

Digital Commons @ CIIS

International Journal of Transpersonal Studies Advance Publication Archive

2023

Cognitive Illusion, Lucid Dreaming, and the Psychology of Metaphor in Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen Contemplative Practices

Michael R. Sheehy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/advance-archive>



Part of the Alternative and Complementary Medicine Commons, Cognitive Psychology Commons, Developmental Psychology Commons, Health Psychology Commons, History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons, Human Factors Psychology Commons, Metaphysics Commons, Multicultural Psychology Commons, Other Philosophy Commons, Other Psychiatry and Psychology Commons, Other Psychology Commons, Other Religion Commons, Philosophy of Mind Commons, Philosophy of Science Commons, Psychological Phenomena and Processes Commons, Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons, Somatic Psychology Commons, Theory and Philosophy Commons, and the Transpersonal Psychology Commons

Cognitive Illusion, Lucid Dreaming, and the Psychology of Metaphor in Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen Contemplative Practices

Michael R. Sheehy
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA, USA

A classic set of eight similes of illusion (*sgyu ma'i dpe brgyad*) are employed recurrently throughout Indian and Tibetan Buddhist literature to illustrate the operations of cognition, its correlative perceptions, and experiences that emerge. To illustrate a Buddhist psychology of metaphor, the fourteenth century Tibetan scholar and synthesizer of the Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) or Great Perfection system, Longchen Rabjam Drimé Ödzer (1308-1363), composed his poetic text, *Being at Ease with Illusion*. This work on illusion is the third volume in Longchenpa's *Trilogy of Being at Ease (Ngal gso skor gsum)* in which he presents a series of Dzogchen instructions on how to settle totally at ease. To complement each volume in his trilogy, Longchenpa composed auxiliary contemplative guidance instructions on their meaning (*don khrid*). This article contextualizes Longchenpa's meditation manual on *Being at Ease with Illusion*, a translation of which is included in the appendix. Special attention is given to Dzogchen practices of lucid dreaming and working with cognitive illusions to spotlight underlying contemplative dynamics and correlative psychological effects. To analogically map these Tibetan language instructions in translation, this article interprets Buddhist psychological understandings of cognitive and perceptual processes in dialogue with current theories in the cognitive sciences.

Keywords: Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhist psychology, Dzogchen, Longchenpa, dream, lucid dreaming, illusion, hallucination, metaphor, meditation, contemplative practices

No idea is as ubiquitous across Buddhism as the possibility of awakenment—to be a fully awakened buddha. Yet even among Buddhist traditions, there is little consensus about what awakenment is.¹ For Buddhists, and the psychology that has emerged from Buddhist thought and practice, awakenment is a necessary presupposition. First and foremost, there is the understanding that a human can embody exalted ways of performance in the world that are not distracted, confined, or distorted by ordinary habits of mind. This is understood by these traditions to be an awakened being, a buddha. For reasons particular to their historical encounter, the dialogue between Buddhism and the sciences, including the psychological and cognitive sciences, has largely eschewed awakenment, this topic of central interest to the tradition. Because some Buddhists claims and insights infer metaphysical

content, Buddhist doctrines, including awakenment, have been intentionally bracketed and redacted from the exchange (Lopez, 2010; Sheehy, 2021).

If nothing else, awakenment is claimed to be experienced. As an experience, language is imperative to communicate that experience, making experience and language inextricably intertwined (Richardson & Mueller, 2019). As soon as language is put to work to express experience—to describe and articulate buddhahood, for instance—we are removed from that experience.² Because of this tenuous correlation between experience and language, and the need for language to articulate experience—especially non-normative or ineffable experiences—Buddhists have approached this paradox of language in a variety of ways: poetically, to inspire readers to experience, didactically, to explain experience, instructionally, to induce

experience, and descriptively, to enumerate factors of experience, such as the 32 *mahāpuruṣa lakṣaṇa* or “marks of a great person” and the 80 *anuvyañjana* minor attributes, etc. Buddhists have also relied on the language of metaphors, similes, and examples to describe experience, and in particular, the experience of awakening (Britton et al., 2014; Silvestre-López et al., 2021). This is evident in English translations of the Sanskrit word *bodhi*. The word is often translated as “enlightenment”—a metaphor that means to fill with light, so to shed darkness; *bodhi* is also translated as “awakening”—a translation more accurately resonant with its etymological root *bud*, meaning to “open” or “wake”—but is also a metaphor, meaning to *wake up*, as if one were asleep in the slumber of *saṃsāra*. To be a buddha is metaphorically rendered as the state of having undergone a long deep sleep wherein myriad delusional experiences unfolded, the dreams of *saṃsāra*, and by recognizing *saṃsāra* to be *like a dream*, the dreamer is said to awaken. In the text discussed below, *Being at Ease with Illusion*, Longchenpa used this metaphor to describe awakening, “Like distorted appearances of dreams vanish when waking from sleep; In the primordial ground, manifest awakening occurs.” (Klong chen Rab ‘byams dri med ‘od zer, 2009a, p. 4; Longchenpa, 2018b, p. 10). Practices of dream yoga (*rmi lam rnal ‘byor*) embrace this metaphor via contemplative technique to both riff on the idea that experiences are dream-like as well as utilize the stuff of dreams.

Being at Ease with Illusion

Employing a language of metaphors to the practice and psychology of awakening, Tibetan Buddhist meditation manuals are less keen to describe what awakening is and more to probe what awakening *is like*. To introduce this language of likeness, we draw from *Being at Ease with Illusion*, a contemplative work by the Tibetan scholar and synthesizer of the Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*) system, Longchen Rabjam Drimé Ödzer (1308–1363). This root text and its auto-commentary comprise the third volume in Longchenpa’s (1975, 1976a, 1976b, 2017, 2018a, 2018b) *Trilogy of Being at Ease (Ngal gso skor gsum; 1975, 1976a, 1976b, 2017, 2018a, 2018b)*. The three volumes are organized on the themes of finding rest

or being at ease (*ngal gso*) in the *Nature of Mind (sems nyid)*, *Meditation (bsam gtan)*, and *Illusion (ma’ya’, sgyu ma)*. The underlying philosophy is that there are ways of living in deep relaxation with whatever experientially manifests, and throughout the trilogy, Longchenpa presents a series of Dzogchen instructions on how to be totally at ease. To complement each thematic volume, Longchenpa composed auxiliary contemplative guidance instructions on their meaning (*don khrid*) (Longchen Rabjam, 2004; Longchen, 2014). To discuss specific practices of illusion, we will draw from Longchenpa’s guidance instruction, *A Wish-Fulfilling Gem: Guidance on the Meaning of Being at Ease with Illusion, A Dzogchen Teaching*, translated and included as an appendix (Klong chen Rab ‘byams dri med ‘od zer, 2009d). This paper examines Tibetan Dzogchen practices that work with Buddhist understandings of dream and illusion to shine light on underlying contemplative dynamics and correlative psychological effects.

Eight Similes and Two Facets of Illusion

This third volume in Longchenpa’s trilogy, *Being at Ease with Illusion*, is organized by a classic Buddhist set of eight similes of illusion. Examples of illusion are not confined to this trilogy nor even Tibetan Buddhism but are used recurrently throughout Buddhist literature to illustrate perceptions and experiences. Various examples of illusion in Indian Buddhist literature were eventually codified and enumerated into primary schematics, typically presented in sets of eight or twelve (Westerhoff, 2010). The classic set of eight similes of illusion (*sgyu ma’i dpe brgyad*) is: (1) dream (*rmi lam*), (2) magical illusion (*sgyu ma*), (3) hallucination (*mig yor*), (4) mirage (*smig rgyu*), (5) the moon in water (*chu zla*), (6) an echo (*sgra brnyan* or *brag ca*), (7) castles in the clouds (*dri za’i grong khyer*), (8) apparition (*sprul pa* or *mig ‘phrul*); and a longer set of twelve includes (9) a rainbow (*ja’ tshon*), (10) lightning (*glog*), (11) a bubble (*chu’i chu bu*), and a (12) reflection in a mirror (*me long gi gzugs brnyan*) (Srongs btsan sgam po 2000, pp. 419–420; Yang dgon pa, 2004; Sheehy, 2022). Though instances of similes of illusion exist in Pāli Buddhist literature, these similes are cited throughout Indian Mahāyāna literature, became frequent tropes in the *Prajñāpāramita* or *Transcendent Wisdom* sūtras,

and are often used by Madhyamaka and Yogācāra authors to illustrate emptiness (*śūnyatā*, *stong pa nyid*) and correlative operations of perception. (Emptiness in this context refers to the absence of two kinds of identity (*bdag gnyis kyi ngo bo med pa'i stong pa nyid*): (1) the absence of a personal identity or selfhood (*pudgalanairātmya*, *gang zag gi bdag med*), and (2) the absence of intrinsicity to phenomena (*dharmanairātmya*, *chos kyi bdag med*). Longchenpa's approach employs this well-known set of eight similes to elucidate his practical meditation instructions: "If subsumed into a single profound essence, and definitively joined with practice, these would be explained to be the yoga that is definitively sequenced according to eight similes and two facets of the way of illusion (Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009c, p. 38).

These eight similes (*dpe brgyad*) and the two facets (*rnam pa gnyis*) in which they manifest are the vital points of this practice, and Longchenpa's instruction describes a practice that progressively joins these eight similes with these two facets. Because these eight distinct similes function as examples across a broad range of experiences, a practitioner can switch their use of simile according to circumstances, including factors of time, setting, mood, intensity, and so forth. All eight similes, however, operate within the two distinct facets or modes of the way of illusion (*sgyu ma'i tshul*). Introducing the first facet of illusion, Longchenpa wrote,

In this way, all phenomena of saṃsāra appear to the ordinary mind due to the full force of the habitual propensities of the mind. These are referred to as *illusions of errant cognition* (Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009c, p. 40).

This first facet relates to how perception of the phenomenal world is cognitively perverted—the Tibetan term is *loktok* (*log rtog*), which literally means a *backward idea*, in the sense of an errant cognition. The phrase used throughout Tibetan contemplative literature is *illusions of errant cognition* (*log rtog sgyu ma*), referring to perversions or erroneous conceptions about what is experienced via the sense faculties. According to the *Abhidharmakośa* (La Vallee Poussin, 1990, p. 102), the process of cognitive selectiveness (*vitarka*, *rtog pa*) operates

in tandem with discernment (*vicāra*, *dpyod pa*), the cognitive operation that reflexively apperceives and mediates the contents of consciousness. These conjoined factors couple with the environment to operate along with the five senses to discursively select, examine, and interpret sensory signals about discrete contents of consciousness (Guenther, 1976; Sheehy, 2006). This process of cognitive selection and appraisal couples with its environment through a discursive cognitive process that distorts perception but is not perception per se. An important point here is that the Buddhist sources emphasize a *cognitive errancy* over that of perverted perceptual processes. This errancy is not necessarily due to perceptual capacities, objects of perception, or sense organs being impaired or distorted (such as a blind eye) but rather because subpersonal cognitive processes misinform perceptions. The claim made by Buddhist psychology is that a distortion of perception derives from a cognitive errancy. Operations of mind fundamentally misapprehend and misinterpret *what we believe* to be reality, and hence, we live under the influence of mistaken cognitions that produce cognitive illusions.

Following the Yogācāra school of thought, Longchenpa asserts that cognitive errancy is due to the force of habitual propensities (*vāsanā*, *bag chags*; Waldron, 2003). These propensities are latent subpersonal impressions conditionally propelled from a subliminal consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*, *kun gzhi rnam shes*) to the fore of conscious experience during both waking and sleeping (Germano & Waldron, 2006). These propensities are not mere habits of comfort, convenience, or even preference but congenital creature habits that operate by implicit forces within the neurovisceral and somatosensory systems of the mind-body-world complex. These inveterate habits of errant cognition emerge based on previous moments of consciousness—such as memories, and conditionally triggered reactivities that reemerge from thoughts, vocalizations, and behaviors to form and inform perceptions. Consequently, according to this Buddhist model of mind, cognitive illusions derive their power of pretense and deceit from forces of habit that run deeply in the neurovisceral circuitry of an organism (Waldron, 2002).

Self-Illusion, Body-Illusion

Current neuroscience theories of “predictive coding” and “predictive processing” posit perception to depend on brain-based inferences that have resonance with the concept of *illusions of errant cognition* (Windt, 2018; Laukkonen et al., 2021; Ransom et al., 2020). These theories propose that for an experience to arise, a brain—isolated in a skull—receives a pre-given world based on electrical signals and impulses via the senses that are indirectly related to objects seemingly out there in the world. These sensory signals about the world are processed by perceptual predictions that the brain makes about the world. A brain never directly encounters the sight of a tree or smell of cinnamon or tactility of silk. A brain receives sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches via the sense faculties and bodily organs of sense (Goodman, 2020). These sensory signals about the world are *prediction errors* based on what the brain expects from a perceptual instance.

While a world experienced comes from the outside-in to the extent that it derives from the inside-out, perceptual experiences are not, however, determined by sensory signals, but rather by top-down predictions (Seth, 2021). This means that, rather than cognition depending on signals coming into a brain from an outside world, sensory information about a world depends as much, if not more, on the cognitive predictions and interpretations flowing from the brain about the world. Consequently, cognitions of the world are understood to be filtered, and thereby a kind of informed guess about what sensations detect about a given environment synthesized with prior ideas, memories, predilections, and assumptions about how the world exists. Though signals are received from phenomenal objects sensed in the world, a brain uses prior expectations, memories, and reasoning to predict and interpret the world. Such scientific theories of active inference are emerging in conversation with phenomenological models of meditation (Jamieson, 2016; Pagnoni, 2019; Lutz et al., 2019).

According to these theories, what we perceive is the brain’s best guess about the sensorium of information that it receives about the world. The world is not passively received as it is, but rather, a

perceiver actively generates an experience of being a body in a world based only on interpretations of signals about the world. Subjective experience of a world is a kind of participatory cognitive construction that arises from perceptual predictions and interpretations. These constructive processes result in experiences about the world that are utterly fabricated. The brain predictions that operate the constructive processes of a bodily self in a world are what neuroscientist Anil Seth (2021) calls a *controlled hallucination*.

Here, it is important to clarify the definitions made by these theories about perception and hallucination (Thompson, 2015). A normative definition of perception in the cognitive sciences is a process that emerges when the brain, via dynamic sensorimotor loops that are in constant coupling with the environment, put the organism into contact with the environment. Hallucination is typically understood to be an internally generated perception that emerges when the brain and the sensorimotor loops are compromised in some way, so that endogenously generated processes are not keyed properly to environmental contingencies (Luhmann, 2011). Hallucinations have the quality of perceptions with correlates in the external environment. Strictly, dreams are not hallucinations because they occur in sleep, and illusions are not hallucinations according to this definition either because, though an external stimuli exist, perception of the stimuli is mistaken. This however fits the Buddhist definition of an errant cognition. In a folksy way, hallucinations are experiences of seeing or hearing something that is not present. While overt hallucinations, those recognized as such, tend to be dominantly visual, hallucinations can be auditory or olfactory or otherwise. Hallucinations are thereby contrasted with normal perceptions that reflect experiences of the world as derived from causes in the world. However, both normal perceptions and hallucinations involve internally generated predictions about sensory signals, and both share the same neural mechanisms (Seth, 2021). Therefore, the difference between a normal perception and a hallucination is a matter of the degree of prediction error. In this way, the everyday perceptual inferences that a brain

makes constantly to predict a world are perceptual processes controlled by causes in the world. What Seth calls a *controlled hallucination* as opposed to an uncontrolled hallucination, such as a drug-induced hallucination, is that during a controlled hallucination, there is agreement about the content of the hallucination. As Seth (2021) has suggested, to take this theory to its furthest conclusion, what we call reality is a shared everyday consensual hallucination.

According to *Being at Ease with Illusion*, hallucinations are not mere trickery. The sense of being a unified autonomous self is constructed from the five aggregates that include myriad previous moments of consciousness—propelled by habitual tendencies—from memories, impressions made by social and environmental interactions, and so forth, to at once make an embodied self, a narrative self, a volitional self, a social self, and so forth (Davis & Thompson, 2014; Struhl, 2020). For instance, in the *Connected Discourses* or *Samyutta Nikāya* in the Pāli sūttas, five similes describe the five psycho-physical aggregates (*skandhas*, *phung po*) that comprise a self,

The body is like a ball of foam,
feeling is like a bubble,
perception is like a mirage,
impressions are like a plantain trunk,
consciousness is like an illusion
(Johansson, 1970, p. 69).

Each of the five factors aggregating a self are understood to be transitory and fallacious because the self is an ongoing dynamical process that is constructed and enacted. Though debated in early Buddhism, the Buddhist view that prevailed is that the self is an ongoing process of construction that co-emergently enacts an identity with a world. So, the self is not an illusion per se, the view of other Indian philosophies, but rather a continuum of dynamic transitory processes that are each distinctly, as well as in their aggregate, *like* a ball of foam, bubble, mirage, plantain trunk, and *like an illusion*. The Indic Buddhist imaginaire extends these similes beyond the subjectivity of an illusory self to encompass the domain of objective phenomena; if the self is *like an illusion*, so is the world in which

the self is embedded and enactive (Varela, 2016).

For Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions in Tibet, a core bodily sense of self is ground zero for epistemological access to awakening via meditative technique. As the Tibetan contemplative Yangonpa Gyaltzen Pel (1213–1258) stated in his explanation of the subtle yogic body, “Moreover, if one doesn’t understand the actual abiding nature of the body, one cannot understand the vital point of the meaning of meditation (Yang dgon pa, 1976, p. 423). Building on the primacy of the body, Yangonpa went on to state that if one does not understand the body, one cannot understand the mind.

The sense of being a self in a world is very much a bodily and embodied sense. Owning a body is a primary feature of being an embodied being. We feel that we are located where our body is located. We *feel* that we see the world through its eyes and *touch* the world through its skin. To perceive a particular body as one’s body is called *own-body perception* (Mandrigin & Thompson, 2015; Seth & Tsakiris, 2019; Thompson, 2015). This experience is a sense of ownership over the phenomenal self and its body. A distinction is made between the sense of ownership for one’s body as an object of perception, the *body-as-object*, and the sense of ownership for one’s body through which one perceives the world, the *body-as-subject*. The *body-as-subject* is the embodied subjectivity of being in a world in contrast to the body perceived as one object among other objects from within a world. The *body-as-object* is delineated by four factors: (1) Own-Body Perception felt as, “This body is mine.”; (2) Bodily Self-Experience or Agency felt as, “I’m the one moving my body”; (3) Self-Location felt as, “I’m in my body”; and (4) Egocentric Perception felt as, “I see the world from inside my body.” The habitual propensities that Longchenpa references are formed in part by orientations of the *body-as-object*, including these four factors of being a body that feels ownership, has agency, is spatially located, and inhabits a perspective. These propensities derive from interactive dynamics of a mind-body-world complex to shape how the mind orients the body in an environment.

Embodied beings perceive the world from a particular point of view, most often determined

by the body's location. One's body is also an object to be perceived, with their foot, arm or other parts as their own. Bodily awareness includes perceiving one's body, sensing that this body is one's own, and identifying with how one operates bodily experience and bodily agency (Mandrigin & Thompson, 2015). For instance, humans are bipedal, and perceive the world from a certain height with two eyes side-by-side in a head with an ear on each side, a nose in its center, a tongue inside a mouth, and so forth. This basic bodily orientation lives with frequencies of light and sounds, aromas, the weight of gravity, and so on, so that what we perceive are human-specific experiences (Viveiros de Castro, 2012). In so doing, habits are formed about how the body is oriented in an environment, the purview of an optical field, distance of objects according to the length of an arm or leg, which contribute to how a body cognizes and perceives itself in dynamic coupling with an environment. These features are present in own-body perceptions even if the person reports experiencing themselves not as having a body, but as being a droplet or a point of light (Thompson, 2015). Affordances emerging from these dynamic interactions of mind-body-world inform habits of consciousness that in turn shape who we are and how we behave. To be human is to live under the influence of implicit habitual patterns, the source of illusions of errant cognition.

Own-body perceptions are visual-spatial, navigable through space, and vertical up-down. These features of embodiment are synchronized, implicit, and pre-reflective. However, a felt sense of being a unified autonomous embodied self is discontinuous and can be disrupted by *illusory own-body perceptions*. Perhaps the most well-known experiment demonstrating illusory own-body perceptions is the *rubber hand illusion* (Metzinger, 2009; Mandrigin & Thompson, 2015) in which subjects experience an artificial limb as part of their body. The experiment places a visible rubber hand next to each participant with their own hand concealed from view, and both are stroked synchronously by a brush. After a minute to ninety seconds, subjects feel the brush strokes on the rubber hand, identifying the sensation of touch on their hand, when in actuality, the touch is outside

of their bodily experience, on the rubber hand. Subjects also report a sense of ownership of the rubber hand, as if it were their own hand rather than the bodily experience of a third hand. One's own hand is felt to disappear. To borrow Longchenpa's phrase, an errant cognition assimilates the fake hand to be an illusory limb, suggesting that bodily experience is a kind of multisensory hallucination by the brain. Meditators have reported less strong sense of ownership of the rubber hand and disownership of their real hand (Xu et al., 2017).

Full body illusions have been shown through experiments to induce experiences of perceiving one's body from outside the bodily perspective, such as *autoscopic hallucination*, in which an individual perceives their own body from an out-of-body vantage point (Serino et al., 2013). Our most basic experiences of selfhood, of being in a body, are deeply grounded in habits that emerge from prior moments of consciousness and their neurobiological mechanisms. However, these mechanisms are not so invested in figuring out what is real in the world: they and the patterns of experience they produce involve sensations, perceptions, and cognitions of things *not* present, and further, they are organized by concepts that guide emotions and behavior (Feldman Barrett, 2018).

The Veridicality of Illusions

This brings relevant cognitive science theories into dialogue with Longchenpa's statement that experiential phenomena of saṃsāra emerge through forces of habitual propensity to produce constructive, interpretive, and thereby deceptive, cognitive illusions. This is the first of the two facets, the *illusions of errant cognition*. Longchenpa described the second facet,

All phenomena of nirvāṇa appear to pristine awareness, the appearances of the bodies of awakening (*kāyas*) and pristine awareness are the intrinsic glow of awareness, and because they transcend substances and phenomenal properties, they are spontaneously present. These are referred to as *illusions that are perfectly pure* (Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009c, p. 40).

In contrast to the first, this second facet, *illusions that are perfectly pure* (*yang dag sgyu ma*), describes nirvāṇa. With this, the language of illusion and its psychology of metaphors are not merely descriptive of experiences enraptured in patterns of deception—the pains that churn the rounds of saṃsāra—rather the language of illusion is also the language of awakening. In Mahāyāna literature, and especially in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, similes of illusion include not only the transitory self and temporary tangible world in which a self is embedded, but the very site of Buddhist psychological inquiry—i.e. nirvāṇa,

O Subhūti, phenomena are like dreams,
like magical illusions.
Even nirvāṇa is like a dream,
like a magical illusion.
And if there were anything greater than nirvāṇa,
that too would be like a dream,
like a magical illusion.
(*Middle-Length Prajñāpāramitā* quoted in Klong
chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009c, 40;
Longchenpa, 2018b, p. 71)

Even nirvāṇa is said to be like a dream, a magical illusion, as is anything that can be imagined or experienced beyond nirvāṇa. Unlike descriptions in early Buddhism, nirvāṇa is not a destination—a “far-off shore” or “island of refuge”—not a noun or even an adjective, but an unfolding process at once continuously and dynamically vibrant in its immanence, embodied buddhahood.

Practices of Illusion

With this philosophical outlook to set the psychology, the practical application prescribed in Longchenpa's supplemental *Guidance on the Meaning of Being at Ease with Illusion* presents concise instructions for working with the illusory nature of reality through a series of succinct contemplative practices. In particular, these instructions concern exercising the imaginative capacity of mind to induce experiences of illusion. Longchenpa wrote,

As you imagine being fully absorbed in the
illusory nature of all that appears and exists,
remain inseparable from that very reality—

the ongoing experience that has no ordinary
conceptual fixations,
not even for an instant.

Outward appearances including mountains
and mansions,
all of the earth, water, fire, wind, space,
and so forth ...
and what's inward including all that arises
as the manifold variations of awareness
that affirm or negate—
all of your moving, sleeping, eating, walking,
talking, and so forth—
without distraction, become familiar with their
nature *being like* a dream, an illusion,
hallucination, mirage, the moon in water, an
echo, castles in the clouds, an apparition.
(Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009c,
p. 172)

From the outset, the practitioner is encouraged to set their intention to train in illusion and employ their imagination to everyday experiences (Klein, 2020). In the beginning, the practice is delineated into discrete time-bound meditation sessions dedicated to regarding experiences to be like one of the eight similes of illusion. This creates boundaries for the practitioner to exercise imagination, deepen familiarity with the practice, and begin to feel an intentional shift in perspective. The next step is to integrate the eight similes of illusion throughout everyday waking experiences by thinking to oneself, from time to time, in different situations, “this is like a dream” or “this is like the moon in water” (Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009f). Within diverse environmental settings, while engaging in ordinary activities of sleeping, eating, walking, talking and so forth, the instruction is to regard whatever is perceived to be illusory. This initial foray into the practice involves attention without distraction (*ma yengs*) towards meditating or literally *becoming familiar* (*bsgom*s) with how ordinary experiences have illusory qualities, such as transience, insubstantiality, and evanescence. The eight similes serve as mnemonics to regularly remind the practitioner both what an illusion is like and provide examples of how the illusory nature of

experience manifests—like a dream, hallucination, and so forth. Longchenpa continued,

By knowing that the appearances of objects,
affirmations or negations of the intellect,
ebbs and flows of experience,
and anything whatsoever, are the play of illusion—
enhance your practice and train in being artful,
so as to bring whatever you encounter within
great intrinsic freedom!

(Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009c,
pp. 172–173)

Intentional familiarization with the illusory nature of experiences introduces imaginal play in everyday life to counteract a tendency to reify experiences. This exercise is designed to loosen the practitioner's grip on ordinary conceptual fixations. As familiarity deepens, experiences are increasingly regarded as the play of illusion.

Lucid Dreaming

These initial practices are applied during the daytime and are coupled with nighttime practices of dream yoga to induce lucid dreaming.³ Tibetan authors refined and devised methods to learn how to dream, practice the yoga of dreaming, and train in the oneiric life. In Longchenpa's guidance instruction, once the practitioner has gained competency in recognizing experiences to be illusory during ordinary waking life, he guided the practitioner through a simple dream yoga practice,

At nighttime, rest on your right side,
breathe gently, and don't glance about abruptly.

From the vital point of the mind within your heart,
[imagine] a white syllable "Ā" about the size
of a thumbnail, emitting light—
and this light emanates forth across
all appearances and existence,
saṃsāra and nirvāṇa –
which melt into the light, are reabsorbed into
you, and dissolve into the "Ā."

By meditating without distraction in that very
ongoing experience,
while you are asleep in a dream and similarly –
first, be certain and then,

multitudes will proliferate from one
and those multitudes will be absorbed back
into the one;
the fierce will be transformed from the quiescent,
and there will be apparitions of gods, nāgas,
and so forth ...

At that very moment, train in their unreality
and gradually mingle with their unborn luminosity.
(Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009c,
p. 173)

At the heart of the Tibetan Buddhist philosophy of dreaming is the understanding that one can dream oneself awake or, to put it another way, live in lucid waking (Metzinger, 2009). The structure of this simplified dream yoga is to (1) recognize dreams as dreams, (2) train in dreaming while asleep to become familiar with a felt sense of dream-like experiences when awake, and (3) increase changes to normative reality while dreaming, like flying or walking through barriers.⁴ The practice focuses on experiences emerging between sleeping and waking perceptions and are based on visualization and setting an intention.⁵ The visualization (*dmigs pa*), though this differs according to specific instructions, is to visualize a Tibetan syllable "Ā" (ཨ) that is white at the heart center. This white syllable emits light that radiates across the universe, pervading everything outwards; the light reabsorbs back into the dreamer's heart (Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009e). This reabsorption of the visualized light marks a transitional period corresponding to the phases of non-REM and REM sleep when discursive thinking and all kinds of sensations stream through consciousness, including buzzing sounds in the ears, the body's feeling numb or heavily pressed down, tingling between the eyebrows, and heavy breathing (Harding, 2021). Salient undercurrent movements of mind occur while dream images remain vague and indistinct. In this phase, the dreamer is encouraged to recognize the dream state before falling asleep. Dream yoga methods use conceptual interventions of visualization involving hypnogogic and kinesthetic imagery to induce dreams.

Once dreams are recognized, training in lucid dreaming begins with intentional shifts and oscillations induced through these practices—

shifts between daytime and nighttime, sleeping and waking, dreaming and habitual life. Once a dream is recognized to be a dream, the dreamer learns to be lucid while dreaming. The instruction for cultivating this lucidity is first to recognize that the underlying habitual propensities are identical and continuous across the liminal landscapes of waking and dream embodiments. Second, the dreamer trains in methods that cultivate a cognitive lucidity that retains attention to the features of their body in the dream. To recognize the undercurrents of waking and dreaming embodiment, the dreamer trains the dream body (*rmi lam lus*).⁶ With resolve, the instruction is to return to dreamtime again and again to practice moving around and performing in unfamiliar ways. If the dream body becomes accustomed to walking, the practice is to sit or run; if the dream body goes straight, to move diagonally or in a crisscross pattern, such as going through windows or skylights, wrestling with wild animals, and flying or slipping and sliding. The practice is to imagine the dream body performing different kinds of activities to intentionally disrupt the bodily habit patterns. Doing so, the dreamer begins to familiarize with different somatic movements.

Conjuring Apparitions

By recognizing and training in dreams, a practitioner learns to seamlessly traverse the thresholds between waking and dreaming, so that the lines are blurred, and eventually waking life is as dreamlike as dreamtime is real. This liminality between oneiric and everyday waking life is critical to dream yoga. Longchenpa instructed the practitioner to conjure multiple apparitions or imaginal bodies, both in a dream and while awake,

During the day, be very intentional in
conjuring apparitions.

This vital point is extremely important!

(Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009c,
p. 173)

Increasing (*spel ba*) and conjuring (*sprul ba*) are integral to familiarizing with the illusory nature of experiences across the liminal thresholds of consciousness. Here, the practice is to cultivate an intention to dream during the day by thinking, "I will grasp my dreams, I will recognize dreams as dreams." This intention setting

during the day primes the practitioner to recognize experiences to be like dreams so that dreams are more readily recognized while asleep (Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009e). The daytime practice also includes working with illusory forms by imaginatively conjuring and multiplying apparitions (*sprul pa*; Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009e). This involves intentionally emanating and proliferating various fictitious visual appearances, which may include conjuring new identities, simulating different embodiments, imagining men turning into women and that something singular becomes multiple or vice versa, mentally traveling to places never visited and the like. The method is to deliberate cognitive illusions by exercising the imaginative capacity to induce experiential moments of illusion for ordinary awareness.

Longchenpa discussed how to use observational powers to notice movements and gestures of awareness, especially during meditation practice,

By becoming familiar in this way,
even though illusory experiences will dawn
as described,
it will be impossible to avoid developing
the understanding that they are unreal.

As for affirmations or negations
and fixations that arise in your mind,
by training to recognize these as illusions,
obstructions will transform into
their intrinsic freedom!

Moreover, from this ongoing experience,
the qualities of meditative concentration
—bliss, clarity, and nonthought—will dawn.
By resting with these appearances,
move into their translucence—
at that very moment of an appearance,
evenly move into their cracks of light,
ambiguities, and perforations—
move with the shimmering, fluctuating,
and pervasiveness of awareness.

(Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009c,
pp. 173–174)

This set of poetic terms describes the nuances of visual appearance (*snang ba*) as having spaces in-

between resembling cracks of light, as with a door ajar, and implicitly their accompanying shadows (*sang nge sang nge*), being blurry or fuzzy at times (*'a le 'ol le*), and evanescent due to seemingly having holes or being porous (*khral ma khrol ma*). At the same time, this describes the nuances of pure awareness (*rig pa*) as fluttering or flickering with light (*ban ne bun ne*), flashing hither and thither with uncertain movement (*phyad de phyod de*), and being open without anything to hold onto (*phyal phyal ba, phal le ba*). When one encounters such anomalies, for instance, early in the morning when switching on a light in darkness or at dusk when the wind blows the trees that sway the shadows to seemingly move the ground, the practice is to notice the wavering of one's visual field as it adjusts and familiarize with these illusion-like appearances.

Concluding Thoughts

In the dialogue between Buddhism and the sciences, different styles of discourse have emerged. The late neuroscientist and philosopher Francisco Varela (1946–2002) identified two extremes dominant in the dialogue that provide convenient goalposts, namely, an “embellishment attitude” or a “justification attitude” (Thompson, 2020). By referencing contemporary ideas in psychology and neuroscience in conversation with Tibetan Buddhist ideas, my efforts are not intended to use scientific concepts to validate or justify Buddhist ideas (the embellishment attitude). My efforts are rather to participate in a kind of analogical mapping across traditions that draws attention to resonances of language and ideas from both Buddhist and scientific sources without making truth claims about either. In this case, my method involves translating and interpreting Tibetan language materials that propose certain ideas about a Buddhist psychology of metaphor that emphasizes cognitive illusions and how cognitive and perceptual processes derive from habitual propensities, and to draw on language and ideas in the cognitive sciences to point out analogues. My work here is to draw attention to how each side formulates and articulates a given idea, however diachronic or synchronic—when synchronic, this does not mean that understandings are parallel—but rather that a given idea, in this

case cognitive illusions, is of mutual inquiry. Identifying where conflicts and convergences exist enables a kind of analogical mapping, which, I argue, is not about either side being invested in what the other thinks, but more about what third-party scholars can discern about an idea. Explicitly, my efforts are not meant to suggest that Longchenpa, the fourteenth-century Tibetan interlocutor in this paper, was scientific; nor that science is in some way discovering what Buddhists have long known, for which there is zero evidence. Instead, my efforts intend an epistemological inquiry that uses intercultural translation to engage multiple epistemes, not to valorize truth claims, but to provide a conceptual framework for new knowledge to emerge. In particular, I think that processes of cognitive selection and appraisal are one area where fruitful dialogue can emerge among Buddhist understandings of mind, the cognitive sciences, and contemporary psychology.

The next level of this analogical mapping requires querying the fundamental metaphysical and methodological differences between these two systems, which is beyond the scope of this paper. This, however, is important because significant metaphysical and methodological rifts exist between Tibetan Buddhism and theories in the cognitive sciences. For instance, Longchenpa's intellectual influences draw from Tibetan interpretations of Yogācāra thought, early Shangpa Kagyü meditation manuals from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, as well as disparate Dzogchen materials. Longchenpa's view sometimes diverges from mainstream Indian Yogācāra sources and is complexified by Dzogchen, which is entangled in myriad threads at once poetical, ritualized, doctrinal, contemplative, cosmological, philosophical, and so forth. The practices and ideas Longchenpa presents about illusion are very far from the Bayesian logic functioning that informs predictive processing and predictive coding, which derive from Cartesian assumptions about the brain that are hierarchical, computational, and mechanistic (Cobb, 2020; Maturana, 1980). While pointing out these differences should be part of the broader epistemological project, I do not think that Buddhism, the cognitive sciences, or contemporary psychology need to accept all the methodological

and metaphysical differences of the other side to meaningfully engage with it (Thompson, 2015).

Current paradigms in the contemplative sciences prioritize meditation practices that involve the narrowing of attentional scope and cultivation of mindfulness or concentration, generally classified as Focused Attention (FA) practices (Dahl et al., 2015). While preliminary studies on expanding attentional scope on the flow of the perceptual contents of consciousness, generally classified as Open Monitoring (OM), and constructive practices oriented towards prosocial affect exist, little research has yet been conducted on the broad range of imagination-based contemplative practices (Kozhevnikov et al., 2009). Tibetan Buddhist contemplative practices of imagination have potentially radical contributions to make about psychological understandings about the self, body, and world. Imagination-based contemplative practice, including visualization and simulation techniques, is a prospectively important intersection with the cognitive sciences, particularly research on lucid dreaming.

The practices presented in Longchenpa's guidance for becoming familiar with the illusory nature of experiences include lucid dreaming and performative visualization that intentionally use mental imagery to alter perceptual processes, including perception of one's self-image. The practices introduced in *Being at Ease with Illusion* are designed to activate the imaginative capacity through multimodal, aesthetic, and performative techniques to induce a cognitive immersion in a representation-rich symbolic world. These practices, including lucid dreaming, shapeshifting bodies, and imaginatively conjuring apparitions, apply visualization and simulation techniques that resemble dynamics operationalized in other Vajrayāna methods, for instance, practices of deity yoga (*lha'i rnal 'byor*).

Buddhist psychology posits cognitive illusions, including dreams and hallucinations, to be an experiential range of active imagination, propelled by propensities of memory and habit, linked with variegated mental imagery. For contemporary psychology to take seriously Buddhist contemplative practices and the experiences claimed to emerge from these practices, we might consider

the Buddhist pre-given of awakening to be less a static state and more a series of traits and conditions extending across a spectrum. Precedent for such a *spectrum of awakening* in Buddhist tradition comes from the *sotāpanna* stream-enterers who have entered the first level of awakening to the *arhat* to the *pratyekabuddha* all the way across to the *samyaksambuddha*, unexcelled awakened buddha. For Longchenpa, the two facets of illusion are a common ground for this spectrum of awakening across the dichotomies of saṃsāra to nirvāṇa; from non-buddhas to buddhas—the unawakened to fully awakened, from those in deep red states to those in the indigo or violet. The shared ground of this spectrum is that which is *like an illusion*. So, if the continuity between buddhas and non-buddhas is *like an illusion*, what is the distinction between saṃsāric illusion and nirvāṇic illusion? A critical shift is identified in Buddhist psychology as the difference between ordinary awareness (*rnam shes*), the consciousness of non-buddhas on the one hand, and the pristine awareness (*ye shes*) of buddhas (Sheehy, 2006). As Longchenpa pointed out in the second facet of illusion, “all phenomena of nirvāṇa appear to pristine awareness” (Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009c, p. 40)—that is, the difference between *illusions of errant cognition* and *illusions that are perfectly pure* is how awareness knows them. While ordinary awareness cognitively divides (*rnam rtog*) via concepts and percepts, operating in unison with habitual propensities to generate a multiplicity of experiences, pristine awareness—the mind of a buddha—does not associate experiences with a mental representation or conceptualization derived from prior moments of consciousness. Without concept formation, there is no fixation onto a percept or sense object being experienced, which in turn does not further the proliferation of conceptualizations. While operating in a world, pristine awareness is described as not particularizing or making arbitrary divisions based on the propensities of habit. Instead, because phenomena experienced are not beyond the forces of interdependence, the inter-relational nature of awareness enables a buddha to know phenomena through interdependent imputations. Though phenomena experienced are no longer conditioned

by cognitive illusions, because phenomena are inconcrete, they can be known by projecting names and labels on them.

To return to the dialogue with neuroscience, brains receive sensory input and search for what that information *is most like*; human neuroprocessing seeks metaphors. This is where analogues to the cognitive illusions of ordinary awareness can be found. If the brain does not have a prior moment of consciousness to compare with sensory input, we are what neuroscientists call experientially blind, unable to make meaning about sensory or perceptual information. From the Buddhist view, the operations of ordinary awareness are regularly experientially blind to what is occurring in an environment, including visual blind spots, sounds, smells, and other sensory information. Following this metaphor, if non-buddhas are experientially blind to awakening, since the likeness of illusion is the shared ground, practices of becoming familiar with illusion—dreaming, shapeshifting bodies, conjuring new selves, simulating wakefulness—could induce, these traditions suggest, experiential moments of illusion for ordinary awareness that operate like breadcrumbs to nirvāṇa.

References

- Baird, B., Mota-Rolim, S. A., & Dresler, M. (2019). The cognitive neuroscience of lucid dreaming. *Neuroscience and Behavioral Reviews*, *100*, 305–323. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2019.03.008>
- Britton, W. B., Lindahl, J. R., Cahn, B. R., Davis, J. H., & Goldman, R. E. (2014). Awakening is not a metaphor: The effects of Buddhist meditation practices on basic wakefulness. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *1307*, 64–81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.12279>
- Cobb, M. (2020). *The idea of the brain: The past and future of neuroscience*. Basic Books.
- Dahl, C. J., Lutz, A., & Davidson, R. J. (2015). Reconstructing and deconstructing the self: Cognitive mechanisms in meditation practice. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *19*(9), 515–523. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2015.07.001>
- Davis, J. H., & Thompson, E. (2014). From the five aggregates to phenomenal consciousness: Towards a cross-cultural cognitive science. In S. M. Emmanuel (Ed.), *A companion to Buddhist philosophy* (pp. 585–597). John Wiley and Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118324004.ch38>
- Deroche, M. H., & Sheehy, M. (2022). The distinctive mindfulness of Dzogchen: Jigme Lingpa's advice on meta-awareness and nondual meditation. *Religions*, *13*(7), 573. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070573>
- Feldman Barrett, L. (2018). *How emotions are made: The secret life of the brain*. Mariner Books.
- Germano, D., & Waldron, W. S. (2006). A comparison of ālaya-vijñāna in Yogācāra and Dzogchen. In D. K. Nuriyal, M. S. Drummond, & Y. B. Lai (Eds.), *Buddhist thought and applied psychological research: Transcending the boundaries* (pp. 36–68). Routledge.
- Goodman, S. D. (2020). *The Buddhist psychology of awakening: An in-depth guide to Abhidharma*. Shambhala.
- Guenther, H. V. (1976). *Philosophy and psychology of Abhidharma*. Shambhala.
- Harding, S. (2021). *Four Tibetan lineages: Core teachings of pacification, severance, Shangpa Kagyü, and Bodong*. Wisdom.
- Jamieson, G. A. (2016). A unified theory of hypnosis and meditation states: The interoceptive predictive coding approach. In A. Raz & M. Lifshitz (Eds.), *Hypnosis and meditation: Towards an integrative science of conscious planes* (pp. 313–342). Oxford University Press.
- Khyung po rnal 'byor. (199?). Chos drug gi tshig gsal. *Dpal ldan shangs pa'i chos skor rnam lnga'i rgya gzhung*, *7*, 526–533. Dpal spurngs dgon pa'i par khang.
- Klein, A. C. (2020). Imaging the real: Buddhist paths to wholeness in Tibet. In A. Abraham (Ed.), *Cambridge book of the imagination*. (pp. 500–513). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108580298.030>
- Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer. (2009a). Rdzogs pa chen po sgyu ma ngal gso. *Kun mkhyen klong chen rab 'byams kyi gsung 'bum*, *127*, 1–26. Dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang. Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.

- Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer. (2009b). Rdzogs pa chen po sgyu ma ngal gso'i bsdus don mandā ra ba'i phreng ba. *Kun mkhyen klong chen rab 'byams kyi gsung 'bum*, 127, 27–37. Dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang. Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.
- Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer. (2009c). Rdzogs pa chen po sgyu ma ngal gso'i 'grel pa shing rta bzang po. *Kun mkhyen klong chen rab 'byams kyi gsung 'bum*, 127, 38–171. Dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang. Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.
- Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer. (2009d). Rdzogs pa chen po sgyu ma ngal gso'i don khrid yid bzhin nor bu. *Kun mkhyen klong chen rab 'byams kyi gsung 'bum*, 127, 172–174. Dpal brtsegs bod yig dpe rnying zhib 'jug khang. Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.
- Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer. (2009e). Theg mchog mdzod. *Kun mkhyen klong chen rab 'byams kyi gsung 'bum*, 18. Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.
- Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer. (2009f). Rnal 'byor bzhi'i rim pa. *Zab mo yang tig* In *Kun mkhyen klong chen rab 'byams kyi gsung 'bum*, 11. Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.
- Kozhevnikov, A., Louchakova, O., Josipovic, Z., & Motes, M. A. (2009). The enhancement of visuo-spatial processing efficiency through Buddhist deity meditation. *Psychological Science*, 20(5), 645–653. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02345.x>
- Laukkonen, R. E., & Slagter, H. A. (2021). From many to (n)one: Meditation and the plasticity of the predictive mind. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 128, 199–217. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2021.06.021>
- La Vallée Poussin, L. (1990). *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*. Asian Humanities Press.
- Lifshitz, M., Brahinsky, J., & Luhrmann, T. M. (2020). Images, and intentions in a syncretic spiritual practice. *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 68(2), 183–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207144.2020.1726180>
- Longchen Rabjam. (2001a). *The precious treasury of the basic space of phenomena*. (R. Barron, Trans.). Padma.
- Longchen Rabjam. (2001b). *A treasure trove of scriptural transmission: A commentary on the precious treasury of the basic space of phenomena*. (R. Barron, Trans.). Padma.
- Longchen Rabjam. (2004). *The excellent path to enlightenment*. (K. G. Rinpoche & G. Wiener, Trans.). CreateSpace.
- Longchenpa. (1975). *Kindly bent to ease us, part one: Mind* (H.V. Guenther, Trans.). Dharma.
- Longchenpa. (1976a). *Kindly bent to ease us, part two: Meditation*. (H. V. Guenther, Trans.). Dharma.
- Longchenpa. (1976b). *Kindly bent to ease us, part three: Wonderment*. (H. V. Guenther, Trans.). Dharma.
- Longchenpa. (2014). *The practice of dzogchen: Longchen Rabjam's writings on the great perfection*. (T. Thondup, Trans.). Snow Lion.
- Longchenpa. (2017). *Finding rest in the nature of the mind*. The trilogy of rest, (Vol. 1.) (Padmakara Translation Group, Trans.). Shambhala.
- Longchenpa. (2018a). *Finding rest in meditation*. The trilogy of rest, (Vol. 2.) (Padmakara Translation Group, Trans.). Shambhala.
- Longchenpa. (2018b). *Finding rest in illusion*. The trilogy of rest, (Vol. 3.) (Padmakara Translation Group, Trans.). Shambhala.
- Lopez, D. (2010). The future of the Buddhist past: A response to readers. *Zygon*, 45(4), 883–896. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2010.01139.x>
- Luhrmann, T. M. (2011). Hallucinations and sensory overrides. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 71–85. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145819>
- Maturana, H. R. (1980). Biology of cognition. In H. R. Maturana & F. J. Varela (Eds.), *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living* (pp. 5–58). D. Reidel. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-8947-4_1
- Mandrigin, A., Thompson, E. (2015). Own-body perception. In M. Matthen (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of philosophy of perception*, (pp. 1–19). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199600472.013.043>
- Metzinger, T. (2009). *The ego tunnel: The science of mind and the myth of the self*. Basic Books.

- Pagnoni, G. (2019). The contemplative exercise through the lenses of predictive processing: A promising approach. *Progress in Brain Research*, 244, 299–322. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.pbr.2018.10.022>
- Ransom, M., Fazelpour, S., Markovic, J., Kryklywy, J., Thompson, E. T., & Todd, R. M. (2020). Affective-biased attention and predictive processing. *Cognition*, 203, 104370. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2020.104370>
- Richardson, P., & Mueller, C. M. (2019). Moving yet being still: Exploring source domain reversal and force in explanations of enlightenment. *Language and Cognition*, 11, 310–319. <https://doi.org/10.1017/langcog.2019.19>
- Seth, A. (2021). *Being you: A new science of consciousness*. Penguin Random House.
- Seth, A., & Tsakiris, M. (2019). Being a beast machine: The origins of selfhood in control-oriented interoceptive inference. In M. Colombo, E. Irvine, & M. Stapleton (Eds.), *Andy Clark and his critics*, (pp. 238–254) (Eds.). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190662813.003.0018>
- Serino, A., Alsmith, A., Costantini, M., Mandrigin, A., Tajadura-Jimenez, A., & Lopez, C. (2013). Bodily ownership and self-location: Components of bodily self-consciousness. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 22, 1239–1252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2013.08.013>
- Sheehy, M. R. (2006). Rangjung Dorje's variegations of mind: Ordinary awareness and pristine awareness in Tibetan Buddhist literature. In & (Eds.), *Buddhist Thought and Applied Psychological Research: Transcending the Boundaries*, (pp. 69–92). Routledge.
- Sheehy, M. (2020). Materializing dreams and omens: The autobiographical subjectivity of the Tibetan yoginī Kun dga' 'Phrin las dbang mo (1585–1668). *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, 56, 263–292.
- Sheehy, M. (2021). Tibetan Buddhism and the new science of rebirth. In H. Gayley, (Ed.), *Voices from Larung Gar: Shaping Tibetan Buddhism for the twenty-first century* (pp. 125–134). Shambhala.
- Sheehy, M. (2022). Images of emptiness in a prognostic mirror: Tantric zhentong visions of tathāgatagarbha in early Jonang Ka'lacakra yoga manuals. In K. D. Mathes & C. A. Kemp, (Eds.). *Buddha Nature across Asia*. University of Vienna Press.
- Silvestre-López, A. J., Pinazo, D., Barrós-Lorcerales, A. (2021). Metaphor can influence meta-thinking and affective levels in guided meditation. *Current Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-01655-1>
- Struhl, K. J. (2020). What kind of an illusion is the illusion of self. *Comparative Philosophy*, 11(2), 113–139. [https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014\(2020\).110208](https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014(2020).110208)
- Tāranātha. (2008). Zab lam nig u chos drug gi khrid yig zab don thang mar brdal ba zhes by aba bklags chog ma. *Jo nang rje btsun tā ra nā tha'i gsung 'bum dpe bsdur ma*, 66, 213–314. Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.
- Thompson, E. (2015). *Waking, dreaming, being: Self and consciousness in neuroscience, meditation and philosophy*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/thom13709>
- Thompson, E. (2020). *Why I am not a Buddhist*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300248708>
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E. & Rosch, E. (2016). *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262529365.001.0001>
- Viveiros de Castro, E. (2012). *Cosmological perspectivism in Amazonia and elsewhere*. HAU Network of Ethnographic Theory.
- Westerhoff, J. (2010). *Twelve examples of illusion*. Oxford University Press.
- Windt, J.M. (2018). Predictive brains, dreaming selves, sleeping bodies: How the analysis of dream movement can inform a theory of self- and world-simulation in dreams. *Synthese*, 195, 2577–2625. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1525-6>
- Waldron, W. S. (2002). Buddhist steps to an ecology of mind: Thinking about "thoughts without a thinker." *The Eastern Buddhist*, 34(1), 1–52.
- Waldron, W. S. (2003). *The Buddhist unconscious: The ālaya-vijñāna in the context of Indian Buddhist thought*. Routledge Curzon. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203451175>
- Xu, A., Cullen, B. H., Penner, C., Zimmerman, C., Kerr, C. E., & Schalzl, L. (2018). Comparing embodiment experiences in expert meditators

and non-meditators using the rubber hand illusion. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 65, 325–333. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2018.09.003>

Yang dgon pa. (1976). Rdo rje lus kyi sbas bshad. *Rgyal ba yang dgon pa'i gsung 'bum*, 2, 421–497. Kunzang Topgey.

Yang dgon pa (2004). Nam mkha'i me tog. *'Bri gung bka' brgyud chos mdzod chen mo*, 47, 593–594. 'Bri gung mthil dgon.

Appendix A

Translation of A Wish-Fulfilling Gem: Guidance on the Meaning of Being at Ease with Illusion, A Dzogchen Teaching

By Longchen Rabjam Drimé Ödzer (1308–1364)
Translated by Michael R. Sheehy

To the dharma of the victors that is a stainless illusion, I bow.
The meaning of all dharmas is taught to be the very way of illusion.

So that this may be put into practice,
I shall write down spoken instructions from my teachers
and this intent of the essential meaning of the sūtras and tantras.

First, go solely for refuge,
and generate the mind as awakened.

From the ongoing experience of emptiness,
imagine buddhas and bodhisattvas in a circle who ultimately dissolve
along with teachers of the lineage, meditation deities, and ḍākinīs into your root teacher who sits upon the sun and moon stacked on a lotus flower on your crown.

Mentally make offerings, praise, and confess your faults,
and after that, make the aspiration to train in illusion.

As you imagine being fully absorbed in the illusory nature of all that appears and exists,
remain inseparable from that very reality—

the ongoing experience that has no ordinary conceptual fixations,
not even for an instant.

Outward appearances including mountains and mansions,
all of the earth, water, fire, wind, space, and so forth ...
and what's inward including all that arises as the manifold variations of awareness that affirm or negate—
all of your moving, sleeping, eating, walking, talking, and so forth –
without distraction, become familiar with their nature *being like* a dream, an illusion, hallucination, mirage, the moon in water, an echo, castles in the clouds, an apparition.

By knowing that the appearances of objects, affirmations or negations of the intellect, ebbs and flows of experience,
and anything whatsoever, are the play of illusion—
enhance your practice and train in being artful,
so as to bring whatever you encounter within great intrinsic freedom!

Moreover, during the daytime,
it is crucial that you are not distracted for even an instant
while in the ongoing experience of becoming familiar with things as a dream and so forth.

In this way, initially practice guru yoga,
secondly, the illusion of appearances and mind,
and thirdly, rest distinctly in knowing that which is beyond projection and contraction.

Exert yourself in meditation by staying loose in the ongoing experience that is like space!
After your session, repeatedly become familiar with things from that ongoing experience of illusion.

At nighttime, rest on your right side,
breathe gently, and don't glance about abruptly.

From the vital point of the mind within your heart,
[imagine] a white syllable “Ā” about the size of a

thumbnail, emitting light—
and this light emanates forth across
all appearances and existence, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa—
which melt into the light, are reabsorbed into you,
and dissolve into the “Ā.”

By meditating without distraction in that very
ongoing experience,
while you are asleep in a dream and similarly—
first, be certain and then,
multitudes will proliferate from one
and those multitudes will be absorbed back into the
one;
the fierce will be transformed from the quiescent,
and there will be apparitions of gods, serpents, and
so forth ...

At that very moment, train in their unreality
and gradually mingle with their unborn luminosity.

On all such occasions, make supplications to your
teachers and
do not be distracted even for an instant.

During the day, be very intentional in conjuring
apparitions.
This vital point is extremely important!

By becoming familiar in this way,
even though illusory experiences will dawn as
described,
it will be impossible to avoid developing the
understanding that they are unreal.

As for affirmations or negations and fixations that
arise in your mind,
by training to recognize these as illusions,
obstructions will transform into their intrinsic
freedom!

Moreover, from this ongoing experience, the
qualities of meditative concentration
—bliss, clarity, and nonthought—will dawn.
by resting with these appearances, move into their
translucence—
at that very moment of an appearance,
evenly move into their cracks of light, ambiguities,

and perforations—
move with the shimmering, fluctuating, and
pervasiveness of awareness.

By merging outer, inner, and in-between into one,
invert the holdings of your body.

In the ongoing experience that is never separate
from great vastness without reference,
attraction or repulsion, affirmation or negation,
while laughing or losing control, whatever occurs—
these will dawn as ornaments of your mind.

Through unwavering meditative absorption,
the mind will remain clear and lucid,
your vision will see the translucency of appearances,
you'll have the clairvoyance of knowing others' minds,
and you'll accomplish the immeasurable super-
normal powers, such as the ability to travel
through space.

By the virtue that arises from this explanation of
how to experience all phenomena as illusory
by nature, may the activity of the illusion-like
victors on behalf of all beings without exception
remain beyond limit!

I, the yogin of illusion, Stainless Radiance (Drimé
Ödzer), arranged this instruction on the
coalescence of luminosity and illusion, the
essential meaning of illusion, extremely vast
and profound in meaning, on the mountain
slope that is like an illusion, White Skull Snow
Mountain (Gangrī Tödgar).

Fortune individuals of future generations,
please constantly and diligently apply yourselves to
this way of the dharma.

Freed from the dimness of the illusion of mis-
knowing,
appearances of percepts will transform into the
spontaneous illusion of pristine wisdom.

This concludes the text called, “*A Wish-Fulfilling
Gem: Guidance on the Meaning of Being at
Ease with Illusion, A Dzogchen Teaching,*” that

was arranged by the child of the victors, Drimé Ödzer.

Virtue! Virtue! Virtue!!

Notes

1. A provisional version of this paper was presented at the Upaya Zen Center on February 7, 2021. The author would like to thank Roshi Joan Halifax for the invitation to initially prepare this paper, Evan Thompson for a constructive exchange about the content, and Maria Kozhevnikov for feedback on the neuroscience.
2. In the third chapter of the *Treasury of the Expanse of Phenomena* (*Chos dbyings mdzod*) and its commentary, Longchenpa wrote about the ineffable in Dzogchen thought using metaphors for the awakened mind (Longchen Rabjam, 2001a, 20–29 and Longchen Rabjam, 2001b, pp. 53–74).
3. Practices of dreaming vary across Tibetan Buddhist contemplative systems, including Dzogchen, Kālacakra, Guhyasamāja, the *Six Teachings of Niguma*, and the *Six Teachings of Nāropa*. Several Tibetan phrases describe associated practices of dreaming, which include “direct instructions on dreaming” (*rmi lam gyi man ngag* or *rmi lam gdams ngag*), “sleeping meditation” (*nyal bsgom*), and the “yoga to be observed while sleeping” (*nyal ba gnyid kyi rnal 'byor*). On dream yoga in Tibetan autobiographical writing, see Sheehy, 2020 and on the neuroscience of lucid dreaming, see Thompson, 2015, pp. 169–170 and Baird et al., 2019.
4. This threefold structure follows the first three of the sixfold procedure for a practitioner to operationalize dream yoga prescribed by Kyungpo Neljor (1050–1140), the progenitor of the Shangpa Kagyü tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, in his *Lucid Lines of the Six Dharmas*. This sequence of six distinct procedures for a dreamer to perform is part of dream yoga in the *Six Teachings of Niguma*: (1) recognizing (*bzung ba*), (2) training (*sbyong ba*), (3) increasing (*spel ba*), (4) conjuring (*sprul ba*), (5) transforming (*bsgyur ba*), and (6) ascertaining objective appearances (*yul snang gtan la dbab pa*). See Khyung po rnal 'byor, *Chos drug gi tshig gsal*, p. 529. This scheme is elaborated by Tāranātha in his commentary; see the *Rmi lam nying 'khrul rang dag gi khrid* section of Tāranātha, 2008, pp. 262–279. For a translation, see Harding, 2021, 375–395. Longchenpa elaborated and reconfigured this dream yoga sequence according to specific Dzogchen instructions. For instance, in the *Treasury of the Supreme Vehicle*, he outlined a sixfold sequence: (1) training (*sbyang ba*), (2) transforming (*bsgyur ba*), (3) cutting-through (*bcad pa*), (4) stirring (*dkrugs pa*), (5) steering (*gcud pa*), and (6) thrusting into the key points (*gnad la bor ba*; Klong chen Rab 'byams dri med 'od zer, 2009e, pp. 76–90). And in the *Progression of the Four Yogas*, he outlined an eightfold sequence: (1) training (*sbyang ba*), (2) transforming (*bsgyur ba*), (3) severing (*bcad pa*), (4) direct instructions on the key points (*gnad kyi man ngag*), which includes a subset of five practices, (4a) mixing the play of appearances with intention (*'dun pas rtsal snang dkrugs*), (4b) manipulating key points in the body (*lus gnad gcun pa*), (4c) thrusting into the key points (*gnad la bor*), (4d) penning-up the breath (*bskyil*), and (4e) reversing (*bzlog pa*). See *Rmi lam gyi zhen pa bcad pa bsam gtan gyi thun la bslab pa* in Klong chen Rab 'byams, 2009f, pp. 336–338.
5. The term that I am translating as “intention” (*'dun pa, chanda*) can mean an intense interest or sincere involvement and is deliberately used throughout dream yoga instructions. This intentionality is understood to serve as a basis for developing enthusiasm for familiarizing with an object of meditation, in this case, the state of dreaming. Another term for interest (*mos pa, adhimokṣa*) is paired with intention throughout dream yoga instructions. Each term signifies a mere difference in degree of intentional attentiveness to a focal object. In the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam*, these are classified as two of the general concomitant mental factors (*citta-saṃpraukta-saṃskāra*). In the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, these are two of the object-determined mental factors (*viśayaniyata*)

along with mindfulness (*dran pa*), concentration (*ting nge 'dzin*), and discernment (*shes rab*). On the relevance of these factors in Dzogchen meditation, see Deroche & Sheehy, 2022. On the efficacy of intention in meditation, see Lifshitz et al., 2020.

6. These are instructions on familiarizing with a dream body or mental body of a dream (*rmi lam gyi yid lus*), the non-physical body experienced in a dream. A dream practitioner trains physical exercises and gestures to enhance recognition of the body while dreaming.

About the Author

Michael R. Sheehy, PhD, is a Research Assistant Professor in Tibetan Buddhist Studies and Director of Scholarship at the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia. His research specializes in the dynamic, ever-evolving techniques of contemplative practices detailed in Tibetan Buddhist meditation manuals. Over the past several years, he has consulted scientific meditation research and collaborated in transdisciplinary dialogues about contributions of Buddhism to discourses in the humanities, cultural psychology, and the cognitive sciences. He serves as the Executive Editor of the *Journal of Contemplative Studies* (JCS), and he co-edited, *The Other Emptiness: Rethinking the Zhentong Buddhist Discourse in Tibet*.

About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a Scopus listed peer-reviewed academic journal, and the largest and most accessible scholarly periodical in the transpersonal field. IJTS has been in print since 1981, is published by Floraglates Foundation, sponsored in part by Attention Strategies Institute, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at www.transpersonalstudies.org, and in print through www.lulu.com (search for IJTS).