience may have diminished with time.

It seems that these levels of subtle consciousness are universal as they are similar in character to the levels of consciousness outlined by the yogis when talking about the mind state (Taimni, 1975), the Buddhists (Bantly, 1992), the Kabbalists (Wills, 1990), the Sufis (Khan, 1922), the Christians (Peers, 1959), the Muslims (Harris, 1981). They reveal something much more fundamental in our human nature, something that is beyond the physical body, the mind and even beyond the soul.

Furthermore, the opening up of each subtle level of consciousness is always preceded by a struggle with personal issues. These issues seem to be consistently related to the inner plane or level of consciousness being opened up to on retreat. Once the issue has been resolved then the "opening" proceeds. If the person cannot resolve the issues, they do not access that level and remain stuck, as one would expect, for instance, in the psychotherapeutic process.

Typical issues that must be resolved before entering the subtle levels associated with the "angelic" sense of self, would be the struggle between dark and light in us, surrendering our personal will to a greater will, distortions of our own truths, distorted sense of self-image, difficulties in forgiveness, resentment, feeling impure in our soul, etc.

The implications of this material for psychotherapy and psychology are enormous. Most psychological and psychotherapeutic models do not speculate beyond the body/mind/emotional dimensions of the human psyche, which, according to the material reported above, limits the inner explorations to a very basic level of consciousness and yet it does not allow the recognition of any other reality, which if it emerges in the client and is reported, is either pathologised as a delusional state or is re-interpreted within the paradigm of the body/mind/emotional model.

This severely restricts the client's ability to reflect upon and integrate important inner experiences that emerge into their consciousness and which could give them a greater understanding of themselves and their life. In recent years, transpersonal models in psychology and psychotherapy have been proposed (Wilber, 1979), (Wilber, Engler & Brown, 1986), (Washburn, 1988) that begin to allow for the possibilities of the existence of such levels of consciousness in the human psyche. It is hoped that this research work will open up a new area of interest in counselling and will contribute to

the further development of such a generally accepted transpersonal model of the human psyche.

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