

PART ONE

ENTERING SACRED DREAM SPACE

CHAPTER ONE

THE ART OF CULTIVATING SACRED DREAMS

The art of orienting the mind toward dreaming in an intended manner before falling asleep is commonly called dream incubation. However, before attempting to incubate one's own sacred dreams, it is important to come to an understanding of what we perceive to be the "dreaming mind." Any student of the humanities will know that this is no small undertaking, for a definition of what the human mind consists of has been hotly debated by some of the most notable scholars throughout history. For scientists of the western world, the mind has largely been regarded as the biological brain, while philosophers and theologians have linked the reasoning faculties of the brain with various concepts of the human soul. Aristotle speculated that the mind was housed in the heart, and in the fourth century CE Augustine of Hippo included the heart as an integral

component of the mind in developing his doctrine of the Christian Trinity. Depth psychologists of the twentieth century borrowed the Greek term "psyche" – meaning soul or spirit as distinguished from the body – and developed it into a concept of the mind as the center of thought, feeling, and behavior with different levels of conscious activity. The spiritual counselor Connie Cockrell Kaplan goes so far as to assert that the womb is the dreaming organ and that the relationship between the womb and the moon controls every aspect of dreaming. This creates what she refers to as the "Dream Weave" that encompasses all human thought and awareness.

So what part or parts of the mind dreams? Does dreaming involve the brain, heart, soul, womb, or some psychic combination thereof? To prepare the mind for sacred dreaming, one must come to terms with her own ideas about what the dreaming mind is and how it relates to that which she holds as sacred. From my own experience as a sacred dreamer as well as the testimonies of those who have shared their sacred dream experiences with me, I understand the spiritual dreaming process to be an activity that can involve every level of brain activity and consciousness. For me, dreaming is also an embodied phenomenon. While a distinction must be made between the sensations of the physical waking-life body and those of the dream body, I am certain the sacred dream can involve either and often greatly affects both. However, I believe it is the human soul that drives the sacred dreaming process. I understand the soul to be a divinely bestowed facility for participation in the sacred "web" that pervades all existence. It is from this perspective that I have developed my own methods of sacred dream incubation as cultivation of consciousness, body, and soul to enter the sacred dream realm. My approach reflects the sacred dream incubation practices that have been documented throughout the history of the world.

Historical Methods of Sacred Dream Incubation

The oldest written evidence of dream incubation was recorded on cuneiform tablets by the ancient Mesopotamians as far back as 3000 BCE. In a work entitled *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East with a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book*, A. Leo Oppenheim, a professor of Assyriology at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, explains that ancient Sumerian, Hittite, Akkadian, and Assyrian kings incubated dreams to access and interpret messages from deities. One ruler who sought a message dream offered this prayer as part of his incubation ritual:

Reveal thyself to me and let me behold a favorable dream. May the dream that I dream be favorable; may the dream that I dream be true. May Makhir, the goddess of dreams, stand at my head, let me enter the temple of the gods and the house of life.

After reciting the invocation, the ruler would enter a temple or sanctuary dedicated to the dream deity, perform a variety of preparatory rituals, and sleep in the temple all night.¹

A classic example of this was recorded in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. As the King of Sumeria, Gilgamesh sought divine guidance through sacred dream incubation in his attempts to evade death. Though the texts are fragmented, the pith of his request can be discerned: "I lift my head to pray to the moon god Sin: For...a dream I go to the gods in prayer...preserve me!"² Unfortunately, the gods did not honor Gilgamesh's dream request. He lost his kingship and was forced to accept the condition of human mortality.

A thousand years later, the accounts recorded in the Hebrew Testament show that the ability to incubate auspicious sacred dreams was still associated with the king's ability to rule in Mesopotamia. According to the biblical texts, King Solomon offered a sacrifice and burned incense

at a high place at Gibeon. He spent the night in a shrine there during which the Lord appeared to him, granted his request for a wise heart and understanding, and added riches and glory beyond that of his royal peers (1 Kings 3:2-14).

Sacred dream incubation was widely practiced in Ancient Egypt. Several temples were devoted to the god Serapis who, under the auspices of the goddess Isis, was the deity of dreams. One of the main dream temples of Serapis was built at Memphis about 3000 BCE. Some of the incubation rituals practiced included prayers and drawings of the desired dreams. Incantations and dream requests were sometimes placed in the mouth of a mummy or a dead cat, as they were believed to be spiritual messengers between the waking and sacred dreaming worlds.³ One ancient Egyptian sacred dream incubation ritual consisted of the dreamer writing the names of five different deities on a clean linen bag before folding it up, saturating it with oil, and setting it on fire. Before the dreamer went to sleep, he would repeat an incantation seven times and put out the flame.⁴

The ancient Hindu Vedic scriptures devoted much attention to the spiritual aspects of sleep and dreams. The *Chandogya Upanishad*, which focuses on the search for ultimate reality, gives a detailed account of a ritual dream incubation. It instructs a "man who is seeking greatness" to mix certain herbs, honey, and curd on the night of the full moon. He is also advised to pour offerings of clarified butter into fire while praising the gods. Finally, he is to drink the mixture before lying down before the flame, where he is advised to remain "silent and unresisting." If he sees a woman in his dreams, it is a sign that his dream incubation has been successful and he may then ask for the divine fulfillment of a wish.⁵

The ancient Chinese Taoists regularly practiced dream incubation in temples. Their preparatory rituals included burning incense before the temple god. Several accounts attest to the fact that judges and other officials incubated dreams in temples for guidance in civil affairs.⁶ In the late Ming and Qing dynasties, dream incubation flourished not only in temples but at graveyards, caves, and wilderness sanctuaries.⁷

In ancient Greece and Rome the art of dream incubation reached its pinnacle as a cultural phenomenon at the temples of the dream god, Asclepius. For many centuries, thousands upon thousands of dreamers seeking healing, prophesy, and wisdom made pilgrimages to sleep in one of these temples. Most of them were set in beautiful remote settings with a large statue of Asclepius standing at the entrance; nonpoisonous snakes, the familiar of the god, wandered the grounds freely.

The incubation procedures for a healing sacred dream were elaborate and varied from temple to temple. Standard rituals demanded that the dreamer follow a special diet, refrain from sexual intercourse, take frequent walks in fresh air, and bathe often in cold water. In some temples animals (usually rams) were ritually sacrificed and dreamers would sleep on their skins. Before retiring, a formal sacred rite known as the "hour of the sacred lamps" was officiated by Asclepian priests. Hymns and prayers were performed in which the god was asked to grant sacred dreams. Finally, the temple priests would escort the dreamers into an inner sanctum of the temple and instruct them to lie down on a *kline*, a ritual bed. Snakes slithered on the floor around them while they slept. According to the many testimonials recorded on the temple walls, the typical sacred dream consisted of a visit from Asclepius or one of his daughters, Hygeia or Panacea, who gave

firsthand instruction on what kind of medicine or curative treatment should be administered. The incubation process could continue for many nights before the dreamer attained the desired results.

The Christian New Testament and other early Christian texts attest to the notion that sacred dreams could affect a favorable psycho-spiritual transformation. However, amidst the many powerful accounts of spiritually charged Christian dreams, we are left with few accounts of sacred dream incubation. The ancient Roman martyrdom account of Saints Perpetua and Felicity, shows that Perpetua was considered to be an adept at sacred dream cultivation. During her imprisonment, her brother reminded her that she was divinely favored with the ability to ask for revelations in her dreams and urged her to incubate a dream prophesying the outcome of her trial. She promised she would tell him the results of her sacred dream the next day, confirming that she "knew that she could speak with the Lord."⁸ The details of her dream incubation process were not recorded, but because she was confined in a heavily guarded cell with her infant son, it can be assumed she had little control over the elements of her ritual. She did, however, experience a powerful sacred dream that evening as well as subsequent prophetic dreams right up to the time of her execution by wild animals in a Roman amphitheater.

Several accounts of successful dream incubation in Christian churches and cathedrals dedicated to the Virgin Mary have been recorded since the Middle Ages. Interestingly, the most common ones are those that house a Black Madonna icon. St. Ignatius of Loyola had his dramatic Christian conversion experience while sleeping in a pew adjacent to the statue of Our Lady of Montserrat in Barcelona, Spain, and sacred dream incubation is still ardently practiced before the statue of the Black Madonna of Chartres in northern France.

Istikhara is a popular form of Muslim sacred dream incubation. It is still widely practiced, particularly by the Sufis – a mystical sect of Islam. Though it is not mentioned in the Qur'an, it is referred to in several of the minor Hadiths, and many Muslims believe it was taught by Muhammad himself. The goal of *Istikhara* is to seek divine guidance as to whether or not an action should be performed in waking life. For example, a common request is whether or not a marriage should take place. Some *Istikhara* dreamers sleep in mosques, while others perform the rite at the tomb of a religious saint. It can be performed during the day, but is generally believed to be more effective when practiced after the first half of the night has passed. The incubation rite is largely made up of a succession of fervent prayers, beginning with the repentance of sins committed since puberty and a promise to sin no more. With this the dreamer declares her intention to perform *Istikhara*, sends blessings to the Prophet, makes her intention for the task in question, and lies down on her right side. The dreamer blocks out the world by repeating the name of Allah until she falls asleep.

In his essay, "Istikhara and Dreams," Hidayet Aydar explains:

If these instructions are followed and one envisages the color white or green, a religious leader, peace or tranquility, or pleasant things, then the task will be beneficial; if one envisages black, blue, yellow, or red, unpleasant types of people or repulsive or ugly things, then the outcome is evil.⁹

There can be no doubt that sacred dream incubation has been practiced throughout the history of humanity. The selections I have noted here represent only a fraction of the sacred dream incubation rituals that have been preserved in writing. However, as disparate as they are in some respects, they exhibit many common aspects that can be examined for the sake of gaining a deeper appreciation for the nuances of sacred dream incubation to experience Ultimate Reality.

Furthermore, I find that an appreciation for these historical rituals can lay the groundwork for the development contemporary dream incubation methods as a form of sacred art.

The Ritual Elements of Sacred Dream Incubation

In evaluating the rituals of historical sacred dream interpretation, it is apparent that the predominant prerequisite is the appropriate sacred space. People have commonly sought to perform their sacred dream sleep in the places that were considered to be in the liminal realm between the physical and spiritual realms. Temples and places of natural beauty were the most obvious choices because they had already been designated and consecrated as sacred space. It may seem macabre that sacred dream seekers would choose to sleep on or near gravesites, but history has shown how the relics of those who were considered to be saints served as a bridge between heaven and earth. Caves have traditionally signified the womb of the Earth Mother, and sleeping inside her simulates a spiritual rebirth. From this perspective, incubating a dream within a cave produced a host of sacred new beginnings and revelations.

I agree with Bulkeley's observation that "dream incubation requires more than just an emotional concern; it also requires a change in the person's physical sleeping conditions, a reorientation of the body and soul within the broader meaning structures of the cosmos."¹⁰ However, for all practical purposes, most of us contemporary dreamers cannot regularly sleep in temples, cemeteries, or caves. We can, however, create sacred space where we usually sleep and

plan to incubate sacred dreams. We should consider Bulkeley's recommendations on sacred dream incubation space:

Whether practiced in a cave, a temple, a mountain, or desert, or a graveyard, the underlying logic of dream incubation always involves a dramatic shift *away* from one's normal sleep patterns and *toward* an unusual place where the powers of whatever the individual holds as sacred are gathered in especially concentrated form.¹¹

For me, few things in life are more exhilarating than creating sacred space, and designing sacred dream space could be the first tangible artistic expression of this process. If it is possible to sleep in another room, one might try arranging a separate dream sanctuary. If not, simply moving the bed could create a dramatic shift away from one's normal sleep and dream patterns. The ancient Taoist art of *ba gua* holds that the direction toward which one's bed is directed can have vast effects on the flow of one's energy. I recently moved my bed from the back wall of my bedroom which was across from the double-door entrance to the room. Adjusting its position just a couple of feet to the left and into the corner facing due north, I was amazed how different it felt lying in bed, out of the massive flow of energy that before had seemingly rushed up the stairwell, across my room and into my dreams. Now, when the moon is full, it streams in through the window to my right during the first half of the night when my dreams are milder. When it is in its first quarter, it peaks in at me from the window on my left during the early hours of the morning when my dreaming is consistently more intense. I not only sleep more soundly, but my dreams are more peaceful as well.

In creating sacred dream space, it is important to surround it with, as Bulkeley says, whatever one holds as charged with sacred powers. As I was raised in the Catholic tradition, I have

always had an affinity for the Virgin Mother; therefore, I have erected an "altar" with a large painting of Our Lady of Czestochowa I had purchased at the Art Institute in Chicago while I was writing my master's thesis comparing and contrasting the Hindu Goddess Kali with the Christian Black Madonna. She is surrounded with candles, fresh flowers, holy cards, and various Marian gifts that I have been presented with throughout the years. On the other side of my sacred dream space, I have a shrine to Guan Yin that miraculously established itself when my son brought me three statues of her from China. I placed a vase with a hydrangea on a table next to my Guan Yins. After two years the flower is still alive and as beautiful as it was the day I bought it, though I stopped watering it well over a year ago. I read somewhere that amethyst crystals are conducive to sacred dreaming, so I keep one on my nightstand. I find I constantly have to move it closer or farther away depending on the position of the moon and the intensity of my dreams.

As part of the sacred dream incubation process, it is important to thoughtfully and aesthetically create your own sleep and dream space in such a way that when you relax there, you feel that you can easily navigate your mind into the liminal realm between wakefulness and dream, and ultimately from mere physical reality into sacred reality. Like all other worthwhile pursuits, sacred dreaming should be regarded as a process and not a one-time event. Therefore, it is essential to keep the dynamics of your physical dream space fluid – moving, adding, and taking away whatever seems to enhance or detract from your sacred dreaming experiences. The fact is that if you feel you are in sacred space while you incubate a dream, you are much more likely to feel you are in the presence of the sacred within your dream.

Another prevalent set of dream incubation rituals that has been practiced throughout history is that of purification. Aside from the traditional belief that only that which is pure can be in communion with the Divine, there are practical reasons for physical cleansing rituals when trying to cultivate sacred dreaming. Scientific study has proven that ingesting heavy meats, sugary foods, alcohol, and some medications before going to bed can greatly disrupt the natural sleep cycle, which can absolutely be-devil dream activity. Ritual bathing not only cleans the body, but relaxes muscle tension. Adding cleansing or relaxing floral or herbal scents or extracts to ritual bathing waters can also help to relieve mental and emotional stress and clear the dreaming mind before the incubation process. Pre-dreaming rituals of repentance and meditation also help clear the mind-soul and make it more susceptible to sacred communication.

It is striking that almost every historical dream incubation process includes a ritual form of fire. From a mythological perspective, fire symbolizes all the ambivalence associated with divine energy. It warms, yet burns. It lights, yet consumes. Close observation of a flame can be mesmerizing, and ancient dream incubators could watch their fire sacrifices arise heavenward on the vapors of smoke. I believe that fire is also closely associated with sacred dreaming because the presence of that which is perceived to be divine appears in dreams in the form of pure light with amazing regularity. More often than not this phenomenon is metaphorically described by the dreamer as a glowing light more brilliant than fire. For this reason, lighting a candle or incense as part of a dream incubation ritual can be a powerful experience. I make sure I do not retire before my pre-sleep flame is extinguished to avoid the fire hazard of falling asleep and leaving an unattended flame burning.

Another common dream incubation ritual element is to approach the divinity with an definite dream request. The manner in which this is offered fluctuates from one incubation ritual to another. In some cases it is merely spoken, while in others it is chanted or sung. Usually the sacred dream intention or question is written down. These are important steps that modern dream incubators tend to ignore. With the serendipity of the normal cognitive process, by merely "thinking" an intention, the dreamer is apt to inadvertently leave it in an amorphous form. In other words, the dream intention is not completely clear while falling asleep. But one must articulate the intention in order to recite, chant, or sing it. Since we usually only vocalizing our thoughts in order to communicate them with someone else, the oral offering of intention stresses the reality that the dreamer is making a concerted effort to communicate with the sacred on a profound level.

The act of writing the sacred dream intention, question, or name of the deity invoked makes the incubation process even more real and powerful. Writing requires more thoughtful articulation than speaking or singing, and for those of us who were raised in cultures framed by religions that were based on Scripture, the association of the written "Word" with that which is of spiritual value cannot be overestimated. After all other dream incubation rituals have been completed, the intention or the name of the deity is repeated in the form of a mantra until the hopeful dreamer drifts off to sleep.

While many more aspects of historical dream incubation practices could be analyzed, I find these to be the most common, and therefore the most useful in constructing a method for contemporary sacred dream induction. The sacred dream incubation process I have found

conducive to sacred dreaming is based on these basic rituals coupled with contemporary scientific methods of dream incubation I have adapted for sacred dream cultivation.

Sacred Dream Practice

"Setting the Intention" Dream Incubation

1. *Create your dream "temple."*

This can be as monumental a project as changing or renovating your sleeping space or as simple as moving one or two objects that are sacred to you closer to your bed. The objective here is that when you lie down to cultivate your sacred dream, you feel as though you are in a "new" and sacred place.

2. *Perform sacred dream incubation purification rituals.*

Avoid heavy foods, alcohol, and mind altering drugs on the evening before you cultivate your sacred dream. Make sure the place you plan to sleep is clean – wash the sheets and whatever you plan to wear to bed. White or light-colored bedclothes and sleepwear can also help promote a feeling of purity.

Above all, take a *highly ritualized* pre-dream bath. A shower is fine, but not the same. Relaxing in warm water simulates the feeling of being in the cosmic "womb" in anticipation of a sacred-new life experience in much the same way ancient sacred dreamers sought out caves as part

of their incubation rituals. Adding orange peel or ginger to the water can draw toxins out of the body, while lavender and chamomile are good for inducing peaceful sleep. Use whatever combination of herbs, perfumes, or commercial bath salts or scents you associate with the sacred. But do something different than your usually daily self-cleaning ritual; and as you soak, be attentive to the fact that you are cleansing not only your body, but your mind and soul as well.

3. *Set and declare your dream intention.*

After your purification ritual, light a candle. If you like, play music that is soothing and sacred for you. While you watch the flame, set your sacred dream intention. This can be in the form of a problem you would like divine guidance on, a question you would like a divine answer for, or simply a request for a dream of divine presence, wisdom, or understanding. Be sure to frame your intention or request in a way that is not too restrictive. If you are open-minded about your encounter with the sacred presence at work in your dreams, you are more likely to experience "gifts" you never expected. I find a good intention to begin with is:

"Tonight in my dreams I would like to be in the presence of the Divine."

If you have a specific form of the Divine you would like to personally invoke, that is fine too. You might even call him or her by name in your intention, but be sure in your wording you are making it clear that you are open for communication and not demanding or necessarily even expecting it.

The *tone* with which you frame your intention is crucial.

Once your intention is set – recite, chant, or sing it. Feel free to dance or move in any way that reaffirms and honors the sacred nature of your request. Write it down. Be concrete and

specific. You may offer up the written intention by burning it in the flame of your candle, but most sacred dreamers prefer to place it under their pillows. Extinguish your candle and lie down.

4. *Incubate your sacred dream.*

Lie in a comfortable position – preferably on your back, as it is easier to extend your spine which is important for meditative breathing. Take a deep, comfortable breath and "feel" it filling your whole body with soft, bright light. Hold the breath momentarily before exhaling slowly. Repeat breathing in this manner as you continue to mentally recite your sacred dream intention. If you feel the urge to roll over, do so; but continue to focus on your breathing and the rhythmic recitation of your dream intention until you fall asleep.

Don't be concerned if you can't immediately incubate a sacred dream. If you wake up in the middle of the night, repeat the breathing and intention recitation cycle. Dream scientists have affirmed that most people are prone to experience longer and deeper REM (rapid eye movement) sleep in the early hours of the morning, and this is also when dreams are the most vivid. Don't be too concerned if you don't experience a sacred dream the first night you try. Just as the Greek and Roman dreamers in the temples of Asclepius sometimes had to pursue their dream intentions for several nights, it might take some time before you achieve the desired results. It may well be you did receive the sacred dream affirmation you sought, but didn't remember it upon waking. Be sure to record any dream scenarios you might recall, even if they do not seem remotely related to your dream intention. Sometimes they turn out to be laden with meaningful symbolism that becomes apparent only with later examination. Techniques for this are described in detail in chapter six. But

whatever you do, don't give up. Through continued practice and perseverance, you will soon be adept at the art of cultivating sacred dreams.

Notes on Chapter One

¹ Oppenheim, Leo A. "The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East with a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book." *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 46, pt. 3, (1956), 179-373.

² Bulkeley, Kelly. *Dreaming in the World's Religions* (New York, London: New York University Press, 2008), 118.

³ Robert L. Van de Castle, *Our Dreaming Minds* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 55.

⁴ Wallace Budge, E. *Egyptian Magic* (London: Paul, Trench, and Trubner 1899). Cited in Van de Castle, 55.

⁵ *Chandogya Upanishad*, 5.2.4-9, trans. Patrick Olivelle (1996), '39-40.

⁶ Van de Castle, 73.

⁷ Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions*, 73.

⁸ *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, ed. Herbert R. Musurillo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 111.

⁹ Hidayet Aydar, "Istikhara and Dreams," in *Dreaming in Christianity and Islam: Culture, Conflict, and Creativity*, ed. Kelly Bulkeley, Kate Adams, and Patricia M. Davis (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 128.

¹⁰ Bulkeley, *Dreaming in the World's Religions*, 139.

¹¹ *Ibid.*