

DREAMING

In the LOTUS

*buddhist
dream narrative,
imagery, and practice*

Serinity Young

Foreword by Carol Schreier Rupprecht

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✧ *For Geshe Lozang Jamspal*

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Foreword

D*reaming in the Lotus* is a special gift to scholars and dreamworkers of the world from an outstanding specialist of Asian culture. This compelling study explores the genre of sacred biography in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism to arrive at a startling conclusion: without dreams there would be no Buddha and no Buddhism. On the way to this conclusion, author Serinity Young unravels some of the mysteries of dreaming and weaves a pattern of insight into others. With this foreword, I invite readers to pick up any thread of interest or expertise they have and follow where she goes. Whether scholar of religion or of literature, novelist or historian of Asia, psychotherapist or physician, feminist or mystic, all will find here new information, unexpected connections, intriguing suggestions, and remarkable dreams. Much of the material, from Sanskrit and Tibetan-language texts, has been previously unavailable to the general reader in English translation.

With uncommon good sense and refreshingly clear prose, Young presents a comparative analysis of biographies of the historical Buddha Gautama (c. 562–482 B.C.E.) and the poet-yogin Milarepa (1040–1123 C.E.). Commentary is included also on Gampopa, Tsongkhapa, and Buton. The unique distinctiveness of *Dreaming in the Lotus* among the current flood of books about dreaming, Eastern and Western, lies in the author's finely tuned comparative methodology, her depth of knowledge about cross-currents in Western research on dreaming, the cultural and chronological range of her sources, and her expertise in Asian languages.

The methodology is anchored in the initial comparison between dream-centered texts originating in India and those that evolved over centuries in Tibet from the convergence of Buddhism with pre-Buddhist indigenous dream beliefs and practices. Young's frequent reach toward more global comparison enhances the book's contributions to oneiric history and theory. She demonstrates, for example, that in Tibetan Buddhism sleep is not just a metaphor for death, as it seems to be in much Graeco-Roman and

Western European literature, but rather a “training ground” for it, since dreaming, wakefulness, and death are seen as equally illusory states needing to be transcended. Tibetan medical text observations on dreaming are linked to those of Galen and Hippocrates. The way the dream of a private individual in sacred biography becomes transformed into a cultural institution is elucidated by analogies with the founding of the cargo cults of Melanesia and the Native American Ghost Dance Movement. Just as dream ideologies cross religious lines between Judaism, Christianity, and paganism, Young says, so do they from Hinduism to Buddhism.

The heuristic nature of such comparison inspires readers to undertake their own search for affinities. I found fascinating, for example, the way the manipulation or rejection of their wives’ dreams by the Buddha, Padma-sambhava, and Marpa was partially echoed in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* by Adam’s unwise and fateful dismissal of Eve’s premonitory dream of their temptation. I also found similarities and illuminating dissimilarities between the sacred biography subject’s dreams of disheveled women and Dante’s pilgrim’s dream of the deformed female, whose clothes are torn by a dream-Virgil, in canto XIX of *Purgatorio*.

Since no systematic methodology for the exploration of dreaming or any set of principles governing dream interpretation emerges in Buddhism, Young serves as a necessary guide for our initiation into a “culturally complex process fraught with contradiction.” She insistently rejects oversimplification with frequent caveats about the multiple shades of variation in Buddhist dream thought even within the single genre of sacred biographies that foreground dreaming no matter how different the lives of the individuals or the compositional backgrounds of the texts. She observes calmly that apparently contending dream beliefs within Buddhism are sometimes only a matter of emphasis, that the coexistence of attitudes that seem mutually exclusive may only reflect ongoing differences between concurrent elite and popular traditions. Apparent inconsistencies in theory and discrepancies between theory and practice, she notes, sometimes have the desired function in the monastic world of requiring the presence of a guru on whom initiates must rely for interpretation.

Young takes a similarly clear-headed stance on the central paradox of dreaming in Buddhism: it is seen simultaneously as one of the most powerful forms of human cognition and as the principal example of the illusory nature of the world.

Buddhism valorized dreaming in the popular tradition of biography while the elite monastic tradition used the dream experience to emphasize

the illusory nature of reality. Their point is not that a dream experience is less real than waking life but that both states, dreaming and waking, are equally illusory.

This paradox shows that radically disparate notions of what constitutes self, cognition, and the “real” are at the core of Eastern and Western oneiric thought. Such difference should prohibit the facile assimilation of Asian practices by Euro-American dreamers, such as equating the mastery over dreaming in Dream Yoga techniques with North American dream control systems like Lucidity. As Young points out, Tibetan Buddhist dream work does not translate wholesale into North American self-help movements, an argument she makes in a thoughtful appendix on the Lucidity Movement headed by Stephen LaBerge.

In working on her extraordinary materials, Young has not succumbed to the seductions of what Carl Jung called “going Eastern.” Instead she has combined rigorous academic training with an intuitive grasp of the otherness of her subject and a deep respect for difference. Thus she escapes the essentialist fallacy of thinking that we all mean the same thing when we use words like dream, shaman, and real. She calls attention to the way in most Western languages one “has a dream,” while in many Eastern languages one “sees a dream.” In the former, the dreamer is the creator of the dream; in the latter, “the passive recipient of an objective vision.” In an especially interesting aside, she explains how some Asian dreamers use eye ointment to protect themselves against “seeing” bad dreams. As a comparative literature scholar who has taught and written on the interface between dream theory and translation theory, I am convinced that one major source of certain kinds of recurrent misunderstanding are the inadequate and often misleading translations of foreign texts on which so many North American dreamworkers depend. The translator’s world view inevitably skews the original material, and dream texts are especially susceptible to conscious and unconscious distortion. Young’s linguistic expertise allows her to work with primary sources and to perform the kind of detailed textual analysis that can limit misrepresentation. This leads to more subtle and sensible communication across cultures about the process of dreaming.

In addition, Young does not atomize the dream experience by isolating single dreams as the crux of analysis. She recognizes the dream experience as a sequence, a dynamic process that moves along a continuum from dream stimulus and setting, to the dream itself (mentation during sleep), telling of the dream, interpretation, and outcome, including ritual attempts to

ward off evil effects or efforts to carry out what are perceived to be dream's directives or explicit instructions. She does not excerpt or abstract dream samples from one culture or one historical moment and then generalize, but traces over centuries the evolution of beliefs and practices. As the structure of her book indicates, Young has particular interest in when and how oneiric traditions persist and innovations make their appearance.

Dreaming in the Lotus has its own set of traditional and innovative materials, both of which have value for post-modern dreamers and professional dreamworkers. I plan myself to follow up on Young's brief but provocative remarks about the role that degrees of orality and literacy play in shaping the oneiric mindset of a society. As I have written elsewhere, in many diverse cultures during the transition from an oral to a primarily written tradition the earliest recorded texts always include dreams (like the Old English "Dream of the Rood") or key dream episodes (like Duzumi's dream in the Sumerian "Inanna"). Dreaming seems to be one of the driving forces that sparks the desire in humans for the preservation in concrete form of their experience.

Readers will find many familiar themes in instructively unfamiliar contexts: incubation, dreams as medical diagnosis and prognosis, taxonomies of kinds of dreaming, shared dreams, sought or induced dreams, debate over divine or demonic origin. The chapter on gender especially bears reading for the perspective it adds to the vexing question of male/female difference in the realm of dreaming. I do not know of any other woman's dream, in any society, that had the endlessly adumbrating influence of Queen Maya's dream of the conception of the Buddha: "a magnificent white elephant, striking her right side with its trunk, is able to enter her womb." Young documents the way this dream, along with its various versions, interpretations, and iconographic representations, significantly affected the development of Buddhism. Like Maya's dream in biographies of the Buddha, the majority of females' dreams appearing in the lives of male Buddhist saints are those of conception.

On the other hand, the biographies are full of men's dreams about women, many following what I call the fear/revere pattern, a corollary to the Eve/ Mary pattern of female representation in Christianity. In men's dreams, awesome, often divine women play a crucial role in ensuring the man's salvational goals, while the true dreams of real women, usually wives, about such men are dismissed, as happens also in versions of the Buddha's biography. In these sacred biographies, as in Indian and Tibetan medical texts, men's dreams also include figures of threatening women, such as the

demonized Lilith of the Talmud. Young also finds in the Indo-Tibetan world the contradiction, which seems to recur worldwide and across millennia, whereby women are endowed with tremendous power in men's dreams and psychic experiences while the concomitant social reality renders them powerless or at least confines them to considerably weakened positions.

Throughout North America, starting as early as the Winget-Kramer study in 1933, gender in dreaming has been a subject for investigation among researchers in clinical, experimental, and academic settings. Virtually without exception these studies have identified differences between males and females in the attitude, content, interpretation, effect, and use of dreams. In the 1970s feminist scholars like me began challenging the conclusions about gender difference in areas of study like content analysis as being the result of social constructions of femaleness and maleness. As decades pass, however, many feminist investigators are finding that dramatic changes in the social realities of North American women and men along the lines of work, education, and income have not necessarily made their dreaming lives more commensurate.

Dreaming is one of the few truly universal human phenomena yet evidence from many corners of the world like that presented in *Dreaming in the Lotus* can persuade us that dreams of individuals are shaped substantially by specific cultural, social, religious, and political contexts. Can it be true that in dreaming gender overrides all these distinctions among people? Do the dream lives of men in ancient Tibet and post-modern Canada have more in common with each other than they do with the dream lives of ancient Tibetan and post-modern Canadian women despite the great contrast between the waking lives of such people? And if so, what does such commonality demonstrate? Young introduces into this ongoing debate some unusual new material, which in its complexity argues strongly for more cross-cultural studies of gender in dreaming.

The ultimate excellence of *Dreaming in the Lotus* is that it provides a valuable model for dream study that does not domesticate the esoteric but enlarges the oneiric world view of those who consult it. It also incorporates the personal life of the author in subtle but essential ways as she tests her own conclusions about early Buddhist literature during her field work in India, Nepal, and Tibet, speaking with Tibetans from different backgrounds about their own dreams, beliefs, and practices. Her work will remind us as we enter the new millennium that the dream is both a personal and collective experience, both an immanent and a transcendent

phenomenon. In this way, Serinity Young earns a place in the most recent wave of dreamworkers who are making this turn of the century as remarkable in the history of oneirology as the last one was in its time.

Carol Schreier Rupprecht
July 1999

Acknowledgments

I FIRST EXPLORED the meaning of Buddhist dreams in my 1990 dissertation and I owe thanks to several members of the Columbia University faculty. I worked most closely with my adviser, Alex Wayman, and Geshe Lozang Jamspal; each in his own way gave generously of his time and advice. Robert Thurman, Peter Awn, and Brian Smith offered insightful comments, while Ainslie Embree, as ever, provided historical perspective and encouragement. That dissertation has been, however, so substantially revised and restructured as to render this a distinct work. I was able to accomplish this, in part, through the generosity of a Research Assistance Grant from the American Academy of Religion, which enabled me to pursue research in the Tibetan communities of India in the spring of 1995. At the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath I am particularly grateful to Samdong Rinpoche for facilitating my research; to Geshe Tsulthim Phuntsok, who went through the *Kangyur* texts on dreams with me and put his vast knowledge of Tibetan history at my disposal; and to Geshe Thapkey, who brought many texts to my attention and shared his knowledge of the world of Tibetan dreaming. I am indebted also to His Holiness Thrangu Rinpoche, who made time for me in his busy schedule in order to clarify the meaning of dreams in the Kagyu tradition, and to the Venerable Rashmi of the Thai Monastery in Sarnath for his enthusiasm, warm hospitality, and introductions to learned Theravāda monks. At the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala, Research Librarian Lozang Shastri and Reference Librarian Pema Yeshe went far beyond the call of duty in assisting me. I received additional support in the form of a grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board, with funds provided by the U.S. Department of State (Title VIII) and the National Endowment for the Humanities, which enabled me to do research in several Russian archives. It is a pleasure to thank Natalia Zhukovskaia, who generously arranged an invitation for me from the Institute of Ethnology and

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Things seem to happen in their own time. This book has been a long and winding road for me, but it was finally brought to a safe harbor at Wisdom Publications when E. Gene Smith became an acquisitions editor there. Gene is a legendary figure among Tibetan scholars, and I cannot imagine having been in better hands. He immediately grasped the concept of this work and gently prodded me to finish it. His kindness, expertise, and worldwide connections have been a true blessing.

Abbreviations

- AN* *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, ed. E. Hardy (London: Pali Text Society, 1896)
- AS* *Abhinīṣkramaṇasūtra*, trans. by Samuel Beal from the Chinese edition as *The Romantic Legend of Śākya Buddha* (1875; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985)
- BC* *Aśvaghōṣa, Buddhacarita*, ed. and trans. E. H. Johnston (1936; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984)
- CS* *Caraka Saṃhitā*, ed. and trans. Ram Karan Sharma and Vaidya Bhagwan Das (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1977)
- EOR* *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987)
- 'Jam mgon* *'Jam mgon chos kyi rgyal po tson ka pa chen po'i rnam thar thub bstan mdzes pa'i rgyan gcig ño mtshar nor bu'i 'phren ba* (Sarnath, Varanasi: Mongolian Lama Guru Deva, 1967)
- Jātaka* *The Jātaka Together with Its Commentary*, ed. V. Fausbøll (London: Trübner, 1877)
- LV* *Lalitavistara*, ed. P. L. Vaidya (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1958)
- Mgur 'bum* *Mi la'i mgur 'bum*, comp. Gtsaṅ smyon He ru ka (Delhi: Sherab Gyaltzen, 1983)

- Mi la* *Mi la ras pa'i rnam thar*, comp. Gtsoñ smyon He ru ka, ed. J. W. de Jong ('s-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1959)
- MSV* *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya: The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saṅghabhedavastu, Being the 17th and Last Section of the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivādīn*, ed. Raniero Gnoli (Rome: Istituto italiano per il medio ed estremo oriente, 1977)
- MV* *Le Mahāvastu*, ed. É. Senart (Paris: L'Imprimerie nationale, 1890)
- NK* *Nidānakathā*, in *The Jātaka Together with Its Commentary*, ed. V. Fausbøll (London: Trübner, 1877)
- Padma* *Padma bka' thang shel brag ma* (Leh, India: 1968)
- SS* *Suśrutasaṃhitā of Suśruta*, ed. and trans. Vidya Jādvaji Trikamji Āchārya, 4th ed. (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Orientalia, 1980)
- Vinaya* *Vinaya Piṭaka*, ed. Hermann Oldenberg, vol. 1. (1879; London: Pali Text Society, 1969)

Introduction

THE SACRED BIOGRAPHIES of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism are filled with dream narratives that foretell the births of important religious figures, describe their spiritual accomplishments, and reveal esoteric teachings. In these texts dreams are first and foremost an accepted form of cognition, one that can provide access to powerful states of consciousness. I approach this material as a historian of religion, though many of my questions are sociological. The goal of this work is not only to illustrate some of the ways in which dreaming functions in these texts but also to show how certain private dreams were translated into social reality for the larger community—that is, to show what changes occur because of them. Primarily, I am looking at the intersection of biography, history, and religious belief in relation to dreams, and correspondingly in relation to Buddhist ideas about consciousness and cognition. I do not attempt to psychoanalyze the dreams but rather provide a cultural context for them through references to additional contemporary biographical materials and through explorations of related literature, such as philosophical texts that theorize about the meanings of dreams. In the course of my research I have uncovered a network of core issues influenced by belief in the significance of dreams, such as the relation between consciousness and reality, the sources of religious authority, and ways to achieve enlightenment. Dream narratives shed light on these issues in very useful ways.

A central thesis of this study is that while dreams had important functions in early Buddhist biographies, there was an efflorescence of dream narrative in Tibetan biographical literature, especially that of Milarepa and his disciples. Ritual texts from the Tibetan canon and esoteric teachings such as Dream Yoga indicate that this increase in literary dream narrative was accompanied by the conscious pursuit of dream experience. In order to highlight these two poles of Buddhist dreaming, textual dreams and dream practices, I have chosen to focus on dream experiences in the biographies

of the Buddha (562–462 B.C.E.) and the Tibetan teacher Milarepa (1040–1123 C.E.). These biographies present a rich and culturally varied picture of Buddhist dream experience, which I compare in terms of continuities and innovations in dream narrative. In this way the reader is first familiarized with the ongoing tradition of Buddhist dream experience and is then presented with a particularly telling example of developments in that tradition.

Dreams are a given in Buddhist biographies. Aside from occasional disparaging remarks about the illusory nature of dreams (and indeed of waking life), their validity is neither questioned nor discussed. Part of their cultural context can be found in early texts that present formal analyses of dreams, such as Buddhaghosa's (fifth century C.E.) canonical commentaries and in later Tibetan texts such as Sangye Gyatso's (1653–1705) commentary on the *rGyud bZhi*, a famous medical text. What these texts have in common is an understanding of the physical bases of dreams—that many are caused by bodily disturbances and illness or are based on previous waking experiences. A related belief is that dreams can be carried on the internal winds of the body and that these winds can be clarified and controlled through ascetic practices such as breath control and meditation. These practices also clarify consciousness: they give rise to a pure consciousness that is able to break free of physical and emotional limitations, enabling one to enjoy true prophetic dreams. These texts assert that some dreams are sent by the gods, and may be prophetic. They also assert a belief in purely prophetic dreams. Buddhaghosa, for one, limits pure prophetic dreams to very special people, like the Buddha, his mother, and the king of Kosala, thereby creating a dreaming elite similar to that found in many other ancient cultures. The idea is that not just anyone's dream is meaningful. Prophetic dreams come to people who have accrued merit, either in a past or in their present life.

I use the ubiquitous Buddhist symbol of the lotus in my title to evoke several things. The lotus is a pan-Indian symbol of fertility and life to such an extent—indeed it even symbolizes a womb—that it also can represent the entire created universe. (One has only to recall Viṣṇu's famous dream of a lotus growing out of his navel from which the universe arises.) It is also a symbol of purity, spiritual perfection and religious authority par excellence. In South Asian art lotuses usually form the seat or stand of a deity or buddha to signify their transcendence of the material world. They also represent one of the highest teachings of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, that we all innately possess Buddha Nature as our natural, primordial state of being.

This state is beyond dualities, beyond discursive thought. It just is. However, in ordinary people it is obscured because of defilements, a concept frequently expressed through the image of a pure white lotus (Buddha Nature) emerging from a muddy pond (*saṃsāra*, the world of suffering). Defilements also obscure dreams, which is the reason prophetic dreams are thought to arise from pure consciousness or the pure mind of Buddha Nature. Indeed, one of the dream rituals translated below recommends focusing consciousness in the center of a lotus so that the adept's mind becomes completely purified (see p. 142). Many of the dreams recounted in the present work are those of individuals who dream within this consciousness, a consciousness aspired to by many.

Part I introduces Indian biographical dream narratives, most particularly those appearing in the biographies of the Buddha, and various Buddhist theories about dreaming, both Indian and Tibetan. Chapter 1 sets forth the importance of sacred biography to Buddhist salvational goals, both Theravāda and Mahāyāna, and elucidates the function of dream narratives in biographical texts within the context of the meaning they had, and continue to have, in the traditions of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Chapter 2 discusses dream narratives in the ancient Indian biographies of the Buddha. These include the most famous dream narrative in Buddhism, the conception dream of the Buddha's mother, Queen Māyā, and the rarely studied dreams attributed to the Buddha. This chapter concludes with an examination of the dreams other people had about the Buddha, including those from his past lives preserved in the Pali *jātakas* (birth stories). These dreams did not occur in an oneiric vacuum, and chapter 3 introduces early, mainly Theravāda, Buddhist dream theory culled from a variety of textual sources and presents dream narratives from other early Buddhist biographical texts such as the biography of Emperor Aśoka. Chapter 4 explores some of the indigenous, pre-Buddhist, dream practices of Tibet, presents Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna views of dreaming, and concludes with an examination of dream theory in Indo-Tibetan medical texts.

Parts II and III are structured by the comparison of dream narratives from the life of the Buddha with those of Milarepa and his disciples in terms of continuities and innovations. Three categories that demonstrate continuity are conception dreams, shared dreams, and dreams that reveal spiritual accomplishments. Conception dreams refer to dreams parents have around the time their children are conceived (chapter 5). Conception dreams are often shared dreams—those that occur when two or more people have a dream about the same person, thing or event—but shared dreams

are treated as an independent category (chapter 6). The third category refers to dreams that portend, and in some cases stimulate, the spiritual accomplishments of the dreamer (chapter 7). These categories are present in Buddhist biographies from the time of the Buddha up to the present. Innovations that appear in the Tibetan biographies are teachings about Dream Yoga (chapter 8), ritual dreaming (chapter 9), and the increased presence of females in male dream experience (chapter 10). The conclusion summarizes my findings, and an appendix explores the Western practices of lucid dreaming in relation to traditional Buddhist dream practices.

This study has inevitably led me to investigate the living tradition of dream beliefs and practices among Tibetan Buddhists. Whenever possible I have sounded out my understanding of Buddhist dream experience with the holders of this tradition, and I frequently refer to their comments.

Most of the original-language texts I cite are available in critical editions, so I have limited original-language quotations to particularly relevant passages. For the convenience of nonspecialist readers, whenever possible I also refer to English translations. In order to produce a reader-friendly text, I have dropped silent Tibetan letters when discussing key terms and persons, though full spellings using the Wylie transliteration system appear in parentheses the first time a name or term is used. In the spirit of friendly redundancy, though, and with the full awareness that not everyone reads a book from beginning to end, these are sometimes repeated, as is other relevant information, such as birth and death dates.

In the bibliography I use the Library of Congress form of transliterated Tibetan citations of titles and authors in order to assist readers in finding references in public catalogs.

✦ PART ONE

Indo-Tibetan Dreaming



FIGURE I

Queen Māyā's dream.

Bharhut. Indian Museum, Calcutta. Photograph by Mary Storm.

1 *Dreams, Religion, & Sacred Biography*

DREAMS IN WORLD RELIGIONS

IN ALL TIMES AND PLACES people have dreamed, and most have tried to understand their dreams.¹ The belief that at least some dreams contain prophecies was and remains an acceptable idea to many people. For instance, the Hebrew Bible records Joseph's prophetic dreams about his future (Gen. 37: 5–11), as well as his correct interpretations of the prophecies contained in the baker's dream (Gen. 40) and Pharaoh's dreams (Gen. 41); in the Christian Bible both the Magi and Mary's husband Joseph are warned in dreams to beware of King Herod (Matt. 2: 12–13); and the vision quests of Native Americans often lead to dreams in which young people are given new names indicative of their future role in society.² A widespread type of prophetic dream is the conception dream that parents, mainly mothers, have before the birth of extraordinary children. Examples of such dreams are found all over the world, such as that of the Buddha's mother who dreamed a white elephant entered her womb.³ In the modern West, Carl Jung gave fresh credence, and a scientific patina, to dreams as a form of prophecy.⁴

Underlying the belief in dreams as a source of prophecy is the ancient idea that some dreams are sent by the gods as messages. For example, Jahweh says to Moses, "If there be a prophet among you, I will make myself known unto him in a vision and will speak to him in a dream" (Num. 12: 6–7); the Book of Acts (16: 9 and 18: 9) records several of the apostle Paul's dreams that he interprets as signs of God's will or in which God actually appears; two accepted *hadiths* record that Muhammad received the first revelation of the *Qur'ān* in a dream;⁵ and Athena sent Penelope a dream to reassure her about Odysseus (*Odyssey* 4.795–807). Such beliefs affirm

dreams as a source of divine communication and in some cases confer religious authority on the dreamer, especially one who can correctly interpret dreams.

Theoretically, prophesying the future is open to anyone who dreams. In reality, however, dreams are connected to the social and religious status of the dreamer. For instance, the dreams of kings were generally believed to have meaning for the whole kingdom, while it is usually the great heroines and heroes of antiquity who are blessed with god-sent dreams. In the religious realm it is almost universally believed that the dreams of saints and other religious virtuosi, such as shamans, ascetics, yogis, prophets, and messiahs, are of great importance not only to themselves but to the religious life of the entire community.

Some of the most valuable sources for religious dreams are the sacred biographies and hagiographies of world religions.⁶ They often begin with the mother's auspicious dream before the birth of her child and continue to introduce dreams at pivotal points in the story. Though sacred biographies have distinct meanings in different traditions, their universal role is to portray the ideal type, or saint, through the events of her or his life and spiritual progress, including visions and dreams that reveal the inevitability of that life story. Biographers organized dream experience into narratives, often including dream interpretations, and thereby affirmed dream consciousness.⁷ Such narratives provided models against which the faithful could measure their own dreams. As we shall see, the Buddhist biographical tradition exemplifies this process.

DREAMS IN BUDDHIST SACRED BIOGRAPHY

Sacred biographies⁸ are central to the salvational goals of Buddhism because they tell the story of those who have achieved enlightenment, and they provide models that others can follow. Buddhist sacred biographies are by definition stories about enlightenment and are believed to possess an intrinsic power capable of leading the hearer or reader to enlightenment.⁹ They are simply told guides to the spiritual life, and yet, for those who have received advanced training, they are also rich in esoteric meaning. They come alive to all practitioners, whatever their level of religious expertise. Dreams play a prominent role in these texts; they provide dramatic shifts in the action, underscore the inevitability of subsequent events, and precipitate significant changes in the spiritual and temporal life of the dreamer.

In what follows, I investigate the sociological and religious functions of Buddhist biographical dreams within the context of the meanings they had (and continue to have) in ancient and medieval South Asia. To this end, my decision has been to emphasize what these dreams meant and continue to mean—both within the individual texts in which they appear and within the larger Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

An obvious, yet important, point about these biographical dreams is that the compilers considered them relevant to the spiritual development of their biographical subjects. Sacred biographies reveal the religious instruction and evolution of an individual, and dreams are an important part of that process. The textual survival of the dreams through the vicissitudes of initially oral transmissions and later handwritten or carved editions in geographically diverse areas among contending schools and orders is in itself a significant indicator of the perceived value of dreams. They are present in Buddhist biographies from the first biography, that of the Buddha, and they persist in modern Buddhist biographies. Further, the relationship between biography and dream experience is reciprocal: the biography confirms the prophecy of dreams by dramatizing their fulfillment while prophetic dreams confirm that it is the biography of someone worthy, someone who possesses religious authority or charisma.

Before going further, it is useful to reflect on the consistent use of the verb “seeing” (*darśana*, *mthong ba*) rather than “having” a dream in all South Asian texts. Such language expresses the fact that dreams are experienced as given to the dreamer rather than created by them and emphasizes the external origin of the dream, thereby lending them a divine or demonic authority.¹⁰ To say one has *seen* rather than *had* a dream is to suggest that the dreamer is the passive recipient of an objective vision.¹¹ The literalness of this thinking is expressed in hymn 4.9 of the *Atharva Veda*, which recommends an eye ointment, *aṣana*, for protection from troubled dreams, and in a Tibetan text from the *Tangyur* that also recommends using a certain eye ointment when seeking an auspicious dream.¹² Such ideas are connected to the powerful and pervasive South Asian belief in the redemptive value of *darśana*—seeing—particularly in the sense that the deity or holy person *gives* *darśana* while the worshipper *takes* it; the devotee both sees the deity and is seen by the deity.¹³ When this word is used for dreams, instead of the more usual *svapna* (derived from the verb $\sqrt{\text{svap}}$, to sleep), one begins to sense the power of the dream in South Asia: the dreamer not only sees the dream but can be seen by it. Seeing is a powerful force that is equated with the experience of touching and even of knowing.¹⁴ Appropriately

enough, this belief is expressed visually in the enlarged eyes of Hindu deities and in the huge Buddha eyes on Himalayan stupas. The *ṛṣis*—literally, the seers—saw the Vedic hymns through an inner vision, an idea that is carried out by the further use of the word *darśana*, in the sense of doctrine, to designate philosophy.¹⁵

Within the Buddhist tradition, what the Buddha saw is foundational to Buddhism: for instance, the four visions that turned him to the ascetic path and his visions on the night of his enlightenment. Throughout South Asia seeing has deeply religious meanings, especially in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism with its emphasis on visualization practices.¹⁶

In this book I examine dreams in the biographical literature of two important figures from the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the historical Buddha Gautama (c. 566–486 B.C.E.)¹⁷ and Milarepa (Mi la ras pa, 1040–1123 C.E.).¹⁸ Despite significant cultural differences in their lives and in the compositional history of their biographies,¹⁹ dreams are pervasive in both sets of texts.

There are many important religious figures in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, and a great deal of their biographical literature is available. The historical Buddha, being the founder and primary role model for Buddhism, is an obvious choice for inclusion. The most famous dream in Buddhism is the conception dream of his mother, Queen Māyā, and the Buddha himself dreams and interprets the dreams of others. For purposes of a Tibetan comparison I chose the much loved poet and yogi Milarepa, whose songs and biography are well known throughout Tibet. He is a unique and pivotal figure whose lineage eventually became the Kagyu (*bka' brgyud*) Order. His biographies are particularly rich in dream material, including those of his guru Marpa and of his disciples.

One of the first things I noticed about the Buddhist view of dreams is that it distinguishes dream *consciousness*, the cognitive state of dreaming, from dream *content*, the events or subject matter of a dream.²⁰ Beginning with the dreams of the Buddha, dream content is important in defining which dream symbols or events are religiously significant.²¹ The dreams preserved in the biographies provide a map of the Buddhist dream world, acting as signposts for those who would follow the same path. For instance, Tibetan Buddhists often dream of *stūpas*, *dorjes*, and other common Buddhist symbols and deities, images that are pervasive in their iconography and visualization practices. The idea of a dream map is extended in the belief that all buddhas, whether of the past, the present, or the future, have the same story and consequently the same dream.²² Indeed, according to

the *Mahāvastu*,²³ even the mothers of buddhas have the same dream when they conceive. The idea is that all buddhas are exactly the same down to the most minute details.²⁴ Underlying this notion is the cyclical nature of the Buddhist concept of time: the same events can and do happen in different times and places, including the same dream. Thus, the *Lotus Sūtra* (XIII.60–70) offers a typology of dreams that precede enlightenment, while the *Ārya Svapna Nirdeśa Sūtra*, in its description of 108 auspicious dreams, suggests both the common dream world that is available to striving Buddhists and the value of dreams as signs of spiritual progress and accomplishment.

Overall, Tibetan Buddhists are not interested in the psychological interpretation of dreams; rather they are interested in dreams as prophecies, and they use dreams to achieve a more awakened state of being. I have chosen to follow the emphasis on dream *consciousness*, since it reflects this traditional understanding of dreams and because it allows us to use the biographies not necessarily as records of what actually happened, a highly questionable enterprise especially for the earliest texts, but for what they reveal about the beliefs and practices of their compilers and their audiences.

One of the functions of dream consciousness in the biographies is to provide the dreamer with cognitive experiences that are beyond everyday notions of spatial and temporal reality—such as receiving prophecies about the future, communicating with deities, and gaining access to realms beyond the world of normal waking consciousness.²⁵ Ancient Indian cosmology was elaborate in its constructions, porous in its boundaries, and not overly concerned with consistency.²⁶ The same may be said of Tibetan cosmology.²⁷ This contributed to the value placed on knowledge of these realms,²⁸ whether gained from dreams or other visionary experiences.²⁹ Such knowledge, combined with the ability to foresee the future and having access to deities, helped to establish the spiritual and, where these two merge, the political authority of the dreamer in large part because the possession of such knowledge and abilities was a sign of extraordinary power, or charisma.³⁰

The successful dreamer is able to call forth a deep response in others by giving voice to their unconscious concerns, or at least by expressing such concerns in a way that the listeners find satisfying enough to act on the dream. Whether the dreamer interprets her or his own dream or someone else is called upon to do this, all the dream material (by which I mean at least the three stages of having the dream, narrating it, and receiving an interpretation)³¹ must combine in such a way that the dream elicits belief

and motivates people to act according to it. The right set of dream material confers charismatic or religious authority on the dreamer. Although any religiously significant dream confers some charisma on the dreamer, a dream that is supported and acted upon by the larger community—whether it be a village on the Amazon, a small religious community in medieval Tibet, or a royal court in ancient Egypt—confirms the dreamer as having access to highly significant information not readily available to others.³²

Just as for other signs of charisma, though, the dreams must be “proved,” that is, they must be realized and borne out in real life, especially in a way that is of benefit to the community.³³ For instance, shamans³⁴ often have their first contacts with supernatural beings through dreams, and one way of proving the extraordinary quality of their dreams and looking after the welfare of their community is to become effective at healing. Another well-known historical example occurs in the life of the biblical figure Joseph. His dreams of sheaves of wheat and stars (Gen. 37: 5–11) are clear signs of his charismatic authority, at least over his brothers, who understood all too well the meaning of his dreams and attempted to prevent his ascendancy by selling him into slavery in Egypt. Once there, Joseph’s ability to interpret the dreams of others (Gen. 40, 41), especially those of the Pharaoh,³⁵ led the Pharaoh to confer both religious and political authority on him, a position that eventually enabled Joseph to provide for the welfare of his community. As these examples suggest, granting a dream religious authority, acknowledging its charisma, is not such a radical idea because the charisma has to be proved. The life of the dreamer is the proof of the dream, either because the dream comes true or because the dreamer lives out its spiritual impact. An example of the latter can be found in Islam, where a ḥadīth from Tabari describes Muhammad’s call to apostleship through a dream in which the angel Gabriel appears.³⁶ Muhammad’s tremendous success, especially his military victories, were taken as a sign of Allah’s favor. In other words his charisma was proved. In varying degrees, the biographical subjects of this study, the Buddha and Milarepa, were such charismatic leaders.

An example of rejected charisma in the life of the Buddha demonstrates this point. After achieving enlightenment, one of the first people to whom he announces his revelation, the Ājivika Upaka, merely said, “That may be so,” and just walked away.³⁷ The Buddha then encountered the five men who had accompanied him during his years of asceticism; they became his disciples, thereby confirming his charisma and thus beginning his ministry. These two contrasting events show that charisma is essentially a relational

term; it is confirmed by the charismatic's followers and denied by others. This recognition is essentially tentative, however, in that the leader is required to prove his or her charisma by displaying magical powers or attending to the welfare of the community of believers. If charisma is not proved, the followers leave.

In Indian and Tibetan biographies there are two categories of dreamers. First, there are the heroes—those who have shaped the tradition—whose dreams are as important as their words and deeds. Second, there are the people closely associated with the hero—his parents, gurus, and disciples—whose dreams serve to reveal various aspects of his spiritual powers, such as his connections to divine realms, his prescience, or his ability to interpret dreams. Both categories of dreamers contribute to the establishment of Buddhist dream maps not only through the content of their dreams but by the interpretations that often accompany them.

My thesis about dreams in these biographical texts is fivefold. First, dreams are an accepted form of cognition.³⁸ A clear division between the waking world as reality and the world of dreams as illusion, or unreality, is a fairly recent development, and one that is not shared by all cultures.³⁹ Many ancient people believed dreams to be an acceptable form of cognition about other realities; for instance, dreams about the dead were thought to reveal information about the afterlife.⁴⁰ Further, information gathered in dreams could be, and often was, applied to the waking world.⁴¹ As the biographies make clear, dreams help one to *see* other realms and the future, to learn about salvation and a higher reality.

Second, control over dream cognition establishes religious authority. Examples of such control are correctly interpreting dreams (one's own or other people's), causing other people to dream, dreaming solutions to problems or questions, and ultimately controlling the contents and events of one's own dreams. In stressing cognition I am in part capitalizing on the language of dreaming used in most ancient texts: people say they have *seen* a dream, not they have *had* a dream. But further, ancient Indian and medieval Tibetan texts themselves discuss dreaming as a cognitive experience.

Third, *some* dreams provide access to the charisma associated with religious authority.⁴² Telling a dream is a narrative, and when someone narrates their dream they reveal something about who they are. Buddhist saints tend to narrate their dreams from a position of authority, as an event that they fully understand. This is partly due to the way the dream narrative fits in with the larger narration of their lives; the dream reveals a significant shift—

it is a moment when, for the dreamer, the world changed. The saints met that change with confidence and authority because they could interpret their dreams; they knew what the dreams portended, and they were ready for it. This confidence and authority contrast with the uncertain dream narrations of other people in the biographies—parents, disciples, and others—who suspect their dreams portend something but must seek the advice of an expert to understand them.

Fourth, in all cases the dreams preserved in the biographies are highly relevant to Buddhist experience; they are understood to be meaningful encounters with spiritual realms or beings—the dreamer crosses a threshold and is often transformed. The dream is perceived as a direct religious experience that the dreamer translates into the waking social world, whether by recounting and interpreting it or by acting upon it. To interpret a dream is to provide a cultural context for the dream experience; the interpretation mediates between the dreaming and waking realms. Significant dreams are never just self-referential: they are a bridge between these two realms, between subjective experience and social existence.⁴³

My fifth and final thesis is that dreams are a vital part of the functioning of sacred biography. The biographies of founders, such as Buddha, Muhammad, and Jesus, establish patterns that become guides for the behavior and spiritual aspirations of the faithful, while the biographies of those who come after introduce a tension between innovation and continuity.⁴⁴ Continuity is maintained by faithfully following the model established in the life of the founder, yet innovations slip in when an attempt is made to express the uniqueness of those who come after⁴⁵—especially when the tradition moves into different cultural settings. The biographies under study here contain examples of both these points of view. Dreams provide a means for examining such tension because they both dramatize continuities—with, for instance, dreams in the biographies of the Buddha—and yet highlight differences, as when they introduce new religious practices, such as Dream Yoga.

Sacred biography is a particularly accessible way to study a religion, and a revealing one. Reginald Ray has noted that in biographies “one finds a Buddhism that is alive and in evolution, and also relatively unselfconscious”; indeed, they often reveal “deep-seated beliefs and values.”⁴⁶ Since more than a thousand years of Buddhist history separate the composition dates of the Buddha’s and Milarepa’s biographies, the texts cannot help but disclose the evolution of Buddhist beliefs and values. Buddhist biographies are the lived reality of Buddhism, and they describe beliefs and prac-

tices, such as the pervasive belief in the importance of dreams, that are not readily apparent in other types of Buddhist literature.

My approach to the biographies has been to take them at face value as cultural documents that reveal the spiritual life of Indo-Tibetan Buddhists. This method has also been used to great advantage in the study of Christian hagiography by Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, who explain their approach as follows: "Our method is the traditional one of examining the texts and letting the stories speak for themselves wherever possible. What matters in this endeavor is not so much whether the stories are true as that they were told and retold."⁴⁷ In the Buddhist case what matters is that faithful Buddhists believe that the dreams and other events in the biographies actually occurred, and this belief shapes their understanding of what is relevant to the path of enlightenment.

ELITE VERSUS POPULAR VIEWS OF DREAMING

Buddhism advocates following a course of spiritual practices that will precipitate a change of consciousness leading to a direct, personal realization of the illusory nature of attachment, desire, and reality.⁴⁸ In other words, aspirants need to change the way they experience the world, the way they cognize or make sense of it. This emphasis on individual experience goes back to the earliest texts, such as the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, in which the dying Buddha tells his disciples to rely on two things: their own experience and the Dharma (the Buddhist teachings),⁴⁹ the two bases of religious authority in Buddhism. So, while the teachings of the Buddha (his revelation as it was preserved in the canons)⁵⁰ are the best guide to having this personal experience, the focus is on a personal experience of the doctrine, not doctrine for its own sake. This is critical to any understanding of Buddhism: enlightenment can only be achieved by individual experience—no one else can do it for you (although others, such as those who have themselves achieved enlightenment because they are believed capable of pointing the way, can help).⁵¹ Consequently, there is a great reliance on biography, especially that of the Buddha,⁵² which reveals an individual's successful struggle toward enlightenment. Of course, the living guru is also critical, but she or he can only offer guidance, not realization itself.

Religious authority is thus traditionally defined as whatever the historical Buddha is believed to have done in his life, all of which is thought to be appropriate and to carry the weight of his example. Thus, the greatest

authority for the validity of dreams comes from the Buddha's biographical literature because he himself both dreams and validates the dreams of others when he interprets them. Tibetan biographies follow this pattern when they record their subjects' dreams. These biographies are part of an evolving, legitimate tradition;⁵³ indeed they became part of the extended Buddhist canon, which is itself a tremendous source of religious authority. As will be shown, though, the biographies maintained their connection to the popular or folk tradition that contributed so much to their composition.

Dreams also have an important position in the nonbiographical and elite texts of Buddhism, such as the commentaries, the *sūtras*, the *tantras*, and so on. Given the range of texts that refer to dreaming, it should come as no surprise that there are contending ideas about its meaning and function. In fact, contradictory views can appear within the same text, even the biographies. For instance, after a dream is recited, discussed, interpreted, and acted upon as a vital, meaningful communication, a warning may be included about the deceptive nature of dreams. Such a warning makes the point that only some, but not all, dreams are significant. It also represents dreams as an example of the illusory and empty nature of reality.⁵⁴ Essentially, these seemingly contending beliefs about dreams are really a matter of emphasis between elite and popular views.

Elite views are most often those of literate scholar-monastics who pursue esoteric studies, while popular views are those of the laity and nonliterate monastics who are often dependent on oral presentations of texts.⁵⁵ Popular views mix Buddhist and indigenous beliefs⁵⁶—this has certainly been the case for all the countries to which Buddhism spread—and most indigenous traditions accepted some dreams as meaningful events.⁵⁷ From its very beginnings, Buddhism has both drawn on indigenous dream traditions, such as the Brahmanical interpretation of Queen Māyā's dream, and created its own, as in the Buddha's interpretation of his wife's dream that flies in the face of Brahmanical dream interpretation. In Tibet the elite/popular distinction is further extended by the diversity of religious virtuosi among Buddhist, Bon, and folk traditions such as wandering monks and yogis, exorcists, hermits, and so on.

The situation I am describing is perhaps best summed up by Clifford Geertz: "What a given religion is—its specific content—is embodied in the images and metaphors [popular tradition] its adherents use to characterize reality.... But such a religion's career—its historical course—rests in turn upon the institutions [elite tradition] which render these images and

metaphors available to those who thus employ them.”⁵⁸ In pursuing the images and metaphors of Buddhist dreamers I have encountered the ideology of elite Buddhist institutions as well as spontaneous bursts of popular piety.

It is helpful to bear in mind that there was and is no central Buddhist authority ruling on new doctrines. Paul Williams has characterized the growth of Mahāyāna as a “doctrinal widening,’ rendering doctrinally respectable certain activities and beliefs that some monks viewed with disdain, and associated primarily with the ultimately useless activities of lay people.”⁵⁹ Buddhist doctrine was never a uniform monolith. From its earliest days Buddhism adapted to the local conditions to which its missionary activities inevitably led, and Mahāyāna developed more as a highly diverse federation of cults based on different sūtras and their attendant practices than as a univocal movement.⁶⁰ Finally, throughout its long history in many diverse cultures there was never an attempt to *impose* uniform views on anyone. There is no central Buddhist authority to do so, and even a cursory look at Buddhism around the world or even in one culture reveals a tremendous diversity. Although I have attempted to trace some of the causes for the contradictory opinions about dreaming in Buddhism, underlying these causes is the simple fact that Buddhism is comfortable with such contradictions. Dreaming, like everything else, can and should be used to help individuals achieve enlightenment in whatever way best suits them: a dedicated practitioner may be led toward the esoteric practice of Dream Yoga, while those with other concerns and obligations may be reminded that since all experience is dreamlike they should apply themselves to being less attached to worldly phenomena.

The main point is that there were continual interactions between monastics and laity in the religious, economic, political, and cultural life of India and Tibet.⁶¹ Consequently, these biographies are not the exclusive materials of one or the other of these divisions, but are read or heard by all practitioners, lay or monastic, rich or poor, literate or not. The conflicting statements that often surround dreams within the same text illustrate these different views of the elite and the popular traditions. Both traditions accepted dreams as a meaningful form of cognition, but the elite tradition maintained an additional position on dreams, that they are a prime example of the empty and illusory nature of this world.⁶² I will have more to say about the relation of dreams, illusion, and emptiness in chapter 4.

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF DREAMS

Before turning to the dreams themselves, a few words need to be said about the psychoanalytic study of dreams. Even though my own thinking has been sharpened by that methodology, I have not attempted to use it here. Freud's basic idea in *The Interpretation of Dreams* was that dreams reveal unconscious wishes and motivations,⁶³ the meaning of which can be revealed in psychoanalysis by the patient's free associations to the various images of the dream. Consequently, the meaning of the dream is personal and highly subjective. In the case of historical dreamers, who are not available to uncover their subjective or unconscious meanings, scholars of historical texts often had to find different paths.⁶⁴ Significantly, it was the absence of such associations that led Freud to exclude literary dream material from his own work on dreams.⁶⁵ Of course, one can no longer *not* be influenced by Freud's ideas, and, in fact, we cannot help but see some of the "Freudian" implications of these dreams. As W. H. Auden has succinctly put it, Freud "is no more a person now but a whole climate of opinion."⁶⁶

While Jung agreed with Freud regarding the need for the associations of the dreamer,⁶⁷ one of his expansions on Freud's theory of dreaming is his distinction between big and little dreams. Little dreams are limited to the affairs of everyday life, while big dreams have such a lasting impact on individuals that they are often remembered for a lifetime.⁶⁸ Big dreams are rich in the symbols of myth and religion—archetypes—that arise from the collective unconscious of humanity rather than from the personal unconscious of the individual. The associations of the individual dreamer are therefore not helpful in interpreting such dreams because they are essentially about the process of individuation, or the integration of the conscious and the unconscious.⁶⁹ The confidence with which various Jungian studies, for instance, those of Jung himself, interpret literary dreams (those dreams preserved in literary texts of both fiction and purported truth) leads me to suppose they believe these are big dreams that can be interpreted without the associations of the dreamer. The reader is, of course, free to pursue such interpretations of Buddhist dream material,⁷⁰ though caution should be exercised before wholeheartedly accepting these accounts as the faithful reproduction of the actual dreams of the Buddha or Milarepa. And, as fascinating as Jung's theory of individuation is, one should pay close attention to the Buddhist notion of the self discussed below. If indeed Buddhists experience individuation, they certainly begin from a very different existential base than Westerners.⁷¹ Lastly, Jung himself was quite clear about

the need for extensive training before undertaking dream interpretation, including being psychoanalyzed. Perhaps more important, he recommended meeting the dream with the expectation that one has absolutely no idea what it could mean!⁷²

The dream process adumbrates a large, meaningful space in Buddhist religious experience that rewards attention. The purpose of this study is to elucidate that space through the sociological and religious functions of Buddhist dreams rather than their psychological and individual meanings⁷³—in ways that, I hope, will illuminate their historical and cultural situation more than my own. Of course, it is the nature of dreams to be rich and fluid in meaning, and frequently I will examine the same dream differently in different contexts. For instance, when I discuss Emperor Aśoka's dream in chapter 3 it is largely in terms of the relation of dreams and karma, while in chapter 10 I discuss it in relation to gender ideologies. There simply is no accurate monolithic viewpoint on the meaning of any one dream, just as there is no unitary view in Buddhist dream theory.