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Abstract

This paper is a dialogue between a scholar of Buddhism and scholar of psychotherapy about dreams and their interpretation in early Buddhist texts. We explore five dreams attributed to the Buddha, and their interpretation, followed by the Buddha's purported interpretation of seven dreams of his prominent disciple Ānanda. Both the dreams and their interpretations are provided in these texts, but what is not provided is the hermeneutical process of interpretation. Our overarching question is whether these ancient dreams and their interpretations have any resonance with contemporary psychotherapeutic methods of dream interpretation. While exploring this question, we engage the ongoing debate in the academy of religion between newer approaches that posit a thoroughgoing historicism, and older approaches, indebted to myth and folklore studies, that identify transhistorical archetypal motifs in religious

traditions. In general, the dreams of the Buddha and Ānanda give us a unique window into the significance of the Buddha's enlightenment, the founding of the Buddhist Sangha, and the early anxieties of that community as it anticipated the Buddha taking leave of the earthly plane. The dreams also illustrate a kind of Buddhist "psychotherapy," where dreams and waking life exist in a dialogic relationship of mutual illumination and relativization. Both dream experience and waking experience can provide valuable insights, but both can also be left behind as disciples focus more intently on the spiritual path of true awakening.

Introduction

This paper is a controlled experiment in dream interpretation in two very different historical and cultural contexts. Our overarching research question is whether a contemporary therapeutic (mainly Jungian) approach to dream interpretation can make sense of ancient Buddhist dream interpretation. And if so, how? It began as a collaboration between Henry, a scholar of Buddhism, and Glenn, a therapist and scholar with an interest in dreams and the psychology of religion. The easiest way to describe what the paper is about is likely to tell you how it took shape. It began when Henry proposed a project on dreams in Buddhism and provided a working paper summarizing various relevant texts. Glenn was quickly fascinated by Henry's description of five dreams of the Buddha, which were purported to have taken place either on the night he left his palatial home to pursue the path of enlightenment, or on the night before he attained that enlightenment. The dreams were not only described, but also interpreted in these texts.

Glenn was struck by the fact that these dreams and their interpretations seemed quite genuine. That is, he was aware that historical scholars might assume the dreams and their interpretations were accretions from a later editor, possibly used to embellish the original oral tradition of the Buddha's enlightenment. But what fascinated Glenn, as he said in a note to Henry, was that "from their content, it seems entirely possible to me that these are actual dreams. They are extremely significant in their content and 'weight,' and they have the ring of authenticity in terms of their interpretations." Henry responded, helpfully, with the eye of an historical scholar:

> The issue, of course, is that it took centuries to develop the hagiography of the Buddha. We have no idea when the story about the five dreams began to circulate. Did the Buddha really have those dreams the night before he attained enlightenment? Or was it a later addition to the life story of the Buddha centuries after his death?

And Glenn clarified that this is precisely what he found fascinating:

> Yes, this is the issue I was pondering too! If these dreams are an addition from a later editor, they were certainly made by someone who had an expert knowledge of dreams and their nuances. It is surprising to me that a later interpreter could invent dreams that fit so wonderfully with the context of the Buddha's impending enlightenment, while also capturing the strangeness of the dream world. To me, these dreams seem too genuine—they fit too well—to be a simple invention. There must at least be a veridical oral tradition present here (in my non-professional estimation).

So the reader can see that, from the very beginning, we were plunged into a host of methodological questions. As mentioned, these ancient Buddhist texts contain not only dreams, but very brief interpretations. These

summative interpretations show the *outcome* of interpretation, but not the *hermeneutical method or process* of interpretation. That is, the texts leave a hermeneutical gap between the dreams and their interpretations. What fascinated Glenn was that he could *fill in* this gap with his own hermeneutical method of interpretation, derived from psychotherapy, to plausibly connect the dreams to their summative interpretations. But how could a contemporary therapeutic method of interpretation make sense of dreams from such a different historical, cultural, linguistic, and religious context? Aren't the meanings of dreams, and the process of arriving at those meanings, completely indebted to cultural and linguistic context? Or is it possible that there are certain transcultural dream motifs, and perhaps transcultural hermeneutical methods for recognizing those motifs? These are the questions this paper poses. In our research, we could not find any scholarship that attempted to fill in the hermeneutical gap between these dreams and their interpretations, and thus we approached our task as a pioneering venture.

These general questions also relate to a larger methodological question that has arguably vexed the academic study of religion since its inception. A previous generation of scholars, indebted to myth and folklore studies, posited certain transcultural motifs in religious stories, texts, and practices. This approach was probably best exemplified by Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) and the "Chicago school" of the history of religions, which trained a whole generation of religious studies scholars. Eliade was famous for identifying archetypal motifs, like the *axis mundi*, that seem to be present in religious traditions from vastly different cultures. An *axis mundi* archetype might be instantiated in a variety of ectypes, such as a sacred mountain, a cosmic tree, a pillar, ladder, vine, or rope, as these are identified in sacred stories or in a particular natural landscape. But in all cases, according to Eliade, these *axis mundi* symbols represent a vertical pole and centre that connects various layers of the cosmos, often with heavens above, the earthly plane of existence in the middle, and an

underworld below. As such the axis is sacred as a point of orientation and communication, an opening to the realms of gods and ancestors, where "the universe of being is accessible in all its dimensions."[1] We will see a few of these *axis mundi* symbols in the dreams below.

The question is, how can we explain the existence of such archetypal, transcultural motifs? How can they appear independently in such widely differing cultures, which may have little or no historical contact? Eliade does not offer a clear answer to this question, but here we can draw on the thought of Eliade's colleague, C.G. Jung, who suggests that the evolutionary inheritance of the human mind and body may be the ultimate source of these motifs.[2] The archetypes may be present in our unconscious from birth, as an evolutionary and instinctive birthright that shapes our perceptions of reality into certain patterns, and functions to reveal hidden aspects of our own soul and its spectrum of being.[3] In relation to the

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[1] Lawrence E. Sullivan, "Axis mundi," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade and L. Jones (Macmillan Reference USA, 1987), 713.

[2] Culianu notes three different conceptions of archetypes in Eliade's work, and in one of these conceptions "the difference between the meanings of 'archetype' in Eliade and Jung is negligible." Ioan P. Culianu, *Mircea Eliade* (Cittadella Editrice, 1978), 57, n. 17. See also the distinctions between Eliade and Jung on this point in Natale Spineto, "The Notion of Archetype in Eliade's Writings," *Religion* 38, no. 4 (2008): 266-274. Eliade frequently joined Jung at the renowned Eranos conference in Ascona, Switzerland. The idea that archetypes have an instinctive, evolutionary, and/or bodily basis is also not unique to Jung, and continues to be noted by scholars today. See Helmer Ringgren, "Comparative Mythology," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion,* 2nd ed, edited by Mircea Eliade and Lindsay Jones (Macmillan Reference USA, 1987). See also Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

[3] In Western history, the concept of archetypes has its origins in Plato's world of forms, and in certain pre-Socratic traditions, but it was picked up especially by Augustine, for whom the archetypes exist in the mind of God, and are continually infused into the human mind and memory. Western medieval and early-modern thinkers debated, in the so called "nominalist controversy," whether these archetypes exist apart from physical objects or whether their existence is constituted by the objects themselves. The

axis mundi archetype, some have even suggested that this axis generally corresponds to the human nervous system and spinal column, with "higher" functions above in the brain, and "lower" functions below in the digestive, sexual, and excretory systems.[4] In general, psychodynamic

archetypes noted by Plato and Augustine included the universal concepts of mathematics (noted by Pythagoras), which form the foundations of music and the arts. Other archetypes included the transcendentals: goodness, truth, and beauty. For Augustine the archetypes also included the seven eternal days of creation, represented by eternal Sophia, which manifest as eternal forces shaping the created order. This latter concept was elaborated especially by Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) who stands behind Jung's conception of the archetypes and their connection to dreams and the imagination. Both Eliade and Jung traced their use of this concept to Plato and Augustine. Jung hypothesized that archetypes are based in bodily instincts, and indeed that they are basically instincts clothed in symbols. The prominent archetypes he noted in his own dreams and the dreams of his patients included the parental *imagos*, the shadow, the archetype of the beloved (anima/animus), and the archetype of the whole psyche (the Self), which included both centre and circumference, consciousness and the unconscious. Jung suggested, following tradition, that archetypes are "purely formal," meaning that their content is supplied by the socio-historical context. E.g. most cultures have mothers, and mother goddesses, which leads us to posit a mother archetype, but the specific content and thus a large part of the meaning of the mother archetype is supplied by historical and cultural context. Jung: "Again and again I encounter the mistaken notion that an archetype is determined in regard to its content... It is necessary to point out once more that archetypes are not determined as regards their content, but only as regards their form and then only to a very limited degree." C.G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 2nd ed., vol. 9i of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, edited by Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler (Princeton University Press, 1968), 79.

[4] This idea is stated explicitly by Northrop Frye in his final book, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (Harvest, 1990), but Frye also seems to think it is implicit in many of the mythographers upon which his work depends, including James Frazer and Eliade. Frye also suggests that its ultimate source is the Renaissance Hermetic idea of correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm, the universe and the human being—a motif we will see in the first dream below. For more on this, see Glenn McCullough, "Northrop Frye, C.G. Jung, and the Grand Scheme of Things: Mapping the Psycho-Mythical Cosmos," *Journal of Religion* 103, no. 2 (2023): 145-186. Both Frye and Jung related this concept to the chakra system of Hindu and Buddhist tantrism.

thinkers have noted that dreams seem to contain a disproportionate number of archetypal motifs, and this may be because dreams are so closely connected to both the body and the unconscious.[5] That is, dreams might have a particular ability to access realms that are deeper than language and culture, even if their symbolism makes use of language and culture. Hypotheses like these seemed quite fruitful for Glenn's therapeutic work, mainly because he had seen so many archetypal motifs in the dreams of his clients.

More recent scholarship in religious studies has questioned the validity of Eliade's and Jung's transcultural motifs, partly because any identification of sameness between two phenomena will necessarily exclude certain aspects of difference. Thus archetypes tend to become abstractions that neglect difference and diversity.[6] Henry was aware, for

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[5] Dreams are connected to the body and are used for diagnosis of bodily conditions in a variety of cultures. In Western traditions, dreams were used for diagnosis and healing of bodily ailments in the temples of Asclepius, in the Hippocratic medical tradition of Rufus and Galen, and generally in Aristotelian thought. On this see, for example, Mark Holowchak, *Ancient Science and Dreams: Oneirology in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (University Press of America, 2002). All of these ideas passed into medieval thought in various ways. Likewise, in the east, dreams were used for diagnostic purposes in seminal ancient Chinese medical texts like the *Huangdi Neijing* (The Esoteric Scripture of the Yellow Emperor), and this influence continues to the present day. See Calvin Kai-Ching, "The Yellow Emperor's Canon of Internal Medicine and the Interpretation of Typical Dreams Two Millennia Ago," *Dreaming* (New York, N.Y.) 26, no. 3 (2016): 250–69. Both Freud and Jung also connected dreams and the unconscious mind to the body, and to the autonomic nervous system, in very direct ways. The ultimate source of this latter idea seems to be G.H. von Schubert's remarkable *Die Symbolik des Traumes* (Bessler Press, 1968; originally published in 1814). Freud's Oedipus complex can be considered an archetype, in Jung's sense of the term. Freud preferred to use the term "parental *imago*" for the parental archetypes, but imago is a term he also adopted from Jung.

[6] The lack of methodological consistency in the comparison of religions was noted in a landmark essay by Jonathan Z. Smith, "Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit," *History of Religions* 11, no. 1 (1971): 67-90. Smith's influential critiques of Eliade's

example, of attempts by earlier Western scholars to impose archetypal meanings on Buddhist texts—usually meanings derived from Western thought—which amounted to a distortion of the texts themselves and an ongoing intellectual colonialism.[7] Likewise, Western scholars were often guilty of selectively appropriating certain aspects of Buddhism and decontextualizing them. The popularity of "mindfulness" techniques in Western psychotherapy is one conspicuous example.[8] In light of these distortions, Henry leaned toward a robust historicism and contextualism in regard to religious phenomena. Glenn, while aware of abuses of the archetype concept in older scholarship, and aware of the deep critiques of Mircea Eliade and the "Chicago school" in recent scholarship, still held the door open to these archetypal motifs, mainly because he had seen them so often in the dreams of his clients.[9]

A helpful example appeared quite early in the project. Henry, suggesting the need for a contextual approach to the dreams, noted the contextual meaning of Mount Meru in Buddhist cosmology: the mythical mountain was understood to be the centre of the universe, with layers of heaven above, layers of hell below, and four island continents surrounding it in the four cardinal directions. Henry noted that if you did not know this contextual meaning, you could not interpret a dream about this mountain accurately. Upon hearing this example, Glenn thought of Eliade's understanding of the sacred mountain as an *axis mundi*, a vertical axis connecting the three level cosmos and defining its symmetry. Glenn

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comparisons were later articulated in a landmark book, Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[7] See, for example, Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[8] See, for example, Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World through Mindfulness* (Hyperion, 2005).

[9] For a good summary of these critiques see Richard King, ed., *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies* (Columbia University Press, 2017), Part 8.

also thought of Jung's archetype of the Self as the deep centre of the unconscious, around which the ego tends to circle in therapy. The Self archetype tends to appear in centring dream symbols, including mountains.[10] For Glenn, although Eliade's particular ideas about sacred mountains, and the evidence upon which they are based, have been critiqued,[11] the fact still remains that disparate cultures often speak of sacred mountains as the centre of the universe, and they organize layered and symmetrical cosmologies around them.[12] Having seen the symbol of the sacred mountain in the dreams of several of his clients, Glenn observed that this symbol appeared to connote a deep psychospiritual Centre, often setting a more transcendent goal for the ego, and drawing it into a sacred quest. But was it possible that these connotations of the mountain symbol could hold true in both an ancient Buddhist context and a contemporary Western context?

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[10] See C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy,* 2nd ed., vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, edited by Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler (Princeton University Press, 1968). Jung did not use the term *axis mundi*, but the phenomenology of his Self archetype is very close to it. See also Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1959).

[11] See Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place*, 1-23. See also Frank J. Korom, "Of Navels and Mountains: A Further Inquiry into the History of an Idea," *Asian Folklore Studies* 51, no. 1 (1992): 103-125.

[12] As Lawrence Sullivan notes, "Foremost among the images designated by the term *axis mundi* is the cosmic mountain, a sacred place deemed to be the highest point of the universe and perhaps identified with the centre of the world and the place where creation first began. Well-known examples of the cosmic mountain are Mount Meru or South Asian cosmology, Haraberazaiti of Iranian tradition, and Himinbjörg of Scandinavian mythology." Sullivan, "Axis mundi," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Macmillan Reference USA, 1987), 712. See also Diana L. Eck, "Mountains," in *Enc. of Rel.*, 6212-5; Walter Y. Evans-Wentz, *Cuchama and Sacred Mountains*, edited by Frank Waters and Charles Adams (Ohio University Press, 1981); Fausto O. Sarmiento, "Montology Manifesto: Echoes Towards a Transdisciplinary Science of Mountains," *Journal of Mountain Science* 17, no. 10 (2020): 2512-2527; and Edwin Bernbaum, *Sacred Mountains of the World*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Methodology

What follows then is a dialogue between a scholar of Buddhism and a practicing therapist about the purported dreams of the Buddha and his most prominent disciple, Ānanda, their interpretations, and their possible relevance for therapeutic and spiritual uses of dreams today. The Buddha's and Ānanda's dreams are our case material, and through it we hope to illustrate, and possibly illuminate, an ongoing debate in the academy of religion between newer historicist and contextualist approaches, and older archetypal approaches indebted to myth and folklore studies. In general we hope to illustrate that contextualist and archetypal approaches can be mutually informative, and that we need both to capture the phenomena of religion in all their depth and diversity. Contextual approaches alert us to the delightful differences between religious motifs that, at first glance, may appear similar. Archetypal approaches help us identify fruitful loci for interreligious dialogue, they foreground the category of "religion" as something that is not simply reducible to the category of "culture," and they raise the possibility that widespread religious motifs might be grounded in the human body and its instincts. The methodological pendulum has swung to both extremes in the history of religious scholarship, and it might be time to find the golden mean.

Henry's specific method for working with these two dream texts included a comparative reading of the different versions of the texts found in different scriptural compendia, with attention paid to the doctrinal and symbolic significance of these dreams as understood in the context of early Buddhism. He also paid attention to the Indian culture that may have impacted the interpretation of these dreams within the Buddhist sangha. As Serinity Young points out, "South Asians consistently use the verb 'seeing' (Sanskrit: *√dṛś*, Tibetan: *mthong*) a dream rather than 'having' a dream. Such language expresses the fact that dreams are experienced as given to individuals rather than being created by them and

tends to emphasize the external rather than the internal origin of the dream, thereby lending them a divine or demonic authority."[13] In her examination of the role of dreams within Buddhist texts, Young also underscores the necessity of opening up the cultural context of Buddhist dream experiences and practices, arguing that the cultural context is crucial for understanding the meaning of a dream.

Glenn's specific method for working with dreams in therapy involved asking the dreamer for their associations with each figure, symbol, or event in the dream. Although the symbols in the remembered "text" of the dream are polyvalent, meaning that the dream can have many different possible meanings, the symbolic associations of the dreamer help to limit the possible meanings of the dream text, and indeed they often allow both client and therapist to agree upon a fairly specific meaning of the dream, at least at that point in time. The feeling tones associated with each symbol and event in the dream are particularly important for interpretation. When the meaning suggested by the therapist rings true for the dreamer, there is often a kind of shock of insight, as if the dream knew something about the dreamer that was very close to the surface of consciousness, but not yet articulated. The articulation of this pre-conscious thought or feeling is often accompanied by a release of energy in the dreamer. The articulation of the meaning of the dream often crystallizes some conflict, tension, trauma, or hope that was lodged in the body or the unconscious, and its articulation often seems to move some quantum of energy out of the body in a kind of release. Dreams can also ring true in this way, with a *totally new meaning*, at later points in the dreamer's life. That is, the polyvalence of the various symbols in the dream supports an

[13] Serinity Young, "Buddhist Dream Experience; The Role of Interpretation, Ritual, and Gender," in *Dreams: A Reader on the Religious, Cultural, and Psychological Dimensions of Dreaming*, ed. K. Bulkeley (Palgrave, 2001), 11.

ongoing, diachronic reading of a single dream text, which allows it to ring true with new meanings at various points or stages in the dreamer's life.

The fact that the dream rings true with an awareness that is beyond the dreamer's conscious awareness means that dreams grant insights that seem to come from beyond the dreamer. This mysterious aspect of dream therapy connects it quite naturally to various spiritual traditions. The dream in this sense appears to come from outside the precincts of the dreamer's ego. In Western traditions dreams have been taken as (1) revelatory of bodily illness or health, (2) revelatory of the state of the dreamer's soul, and (3) revelatory of forces outside the dreamer, such as spiritual figures (e.g. angels or demons) or deceased ancestors.[14] Glenn has observed all three "types" of dreams in his therapeutic practice, although as a therapist he generally maintains a metaphysical humility and tries to adapt to the spiritual inclinations of his clients.[15] In the dreams that follow, the texts themselves offer interpretations, so our task is to connect the dream symbols with the interpretations that are already offered by the tradition itself. The fact that we do not have the original dreamer's associations, and especially the feeling tones associated with the dream figures, is a serious impediment, but we will attempt to proceed as best we can given the data available.

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[14] See, for example, Holowchak, Ancient Science and Dreams; Morton T. Kelsey, *God, Dreams, and Revelation: A Christian Interpretation of Dreams*, revised and expanded edition (Augsburg, 1991); and Kelly Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History* (New York University Press, 2008).

[15] For more on dreams in the Western tradition see Glenn McCullough, *Jacob Boehme and the Spiritual Roots of Psychotherapy: Dreams, Ecstasy, and Wisdom, Studies in Theology and Religion*, Vol. 35 (Brill, 2025).

Part 1: The Buddha's Five Dreams

These five dreams are found in Buddhist texts of various traditions, although the timing of the dreams differs. In the *Lalitavistara-sūtra* and the *Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra* , which were originally composed in Sanskrit and belong to the Mahāyāna tradition, these dreams occurred right before the Buddha left the palace to begin his ascetic path; in the *Supina Sutta* and the *Mahāvastu*, which are Pali texts of the Theravāda tradition, these dreams occurred the night before the Buddha attained his enlightenment. Nevertheless, the five dreams are described very similarly in these different texts. According to the *Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra*, which survives in Chinese translation as the *Fo benxing ye jijing*, it is stated:

> That night, the Prince had visions of the five great dreams. Firstly, he dreamed that he made use of the great earth as his couch, Mount Meru as his pillow; he laid his left hand in the Eastern Ocean, laid his right hand in the Western Ocean, and placed his two feet in the Southern Ocean. Secondly, he dreamed of a creeper named "Establishment" growing out of his navel and its tip reaching the Akaniṣṭha. Thirdly, he dreamed of four birds of different colours, coming from the four directions, and they naturally turned into the pure white colour at the feet of the Prince. Fourthly, he dreamed of four white beasts with black heads, crawling from the feet to knees to lick the legs of the Prince. Fifthly, he dreamed of a mountain of manure, high and extensive, yet the Prince walked on it all over but was not fouled by the manure.[16]

It is also important to observe that the sequence of dreams presented here adheres to the traditional Chinese account. However, notably, the order

[16] T 190, 3: 728a-b. The five dreams are also found in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (AN 5.196, *Supina Sutta*), in which the order of the third and fourth dreams is switched.

of the third and fourth dreams is reversed in the Pali Canon.[17] These five dreams are traditionally held to be prognostic[18] and to presage the following key events in the Buddha's life: 1) the Bodhisattva's realization of enlightenment, 2) his teaching of the Eightfold Path, 3) the four classes of the caste system learning the Dharma from him and attaining liberation, 4) many lay people wearing pure white clothes to take refuge in him, and 5) the Buddha making good use of the four requisites of robe, alms, dwelling place, and medicines without attachment.[19] We will explore them in turn. To underscore the prognostic and authentic nature of the Bodhisatta's dreams, traditional accounts maintain that all Buddhas, both past and future, experience these dreams as a sign of their attainment of perfect enlightenment, prior to their final victory over Māra.

Dream One: The Enlightenment of the Buddha

> *He dreamed that he made use of the great earth as his couch, Mount Meru as his pillow; he laid his left hand in the Eastern Ocean, laid his right hand in the Western Ocean, and placed his two feet in the Southern Ocean. The dream symbolizes the Buddhas attainment of enlightenment.*

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[17] C. Bautze-Picron, "The five Dreams of the Bodhisattva in the Murals of Pagan," *Berliner Indologische Studien*, 15 (2003), 341-368.

[18] S. Young, *Dreaming in the Lotus: Buddhist Dream Narrative, Imagery, and Practice* (Wisdom Publications, 1999), 29-31.

[19] Another early Buddhist text, the *Milindapañhā* (The Questions of King Milinda), offers an interesting typology of dreams. The final type, prognostic dreams, are the only type considered to be "true:" "O king, coming across the path of the mind which is what is called a dream. And there are six kinds of people who see dreams—the man who is of a windy humour, or of a bilious one, or of a phlegmatic one, the man who dreams dreams by the influence of a god, the man who does so by the influence of his own habits, and the man who does so in the way of prognostication. And of these, O king, only the last kind of dreams is true; all the rest are false." Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda* [*Milindapañhā*], 157–158.

As a therapist, if Glenn saw a dream like this in one of his clients, he would be somewhat worried. Inasmuch as dreams depict psychological conflicts and their possible outcomes, they can be used as a very general, though imperfect, assessment tool.[20] For an "average" person, meaning someone who had not attained the spiritual stature of the Buddha, the identification of the dreamer with the cosmos here would tend to indicate grandiosity on a significant scale, possibly portending a severe mental health crisis.[21] But in an "average" person, a dream with such grandiose symbolism would usually appear as a nightmare, with fear, foreboding, and other extreme warning signs. Thus what is noteworthy and unique here is that the vastness of the cosmic symbolism in this dream also comes with a feeling of serenity, indicating not grandiosity but equanimity. The dreamer is reclining on the earth as a "couch," and on the cosmic mountain as a "pillow." The scene is one of monumental grandeur with simultaneous peacefulness and repose. In other words, the dreamer is no "average" person, but a person of significant spiritual attainment.

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[20] For a good summary of diagnostic uses of dreams, see James Hall, *Jungian Dream Interpretation: A Handbook of Theory and Practice* (Inner City Books, 1983), 38-53. Dreams are certainly not the only tool for diagnosis, but they can at times be remarkably insightful and prescient.

[21] The dream symbolism is grandiose in that it identifies the dreamer with the cosmos itself, indicating an almost godlike sense of self. Dreams with such grandiose symbolism often portend major psychic conflicts, including psychosis. But, as mentioned, a dream that presaged such a negative outcome would usually include violent symbolism and feelings of fear. Jung famous book *Symbols of Transformation*, which occasioned his split with Freud, traced a series of dreams in a young woman just before she had a psychotic break. Although he did not know the dreamer personally, Jung was able to trace, quite remarkably, the vicissitudes of her psychic struggles. His conclusions were later validated by the woman's American therapist, who said that "personal acquaintance with the patient had not taught him 'one iota more' about her mentality." C.G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, 2nd ed., vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, edited by Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler (Princeton University Press, 1956), xxviii.

The dream describes the Buddha's body as a cognate of the cosmos, with his limbs laid out according to the four cardinal directions. The archetypal motif here is the correspondence of the microcosm of the body with the macrocosm of the universe. The Buddha, in a sense, has become one with the universe, or the universe has become one with the Buddha. Either way, this may be one way of understanding what enlightenment means in Buddhism. The scene itself is a kind of *maṇḍala*, with the body itself describing the four gates of the *maṇḍala:* head, feet, left hand, and right hand. But the head is emphasized as unique and set apart, because it is the only body part that is not in an ocean. The head rests on Mount Meru like a pillow. And there are at least two things worth noting here. The first is that it "rests." The head—and the mind within it—is in a state of relaxed repose. The second has to do with the vast significance of the sacred mountain as a symbol of the universal centre, the *axis mundi*. The head rests in this cosmic centre, perfectly balanced between heaven and hell, above and below, and centred between the four continents and the four cardinal directions. To rest the mind in this cosmic centre in perfect equanimity may be another way of understanding what enlightenment means in Buddhism, at least at the time of this dream.

The cardinal directions and the left and right sides of the body may also carry symbolic significance here. In later tantric traditions, the origins of which scholars generally trace to seventh-century India, the cardinal directions play a very important role, in that the "five directions" (including the centre) were associated with the Five Buddhas, the Five Wisdoms, etc.[22] The left and right sides of the body were also linked to the left and right channels of tantric visualization. These teachings and practices came much later than the dreams described here, although it is

[22] Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (Routledge, 2000), 211.

possible that they emerged from a common tradition. A story present in similar forms in various texts, notes that

> As soon as he was born, the Bodhisattva stepped onto the ground. Wherever his feet touched the ground, a large lotus immediately sprung from the earth. . . . Unsupported, he took seven steps toward the east and declared, "I will be the cause of all virtuous practices." Wherever the Bodhisattva took a step, a lotus sprouted forth. He then took seven steps toward the south and said, "I am worthy of the offerings of gods and humans." Next he took seven steps toward the West and, pausing on the seventh step, he proclaimed these satisfying words in lion-like fashion: "I am the Supreme Being on this earth. This is my last birth, where I shall uproot birth, old age, sickness, and death!" He then took seven steps toward the north and said, "I will be supreme among all sentient beings!" Next he took seven steps downhill, saying, "I will subjugate Māra and his army! I will cause great rain clouds of the Dharma to shower down on all hell beings, extinguishing the fires of hell and filling the beings there with happiness." Finally he took seven steps uphill, lifted his gaze, and said, "All sentient beings will look up to me."[23]

We get a suggestion here that the Buddha is *himself*, like mount Meru, a cosmic centre—that his newly born body is *itself* the point of reference for all other points, an *axis mundi* of sorts.

[23] 84000. *The Play in Full (Lalitavistara, rgya cher rol pa,* Toh 95), edited by Dharmachakra Translation Committee. Online publication (84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, 2024). https://read.84000.co/translation/toh95.html?id=&part=.

Dream Two: The Eightfold Path

> *He dreamed of a creeper named "Establishment" growing out of his navel and its tip reaching the Akaniṣṭha. The dream symbolizes the Buddha's teaching of the Dharma: the Eightfold Path to liberation.*

Interestingly, the dream symbolism seems to contain Hindu elements, at least at first glance. The Hindu *Purāṇa*s, in several different passages, depict the birth of the creator god Brahma, describing him as emerging from a lotus flower growing out of the navel of the sustaining god Viṣṇu.[24] This story was likely known to the early Buddhist community, but in this dream the story has changed. And as such this dream is even more grand and panoramic than the first dream, although it can also be seen as a logical extension of the first. Here the Buddha is not merely co-extensive with the cosmos, but like Viṣṇu, who produced Brahmā the world creator, the Buddha is *himself* producing a Dharma (the Eightfold Path) which is *itself* a kind of world creator. Or, more accurately, if we see the whole dream and not merely the creeping vine as a symbol of the Dharma, we might say that *the Dharma reveals that the world creator is itself a creation*. In other words, behind or within the Dharma is the Buddha's realization that the created world as we perceive it is itself a creation of our own desires. The navel may be a symbol here of human will, desire, and fortitude, as well as a symbol of the ability to give birth to autonomous entities with a will and a life of their own. The Buddha Dharma is one such autonomous entity.

If we look at the dream on its own terms, instead of contrasting it with Hindu mythology, we can consider the name of the creeping vine, "Establishment," and the fact that it extends up to Akaniṣṭha, which means "unsurpassed" in Sanskrit—the highest abode in the heavens of

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[24] Mani Vettam, *Purāṇic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Work with Special Reference to the Epic and Puranic Literature* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), 864-867.

Buddhist cosmology.[25] Here the vine does seem to represent the establishment of a firm path, the Eightfold Path, which leads to this highest abode. If Mount Meru as the cosmic centre was identified with the Buddha's body in the last dream, here we have the Dharma emerging out of the Buddha's body, as an established path that extends through this cosmic centre from earth to the highest abode. The vine of Dharma, as an umbilical cord, remains connected to the Buddha's body, and remains nourished by it, as the tendrils of this vine connects the earthly realm to the highest heaven. And all of this helps to elucidate symbolically the sense in which the Dharma is a path, established in and by the Buddha.

Dream Three: The Founding of the Sangha

> *He dreamed of four birds of different colours, coming from the four directions, and they naturally turned into the pure white colour at the feet of the Prince. The dream symbolizes the four classes of the caste system learning the Dharma and attaining liberation.*

Once again, this dream may be set against the backdrop of Hindu mythology, building on the previous dream: Brahmā, the creator, is often pictured with four heads, and those heads have various symbolic associations in mythic texts, including the four Vedas, the four *yuga*s (or ages of the universe), the four cardinal directions, and the four *varṇa*s or castes (Brāhmin, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra).[26] In the Vedic tradition, the four classes of the caste system are believed to have come from the mouth, the arms,

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[25] The name of the creeper is only found in the Chinese translation of this passage. The Chinese word, 建立 (*jianli*), can mean "establish," "instate," "cultivate," "build," "set," etc. Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. "建立," assessed November 4, 2024. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/chinese-traditional-english/建立.

[26] John Stratton Hawley, "Brahmā," in *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of World Religions*, ed. Wendy Doniger (Merriam-Webster, 1999), 140.

the thighs, and the feet of a primordial giant named Puruṣa, whose body parts represent the four castes in a hierarchy of decreasing purity.[27] In the Buddhist tradition, the metaphor of white has long been employed to symbolize purity, with other colours often representing impurities. A notable example of this can be found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, where the Buddha directly compares a white cloth to a pure and radiant mind:

> Again, a monk, having given up pleasure and pain, and with the disappearance of former gladness and sadness, enters and remains in the fourth jhāna which is beyond pleasure and pain, and purified by equanimity and mindfulness. And he sits suffusing his body with that mental purity and clarification so that no part of his body is untouched by it. Just as if a man were to sit wrapped from head to foot in a white garment, so that no part of him was untouched by that garment—so his body is suffused. . . . This is a fruit of the homeless life, more excellent and perfect than the former ones. And so, with mind concentrated, purified and cleansed, unblemished, free from impurities, malleable, workable, established, and having gained imperturbability, he directs and inclines his mind towards knowing and seeing."[28]

In the later development of Buddhism, the practice of tranquility (*samatha*) is frequently articulated through a nine-stage training process, symbolized by the imagery of taming a wild elephant.[29] In one Tibetan tradition of *thangka* painting, this progression is visually represented by the gradual transformation of a dark elephant into a white one, illustrating

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[27] Arvind Sharma, "The Puruṣasūkta: Its Relation to the Caste System," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 21, no.3 (1978): 294-303.

[28] Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Wisdom Publications, 1995), 103-4.

[29] Lobsang Tshultrim Gnon-na, "Theory and Practice of Tranquil Abiding Meditation in Tibet: The Pith Instructions of Yeshe Gyaltsen (1713-1793) and His Predecessors," *Religions* 13, no. 11 (2022): 1057. https://doi.org/10.3390/ rel13111057.

the stages of mental taming and purification. The core message of this dream seems to relate to the *colour* of the four birds, which is initially "different," but which "naturally" turns into "pure white." The differences of the caste system seem to naturally dissolve under the influence of the Dharma, and a new "purity" is found, again at the centre point of the four directions, which here is at the feet of the Prince, possibly symbolizing the notion that, regardless of the caste from which individuals originated, they all demonstrated the highest respect for the Buddha by venerating him at his feet, in accordance with ancient Indian customs.[30]

Looking at the sequence of dreams thus far we can see a progression from (1) the Buddha's enlightenment, to (2) the *effect* of that enlightenment in the teaching of the Eightfold Path, to (3) the effect of the Dharma itself in dissolving power and caste differences, and forming new egalitarian communities. We can thus position the first three dreams in terms of the three traditional jewels of Buddhism: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Lastly, the significance of bird symbolism is multifaceted. In the Dhammapada, the Buddha is said to have compared the path of enlightened beings to the flight of a bird, and the traditional reading of this dream seems to involve the attainment of liberation.[31] Another prominent connotation of bird symbolism comes from the hub of the wheel of life, in which a bird, a snake, and a pig are depicted as representing the three poisons, namely, greed, hatred, and delusion. Therefore, birds may represent desire and clinging (*rāga*). Birds of different colours turning into pure white may connote that various kinds of unwholesome desires are transformed and become pure, as they gather within the Buddha's

[30] Albertina Nugteren, "Bare Feet and Sacred Ground: 'Viṣṇu Was Here," *Religion* 9, no. 7 (2018), 224. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9070224.

[31] John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana, trans., *The Dhammapada* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 43.

"standpoint." It may signify further that the caste system is itself based in a system of unwholesome desires. Significantly, these four birds follow a trajectory that brings them down to earth, which might also connote the establishment of an earthly community—a community grounded in the exigencies of everyday life, which nonetheless seeks to be egalitarian, and to foster liberation.

Dream Four: The Growth of the Sangha

> *He dreamed of four white beasts with black heads, crawling from the feet to knees to lick the legs of the Prince. The dream symbolizes the pure white-robed lay people and householders who take refuge in the Buddha and his teaching.*

The term "white-robed laymen" (*avadāta-vasana*) is commonly found in Buddhist texts to refer to lay Buddhist practitioners. Buddhist monastics, on the other hand, are described as wearing dark and black robes. As such this is the second dream describing the Buddhist Sangha. If the first dream is about the descent toward the grounding and founding of an earthly community, here we have an image of very earthly beasts (which are described as "worms" in the Pali versions of this dream) ascending from the ground, and a somewhat sensual depiction of the hunger or thirst of these beasts as they lick the legs of the Buddha. If we were to look at these dreams in terms of a temporal progression, we might suppose that the initial founding of the Sangha in the previous dream—a founding of purity and unity—gave way in later generations to a community that itself could succumb to instinctive desires and craving. Even if this craving is primarily for the Buddha himself and his teaching of liberation, this craving, this licking of the legs in an attempt to ascend to the full stature of the Buddha, can itself be a source of division and impurity within the community. As such if the previous dream gives us an ideal, or idealized portrait of the

Sangha—a Sangha of unity and purity—here we get a sense of the shadow of the Sangha in a more earthly and animalistic depiction of human community, with its inevitable desire, competition, and conflict. If the birds in the previous dream become "pure white," the beasts or worms in this dream are a mix of white and black, emphasizing a mix of purity and impurity.

Dream Five: Sacred and Profane

> *Fifthly, he dreamed of a mountain of manure, high and extensive, yet the Prince walked on it all over but was not fouled by the manure. The dream symbolizes the Buddha making good use of the four requisites of robe, alms, dwelling place, and medicines, without attachment*

This final dream represents, in a sense, the resolution of the question posed by the previous two—the question of how the Sangha, which was initially formed in purity and equanimity, and which inevitably through the course of its historical development becomes tainted by the desires and attachments to earthly existence (including the robe, alms, dwelling place, and medicines), might continue to understand itself as an extension of the Buddha and his teaching. This tainted attachment may also be interpreted as extending to the teachings of the Buddha themselves, a critique frequently encountered in Mahāyāna teachings. Such teachings caution against the hindrances (*āvaraṇa*) generated by the dual attachments to "self" (*ātmagraha*) and "Dharma" (*dharmagraha*).

This dream is, in a sense, the *tertium quid* of the previous two. There may be a widespread understanding, among various religious communities, of the difficulty that emerges when the originator of the community leaves, and the community itself must then bear the weight of continuity and perpetuity within the shifting sands of history. This weight often seems too much to bear. The community must continually reveal its initial

founding insight to future generations, even as that initial insight inevitably becomes domesticated and harnessed by interpretation, codification, and regulation. The initial breakthrough of the originator's teaching then begins to seem stale and habitual. The disappointment of habituation inevitably leads to strife, and the splintering of communities, each seeking the "correct" way to recover the initial breakthrough.[32] The previous two dreams may represent, respectively, the initial insight that formed the Sangha in purity, and the inevitable earthly and animalistic desires that characterize the Sangha's development.

Into this reality the present dream emerges like a breath of fresh air, simultaneously elevating and relativizing the requisites of Buddhist practice: food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. The various branches of Buddhism have discussed the correct use of these earthly necessities in order to attain liberation, but here we get a marvelous image that speaks louder than words. These necessities are indeed like a mountain that leads us toward the peak—"high and extensive"—but they are a mountain of manure, a highly exalted pile of shit. This understanding can be applied more generally to the sangha, which is both exalted and mired in the exigencies of daily life. In some ways, the great weight of continuity that is born by all religious communities can only be resolved by embracing this paradox of the sacred that is simultaneously profane. This too, it seems, can be learned from the Buddha's example. For by understanding the high mountain as manure, the Buddha was able to ascend the mountain without becoming attached to it, or "fouled by it."

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[32] Richard F. Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (Routledge, 2005), 1-26.

Part 2: Ānanda's Seven Dreams

Another text in early Buddhist literature depicts the Buddha not as a dreamer, but as a dream interpreter. In the *A'nan qimeng jing* (*The Sūtra of Ānanda's Seven Dreams*), Ānanda approaches the Buddha looking for insight about his experience of seven nightmares, and the Buddha offers seven interpretations.[33] Ānanda's seven dreams are as follows: 1) a vast surface of water is on fire with the flame reaching high into the sky; 2) the sun disappears while the entire world is surrounded in complete darkness, with not a single star left in the sky; 3) the monastics fall into a great pit and their family members step on their heads; 4) wild boars appear in a dense forest, digging at the root of a sandalwood tree; 5) Mount Meru sits on top of Ānanda's head but he does not feel its weight; 6) adult elephants abandon younger elephants; and 7) a lion, as king of the animals, passes away and flowers are showered on his head, while the other animals still fear him and dare not approach. This is followed by maggots appearing in the lion's body and eating it.

The Buddha interprets these dreams as indicating possible future hazards for the Buddhist community. Now from a therapeutic perspective, this interpretation is somewhat strange — unless one fully embraces the prognostic nature of dreams — because, generally speaking, dreams relate to the psychological state of the dreamer. But on closer inspection, we see that these dreams reflect the anxieties carried by Ānanda, the Buddha's chief disciple, as he considers his responsibility to preserve and continue the sangha after the Buddha has left the earthly plane. The dreams reflect both Ānanda's anxieties and his intuitions of potential dangers for the fledgling community. The Buddha's interpretations are as follows: 1) that the monastic sangha would see ill-willed monks harming one another; 2) that the "Hearers" (Śrāvakas) or disciples who were trained by

[33] The scripture was translated into Chinese in the fourth century CE by Dharmarakṣa (竺曇無蘭). See T 494.14.

the Buddha would enter into *nirvāṇa* following the Buddha, and the world would be "dark," as if we had lost our eyes; 3) that monks would become jealous, lose their belief in causality, and kill each other, while laymen would assume the role of preaching Dharma in a way that belittled the monks; 4) that the monks would no longer respect their robes, but instead put on lay clothing and cause harm to the monastic community; 5) that Ānanda would take up the responsibility of memorizing and reciting the teachings of the Buddha, without feeling pressure put upon him; 6) that perverted views would overshadow Buddhist teachings, and virtuous practitioners would maintain a low profile; and 7) that the Buddha Dharma would be destroyed by the Buddhist practitioners some 1,500 years after the Buddha entered *parinirvāṇa*. It becomes clear from these interpretations that, if these dreams are prognostic, they are not fatalistic. The scenarios they depict are *possible* dangers, which may or may not be realized; alternatively, they might serve as early indicators of issues that the Buddha foresaw as having the potential to escalate into genuine threats to the survival of the sangha. These scenarios represent what the community should protect itself *against*, which is why they may have been preserved for posterity. In some ways, the themes of these dreams also follow from the Buddha's own dreams about the sangha, noted above. We will explore them each in turn.

Dream One: The Fire of Ill Will

> *A vast surface of water that was on fire with the flame reaching high into the sky, meaning that the monastic sangha would see ill-willed monks harming one another.*

The calm surface of water is of course a potent and prolific symbol of the calm mind absorbed in meditation, but here the fire on the surface of the water provides a clear contrast. This dream seems to introduce the series,

pointing to the earthly and human weaknesses of the sangha and their possible (but not inevitable) manifestation. Fire as a symbol of anger and ill will is quite prevalent historically in various cultures. Here the fire seems to indicate the shadow side of the calm water, since fire and water are opposing elements. Thus the dream reflects Ānanda's anxiety that, even with all of the time spent trying to cultivate the calm water of a still mind, fire might still exist in the sangha. Fire might *continue* to exist alongside or above the calm surface of the water, meaning that even the hours spent in the training of meditation might not be enough to keep the peace.

Dream Two: Darkness without Disciples

> *The sun disappeared while the entire world was surrounded in complete darkness, with not a single star left in the sky, meaning that the "Hearers" (*Śrāvakas*) or disciples who were trained by the Buddha would enter* nirvāṇa *following the Buddha, and the world would be "dark," as if we had lost our eyes.*

The implication of this dream is not simply that the Buddha's disciples would enter *nirvāṇa*, but that they would leave so suddenly and so completely that they would leave no light behind them—they would leave no other disciples on the path who could continue to provide light to the world. The darkness, representing the extinguishing of the Dharma in the world, is indeed potent and foreboding, "with not a single star left in the sky"—a world without eyes. This period is referred to as the age of "the decline of the true Dhamma" (*saddhamma-vipallāsa*), a concept warned about in various scriptures across both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions. For instance, in the *Saddhammappatirūpakasutta*, it is outlined that five detrimental factors contribute to the decay and eventual disappearance of the true Dhamma, namely "the *bhikkhus*, the *bhikkhunīs*, the male lay followers, and the female lay followers dwell without reverence and

deference towards the Teacher; they dwell without reverence and deference towards the Dhamma; they dwell without reverence and deference towards the Saṅgha; they dwell without reverence and deference towards the training; they dwell without reverence and deference towards concentration."[34]

Dream Three: The Pit of Jealousy

> *The monastics fall into a great pit and their family members step on their heads, meaning that monks would become jealous, lose their belief in causality, and kill each other, while laymen would assume the role of preaching Dharma in a way that belittled the monks.*

If anger and ill will are symbolized by the fire of the first dream, here jealousy is depicted as a deep pit—an appropriate symbol of the feeling of lack or privation that prompts jealousy. The dream is laconic, but we might speculate that the monks in the dream are not only jealous of one another, which is why they enter the pit together, but also jealous of the more comfortable life of the lay Buddhist community. Similarly, the lay Buddhists appear to be jealous of the learning and preaching of the monastic Buddhists, which is why the lay people usurp the preaching and teaching role and belittle the monks. We thus see a depiction of conflict not only within the monastic community, but between the two main segments of the sangha: monks vs. lay people. If we were to see these dreams as cumulative, we might even see a progression of anger in the first dream, without the guiding light of strong disciples, leading to jealousy, loss of belief in core teachings, and the progressive death of the community.

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[34] Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Wisdom Publications, 2000), 681.

Dream Four: Forsaking the Monastic Robes

> *Wild boars appear in a dense forest, digging at the root of a sandalwood tree, meaning that the monks would no longer respect their robes, but instead put on lay clothing and cause harm to the monastic community.*

The three dreams above, although somewhat stylized, can be symbolically connected with their interpretations quite well. The interpretations generally fit the dreams. But here the connection is less obvious. Wild boars may relate to the pig, representing the poison of delusion, as symbolized in the hub of the wheel of life mentioned above. Wild boars are generally known for their ability to consume almost anything, and to lay waste to the landscape in large numbers. Here they are attacking the roots of a tree. The sandalwood tree was revered as sacred in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, prized especially for the beautiful fragrance of its wood. The wood in turn was used to create, among other things, sacred statues, prayer beads, and incense, the fragrance of which was believed to calm and clear the mind.[35] All of this stands in contrast to the wild boars who are attacking this fragrant symbol of spiritual life at its root. This dream may be a continuation of the previous one, revealing how jealousy leads

[35] An early reference to sandalwood in Buddhist scriptures appears in the *Dhammapada*: "Among these kinds of perfume, such as sandalwood, *tamara*, waterlily, and *vassikī*, the fragrance of virtue is incomparable." (*candannaṃ tagaraṃ vāpi uppalaṃ atha vassikī / etesaṃ gandhajātānaṃ silagandho anuttaro*). See John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana, trans., *The Dhammapada*, 142. Another example is found in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* of the Pali canon, where it is described that shortly before the Buddha entered *parinibbāna*, "At that time, the twin Sâla trees were covered in blossoms, out of season; their flowers dropped, sprinkled, and scattered over the body of the Tathâgata in reverence for the successor of the Buddhas of old. Heavenly Mandârava flowers and sandalwood powder, too, fell from the sky, descending, sprinkling, and scattering over the Tathāgata, in homage to the successor of the Buddhas of old." See T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Suttas* (1895-1910; repr.: Routledge, 2013), 86. For the use of sandalwood in crafting Buddha statues, see Christian Mathias Boehm, *The Concept of Danzō: "Sandalwood Images" in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture of the 8th to 14th Centuries* (Saffron Books, 2012).

to greed and delusion, and ultimately to the destruction of the source of fragrant life in the monastic community.[36] The monks' loss of respect for their robes can be taken as a loss of respect for their monastic role in general—a forsaking of their monastic vocation. This loss of respect for the distinctiveness and importance of the monastic life has predictable results.

Dream Five: The Weight of Continuity

> *Mount Meru sits on top of Ānanda's head but he does not feel its weight, meaning that Ānanda would take up the responsibility of memorizing and reciting the teachings of the Buddha without feeling pressure put upon him.*

This dream offers the strongest indication so far that these seven dreams relate specifically to Ānanda's own anxieties about the continuation of the sangha. It is likely that, at the time of these dreams, Ānanda had been considering his own unique role and responsibility, and even harboring secret doubts about his ability to sustain the community after his master was gone. And interestingly the association of Mount Meru with the head, which we saw in the first dream of the Buddha above, is here recapitulated with Ānanda. In the first dream above, the Buddha was using Mount Meru as a pillow, possibly symbolizing that he had established this cosmic centre of balance and equanimity within his own mind. In the Buddha's

[36] In the same chapter of the *Dhammapada* referenced previously, fragrance serves as a metaphor for the effective practice of the Buddha's teachings: "Just as a brilliant flower, full of color and fragrance, so is a well-spoken word fruitful for one who enacts it" (*yathāpi ruciraṃ pupphaṃ vaṇṇavantaṃ sagandhakaṃ / evaṃ subhāsitā vācā saphalā hoti sakubbato*). This simile underscores the value of not only speaking words of wisdom but embodying them through practice, much like a flower that not only delights with its colour but also spreads its scent, yielding tangible benefit to those who encounter it. See Carter and Palihawadana, trans., *The Dhammapada*, 139.

dream, the mountain and the mind are commensurate, being equal in size and proportional in function, with the mountain serving as a place that the head and mind can rest, like a pillow. By contrast, in Ānanda's dream, we get a sense of disjunction. The dream suggests that Ānanda is not fully cognizant of the weighty mountain that is being bequeathed to him. His head does not rest on the mountain, but rather the mountain "sits on top" of his head, and he "does not feel its weight." It is as if the mountain hovers over his head, and remains somehow disconnected from him, and from his thought processes.

If we take the mountain as a symbol of the Buddha's own enlightenment, as in the Buddha's first dream above, we might suppose that Ānanda has not yet experienced this enlightenment. Ānanda has not experienced the full weight of the Buddha's awakening, and its connection with the centre of the cosmos. Thus we get a clear picture of the key issue in this dream—an issue that confronts any religious movement when the originator and leader of the movement quits the stage and must leave the movement to his disciples: the disciples can certainly memorize and recite the teachings of the founder (as Ānanda did, according to tradition) but the state of mind that *gave birth* to those teachings is no longer physically present.[37] The question, then, is whether the Dharma can sustain itself

[37] Tradition states that many of the early Buddhist writings were the result of Ānanda's excellent memory. Ānanda was also said to have been present with the Buddha during that last year of his life, and to have conveyed the message that the Buddha would not appoint a new leader of the movement, but would allow the Dharma itself to sustain the community. See Graham Lock and Gary S. Linebarger, *Chinese Buddhist Texts: An Introductory Reader* (Routledge, 2018), 1: "Soon after the Buddha died, a meeting is said to have been held in a cave in Rājagṛha to recite and codify his teachings. This is usually referred to as the First Council. According to tradition, Ānanda, the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant, had a prodigious memory and was able to recite all the discourses of the Buddha that he had heard. This is why the discourses of the Buddha typically begin with Ānanda's words 'thus have I heard' (Skt. *Evam mayā śrutam*; Chin. 如是我聞)."

without the physical presence of the Buddha, from whose awakened mind the Dharma issued. The question is whether Ānanda, simply by memorizing and reciting the teachings of the Buddha, can make them fully present to the community, and thus preserve its continuity.

From a methodological perspective, in relation to the interpretation of dreams, we see a very interesting data point here: the symbolic significance of Mount Meru seems to show remarkable continuity between the dreams of two different people, the Buddha and Ānanda, as described in two different early texts. Here we are confronted again by the question of the continuity and dispersion of symbols and their interpretation—the issue of contextual vs. archetypal approaches to symbolism. In this case, it would not be very surprising for the symbol of the cosmic mountain to be continuous within the early Buddhist community. But as Mircea Eliade and other early Western scholars of religion pointed out, the symbol of the sacred mountain, indicating a cosmic centre, an *axis mundi*, and an enlightened state of mind, is quite widespread. Just to give one example from a Western theorist, the great Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye attempted to distill four archetypal images from the Judeo-Christian Bible, which he believed to be the root and mythological matrix of all of Western literature.[38] The first of these images was "the Mountain," corresponding to Mount Sinai and other sacred mountains in the biblical text, like the temple mount in Jerusalem. For Frye, the Mountain symbolized a cosmic centre, an *axis mundi*, and a symbol of the ascent of elevated consciousness and wisdom. The parallel with the current texts is striking.

[38] Northrop Frye, *Words with Power*, Part II.

Dream Six: Corrupted Teachings

> *Adult elephants abandon younger elephants, meaning that perverted views would overshadow Buddhist teachings, and virtuous practitioners would maintain a low profile.*

Following from the previous dream, this dream introduces the possibility of corruption or perversion entering into Buddhist teaching. The issue then is not just how the Dharma will sustain itself without the Buddha's physical presence, as we saw in the previous dream, but also how the Dharma will sustain itself historically, as it is passed down from generation to generation, and interpreted in various languages and cultures. The dream images and their interpretation are again quite brief here. As with dream four in this series, one gets the sense that there may be something missing, and that the symbolism does not fully justify the interpretation. The elephant is a prolific symbol with many different meanings in Buddhism.[39] In this dream it seems to be the size of the elephant that is most at issue. The elephant is prolific due to its size, and this is in contrast to the virtuous practitioners who keep a low profile. Clearly the adult elephants in this dream are not virtuous for they abandon the younger elephants. Here we see the theme of disjunction between the generations, as if there is a break in the historical line. Rather than passing on the Dharma faithfully, these high profile elephants are breaking the line of transmission. The low profile practitioners remain virtuous, but presumably their virtue does not attract the attention it deserves. The general issue here seems to be the question of how one recognizes a true and virtuous practitioner of the Dharma, for virtue itself is not always recognized by the world.

[39] On Buddhist interpretation of animal symbolism, including elephants and lions, see Jampa Choskyi, "Symbols of Animals in Buddhism," *Buddhist Himalaya* 1, no. 1 (1988).

Dream Seven: Destruction of the Dharma

> *A lion, king of the animals, passes away and flowers are showered on his head, while the other animals still fear him and dare not approach. This is followed by maggots appearing in the Lion's body and eating it. The interpretation is that the Buddha Dharma would be destroyed by Buddhist practitioners some 1,500 years after the Buddha entered* parinirvāṇa.

This final dream indeed marks a culmination of the series, for it presents what can be seen as a worst-case scenario: the complete destruction and eradication of the Buddha Dharma on earth. Again, this theme seems to follow logically from the previous two dreams, which likewise speak of anxieties surrounding the historical transmission and efficacy of the Dharma. Here the dream symbolism is elaborated in more detail, but it is still not clear how the specific figure of 1,500 years could be gleaned from this symbolism. What does make sense, symbolically, is that the lion in the dream seems to symbolize the Buddha himself, and the lion's death symbolizes the Buddha's death and entry into *parinirvāṇa*. What is interesting is the response of the other animals to this death. The lion's status as king of the animals is immediately recognized by the flowers showered on his now-deceased head. And for a time the community of animals seems to maintain this status by maintaining a sacred memory of the lion. But this memory of the unsurpassed leader is maintained mainly through fear, as indicated by the animals' fear of approaching the dead lion. There is even a hint here of the Freudian motif of the death of the father, which arouses uncanny feelings of fear, reverence, and guilt in those left behind.[40] It is hard to know whether this fear would have been dissipated or exacerbated when, as the dream indicates, his corpse began to visibly decompose and be eaten by maggots. This disturbing picture only adds to the uncanny and unresolved feeling tone of the dream. According to the interpretation,

[40] S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo, vol. 13 of The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by J. Strachey, 1–164 (Hogarth Press, 1955).

the eating of the lion's body by maggots seems to symbolize the destruction of the Buddha Dharma, and the maggots themselves seem to symbolize the Buddhist practitioners who are doing this destruction.

The picture here is of a community with deeply mixed feelings about the death of their leader. How will the community survive? Who will protect us? Why did he leave us? Is he still the leader we once knew? There is deep ambivalence here about the leader's ability to provide protection: on the one hand he remains king of the animals, even though he is deceased, but on the other hand his physical body is now lifeless. The *distance* between leader and followers, implied by the followers' fear of approaching, is the result of these mixed feelings. Another interesting theme is that, according to the interpretation, the Buddha Dharma is identified with the *body* of the deceased king. The leader's body is thus preserved by the community who preserves his teachings. This theme is present in many spiritual traditions. But eventually this body is consumed by maggots, indicating the destruction of the Dharma.

We can again take this dream to represent the fears of Ānanda about the continuity of the Buddhist community after his master's death. The dream presages that death, along with all the emotional turmoil in the sangha that would accompany it. And although the final scene of the dream seems quite disturbing and ultimately tragic, this scene represents a worst-case scenario that need not be realized in any fatalistic sense. It is a warning, not a foregone conclusion. The seed of hope contained within the imagery is that the Buddha's physical presence is itself preserved in and by the Dharma. Indeed, tradition has it that Ānanda was with the Buddha during his last year of life, and that Ānanda communicated to the sangha the Buddha's wish not to appoint a successor. The Dharma itself would be the new leader of the community.[41] This dream anticipates that

[41] Rāhula Walpola, *What the Buddha taught* (Grove Press, 1974), 64.

teaching with its symbolism, and connects the Dharma to the physical presence of the Buddha in striking ways.

Conclusion

It would seem from the foregoing that many motifs in these dreams are not merely culturally specific, but are accessible to readers of various cultures and time periods. In other words, as these ancient texts connect dream symbolism to very specific interpretations, a contemporary psychotherapeutic approach to dreams can, in almost every case, *fill in the hermeneutical gap* between the dreams and their given interpretations. The connection between the symbols and their meanings is not opaque, but is generally quite plausible, especially for a therapist who works with contemporary dreams and dreamers. All of this speaks to the possibility of certain widespread or even universal understandings of certain symbols, as well as the existence of archetypal motifs. It may be that dreams are a particularly rich source of such archetypal motifs, and this in turn may reflect the fact that dreams and their symbols have often been connected to the human body, and its instincts, in various cultures and time periods. Motifs like the cosmic mountain as the centre of the universe; the connection between the sacred mountain and the ascent of the enlightened mind; the *axis mundi* connecting worlds above with worlds below; the connection between the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of the human body; the symbol of fire representing anger and disturbance; the symbol of the calm surface of water representing the still, meditative mind: all of these motifs seem to have extremely wide dispersion, even if their polyvalence necessitates that they do not *always* carry *only* these meanings. Likewise, the potent symbol of the mountain of manure—of mundane earthly means being used for sublime ends—seems to resonate

with Mircea Eliade's famous insight that the sacred is intermingled with the profane, and emerges out of it, in so many traditions.[42]

It is important to note, however, that we can only truly recognize these archetypal motifs if we first do the difficult, fine-grained historical and contextual work of interpretation. We must first understand texts and symbols within their own unique culture, language, and time period. And only then can we reach the conclusion that the meaning of symbols in one particular time and place resonates more broadly. The contemporary academy of religion is right to critique the faux universals that were imposed by previous generations of Western scholars on non-Western traditions, and the colonial imposition this represents. But these critiques do not obviate the existence of archetypal motifs. And now as non-Western scholars are themselves pointing to such widespread mythemes emerging from their own traditions, it may be time for a critical retrieval of these older archetypal methods. Dreams might prove to be one of the most fruitful data sets in this exploration, even as their symbols connect the quest of ancient saints and sages to the spiritual and therapeutic yearnings of contemporary society.

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[42] Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane.*

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