

## WORKING WITH DREAMS with JEREMY TAYLOR



JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. Our topic today is "Working with Dreams," and my guest, Jeremy Taylor, is the author of a superb book on that subject called *Dream Work*. He is a Unitarian-Universalist minister and one of the leaders in the movement for leaderless dream groups. Welcome, Jeremy.

JEREMY TAYLOR: Thank you.

MISHLOVE: It's a pleasure to have you here.

TAYLOR: Great to be here.

MISHLOVE: You know, one of the things that you describe in your book which is very striking, is that there seems to be a cultural bias in Western or modern civilization against interpreting or working with dreams in various ways.

TAYLOR: Yes, that's my experience. I think there are a number of reasons for that, not the least of which is that it is difficult to administer people who are paying attention to their dreams. They are not docile.

MISHLOVE: One of the things that you mention is that even the traditions that talk about dream interpretation, such as Freudian psychology, or the Christian, the Jewish, and the Islamic religious traditions, have themselves moved away from dream work.

TAYLOR: Yes, the evidence is very clear that all three of those traditions that you mentioned involved regular daily dream sharing in their early years. My conviction is that what happened was that because the dream always comes in the service of wholeness, the dream is radically critical of any prematurely closed system. So as soon as those religious systems became, from my point of view, prematurely closed, as soon as they became rigidified and dogmatic, the dreams themselves began to criticize the authority structures, and the people in power, the bishops and imams and rabbis, said, "There isn't any way to distinguish between the dreams that are truly inspired by God and the dreams that come from the devil, so we're just going to rule dream work off the turf entirely." Unfortunately, the same thing has even happened, as you mentioned, amongst the Freudians.

MISHLOVE: I think that's very strange, since Freud was the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. One would think that dream interpretation is the very foundation of psychoanalysis.

TAYLOR: Well, I believe it is, but what appears to have happened is that the dreams themselves have refused to follow the rules that Freud said they ought to follow, so that as the spontaneous dream narratives of clients in therapy do not fit into the categories defined by the master, it has become easier and easier to ignore the dream and to say that the dream is too rich. The current Freudian rejection of the dream usually comes with rhetoric about how it is the royal road to the unconscious, but it's too rich and too complicated and too overdetermined, and that it's much easier to get at the core neuroses by word association and Thematic Apperception Tests and things of that sort.

MISHLOVE: In your approach you tend to take the point of view that dreams can have many, many different interpretations. In fact I think you go so far as to say that every approach to dream interpretation that's been offered -- Freudian, Jungian, etcetera, etcetera -- they're all valid.

TAYLOR: Yes, I believe that's true. I believe that there is no such thing as a dream with only one meaning, and that really the only way to make sense of the history of argument that has characterized the classical dream interpretation movement is to understand that every one of them has focused on some aspect of the whole truth about dreaming -- unfortunately, usually to the exclusion of all other aspects. My experience is that whenever any of those great theorists say, "The dream is about so and so," they are correct, and whenever they say, "This is all a dream can ever be about," they are in error.

MISHLOVE: So for example every dream says something about our health. You go so far as to say every dream has some kind of synchronistic or psychic or telepathic element.

TAYLOR: I believe so. It may not necessarily be an obvious element in the dream, but it seems to me that since those synchronistic, telepathic, precognitive elements appear with such regularity, that it is reasonable to suppose that that potential at least exists in every dream, and that it may not be filled in with a particular piece of manifest content, but that it is always there, in the same sense that all the organs of the body are always working, whether we're aware of them or not. The spleen is cleaning all the old white blood cells out of the blood all the time, and if something goes wrong with the spleen, then there'll be inflammation and you'll feel the pain, and you'll go, "Ohhhh, there's something wrong with my spleen." But even when you're not aware of the spleen, the spleen is still operating. I would say that even when the surface of the dream does not obviously present a psychic face, that that is still an organ of the dream that is operating.

MISHLOVE: I believe in your book you've listed maybe twenty different approaches, and you say they're all valid; they all apply to every dream.

TAYLOR: Yes, I believe they do. Now that does not necessarily mean that every dream is going to have an obvious meaning at all twenty of those levels. But again, let me use the analogy of the body. In the healthy body all the organs are operating. You mentioned before the level of the dream which is always a read-out, a barometric indication of pressure in the body. Most of the time the dream says, "Four a.m. and all's well," just the way the old town crier used to. But if there is something wrong, the dream will say, "Four a.m. and the spleen is enlarged. Six a.m. and the lungs are filling with fluid. Eight a.m. and it's time to get up and relieve the bladder." And even at 4 a.m. when it says all's well, there's been a touch on all of those organs so that that statement can be made. I think the same is true of those other twenty or so elements that I think are always present in the dream -- that the dream takes the shape it does passing through all those levels. Now some of those levels may not have immediate information to add to the manifest content of the dream, but that does not mean that they are not present.

MISHLOVE: The theme that you mentioned earlier is one that you repeat throughout your book. It's the notion of premature closure. I found that to be a very exciting idea -- that, as I understand it, we sometimes conclude that we understand something, we have a system of thought which is complete in itself. It could be political, it could be religious.

TAYLOR: Or scientific.

MISHLOVE: Or scientific. You call this premature closure. And one of the things that dreams do, and apparently one of the most important, is to challenge us when we think we know it.

TAYLOR: Oh yes. I think that that is one of the primary reasons why dreams have such a bad press generally, is that there is a certain amount of comfort to be derived from the premature closures that we make. We think we know it all, we think we're good parents, we think we have a relationship with God, we think we've got our political questions settled, and we don't want to be confused with any sort of issue that makes it clear that we haven't got it settled. Whether those confusions come from the headlines or from a dream, we tend to hold them at bay. But the dream comes always in the service of health and wholeness, of the best and most complete and most creative being that we can be. So whenever we close down prematurely in that fashion, the dream will then come out of the wings and show us a little dumb show about how it is that we have made a mistake, how we've sold ourselves short.

MISHLOVE: You seem to imply that this is especially true in the realm of politics or social problems -- that if we look at racism, sexism, the problems of war, perhaps overpopulation, all of these things result from this concept of premature closure.

TAYLOR: I believe that they do, yes. It seems to me that the psychological mechanism which allows any human being to treat any other human being as less than human is a result of premature closure, and that the premature closure has to do with, first of all, the assertion, "I know myself to my depths. I am human. I see something different in you from what I know myself to be. Therefore you are not human. Therefore I am justified in treating you as an object." But that is premature closure, because all of us have within us all the human potentialities, whether we choose to act them out or not. Racism and sexism particularly are based on the repression of, in the one case, the dark side -- the archetype that Jung called the shadow -- and in the other, the contrasexual element of our being -- the archetype that Jung called animus and anima. Masculine racism can clearly be analyzed in terms of denying those aspects of us men which are "feminine" in a stereotypical sense -- imagining that we do not have any of that hysterical emotionality that we're always accusing women of. And then as soon as a woman comes along and makes an emotional statement, we project that out onto her: "That woman is a lunatic. Here is yet another reason why women are not to be trusted. Here is yet another reason why we should put them on pedestals and not treat them as real human beings." The ultimate problem is a psychological and spiritual closure that we have made within which is premature, because it has not plumbed the depths that are in fact present within us.

MISHLOVE: So what you're proposing as a solution to these kinds of problems is that people should sort of revert -- maybe revert isn't the right word -- regress, or learn from non-technological societies that have worked with their dreams on a regular basis. After all, if we spend a third of our life sleeping, maybe we ought to talk about it while we're awake more.

TAYLOR: Indeed, indeed, particularly since these spectacular, fascinating little dramas that come to us all every night, when we do take the time to talk about them, reveal extraordinarily stimulating and creative ideas for how to solve the problems that we face.

MISHLOVE: You go so far as to suggest -- and I think it's a unique suggestion -- that the leaderless group, the lay dream group, is actually more effective than a group working under a professional whose interpretations may be limited.

TAYLOR: Yes, I believe so. It is another one of the reasons why I believe so deeply in group dream work. I do not think it is merely an inexpensive substitute for one-to-one work with a highly trained professional, and it is clearly more productive than solitary work. Solitary dream work can be accomplished to good effect, but it is an immense amount of work, an immense energy drain, and insights can be generated in three hours in talking with your friends that would literally take months to come to on your own.

MISHLOVE: How do the lay dream groups operate?

TAYLOR: Well, there are several people who promote lay dream groups. The ones that I promote begin with an assertion that there are really four basic rules of thumb that need to be kept in mind, all of which boil down to the fact that the dreamer is the only reliable arbiter of what meanings his or her dream may hold. Then, literally, there are only two boundaries to the work. There is the boundary on the one hand of the collective imaginations of the people present, and the boundary on the other hand of their collective sense of propriety, whatever that may be. But within those two boundaries anything goes. In terms of actual practice, probably the most important thing that I promote is getting into the habit of saying to anyone when you're going to make a comment about their dream, "Well, if it were my dream, it would be about thus and such," because not only is that polite, it's accurate. Carl Jung once said that the limit of our ability to do dream work is to share our dream about somebody else's dream.

MISHLOVE: In other words, say, if I have an interpretation of a dream that you dreamt, it may even be very meaningful for me. But if you reject my interpretation, that's your prerogative.

TAYLOR: That's right. And I may be incorrect in my rejection, but that doesn't matter. The correctness of the interpretation is not the most important issue. The most important issue is the "Aha!" of insight of the dreamer him- or herself. In the presence of that "Aha!" you can be sure that what you're thinking is true, and in the absence of that "Aha!" it's simply irrelevant.

MISHLOVE: Now, most people have three, four, five dreams an evening. If we were to try and interpret every one of those dreams every day, it seems to me we would spend all our waking hours doing that and nothing else. How do you select?

TAYLOR: I think the selection mechanism in large part is taken care of by our habits of memory to begin with. The chances of actually remembering all four or five dreams every night are almost nil. Even the most skilled and enthusiastic dream recaller will probably only remember two or three dreams a night on a regular basis. My conviction is that the best thing to do is to write down everything that you remember, and as you get used to that as a discipline -- I would even say as a spiritual discipline -- then oftentimes the very process of writing the dream down will be the occasion for an "Aha!" of insight. So there will be a certain amount of interpretation that will happen just in the process of remembering on a regular basis. But beyond that, it seems to me that being able to get together with people you care about, who care about you, on a regular basis, say once a week or once every couple of weeks, and sitting down and sharing your dreams and listening to their dream, and projecting on them, and saying, "Well, if this were my dream it would be about this and that and the other thing," is the most productive way to bring the energies and the gifts that these dreams have to offer.

MISHLOVE: Let's talk about lucid dreaming. This is a topic that's becoming very popular now. I myself have had many dreams, and they're usually my favorite ones, that have to do with flying, typically; it seems like it's such sport. You report in your book -- I think it's a unique experience -- where you're having one of these flying dreams, and then you see some highly evolved spiritual beings who say to you, "Oh, there he goes flying again."

TAYLOR: Yes, yes, I was acutely embarrassed in that dream. I was having a great time, and these rogue sages sort of went, "Oh, there he goes." It was a very valuable insight for me at the time when I had the dream, that in fact I was allowing my enthusiasm over the experience of lucidity and the pleasure of flying to close me down prematurely in fact to what other possibilities of that state might offer. These wiser parts of my unconscious came in and in a very gentle way reminded me that there was more to this business than simply flying and having a good time.

MISHLOVE: What are some of the deeper purposes that lucid dreaming can be put to?

TAYLOR: Well, for instance, one can conquer an addiction in a lucid dream. I have not done it myself, but I have worked with people who have clearly conquered their addictions in quick time -- go to sleep hankering for a cigarette, and wake up with the habit knocked -- who say that they achieved that transformation of their interior energy dynamics in a lucid dream. I have no reason to believe that that is not so. As a matter of fact, all the things that I know point to the distinct possibility of that kind of action, and that being just the crudest example of the kinds of changes possible.

MISHLOVE: How would one do that -- by battling with the dragon of addiction, something of that sort?

TAYLOR: Indeed, yes, yes. Whatever the dreamer's heart and attention is truly focused on will be the subject of the dream. So it requires a certain sincerity. For instance, let's use quitting smoking as an example. A certain amount of sincerity in wanting to quit smoking to begin with is required. You can't substitute lucid dreaming for sincerity of desire. But assuming that the sincerity of desire is already there, and the problem really has to do with conquering a habit and a bodily craving, then the dreams are very likely to portray the bodily craving and the habit as a figure, as what seems to be a monster in the dream. And when one is lucid, it then becomes possible to turn and say, "Oh, I'm dreaming. This is a dream that's happening to me here. And because it's a dream I do not need to fear any harm, so I can turn to this monster and overcome it, and battle with the monster in the dream and overcome it, and then demand of the monster the gift of freedom from the addiction." If you can accomplish that in the dream state, the chances are when you awaken the actual energy dynamics that fed the addiction to begin with will be altered, pretty much for good.

MISHLOVE: That's remarkable.

TAYLOR: It is, it's extraordinary. My colleague, Stephen LeBerge, down at Stanford University, is the one who from my point of view is doing the most interesting research in this regard. Stephen believes, and I think he's correct, that it will be possible to demonstrate in the laboratory that lucid dreaming will be able to promote the healing of broken bones. He plans to offer a program for people who come into the Stanford Hospital with broken bones, in which he will train them to dream lucidly, and then give them exercises to undertake in their lucid dreams to heal their bones, and then produce a statistical study with broken-bone patients who are engaging in this practice, and broken-bone patients who are not engaging in this practice, and demonstrate a significant difference in the healing curve for the two of them.

MISHLOVE: You know, I was recently in Greece, and had an opportunity to visit the healing temples of Aesculapius, the temple at Cos -- a huge, enormous ruin. It was at one time vast. This is where Hippocrates received his training in medicine. So using dreams as a form of healing is a very ancient art.

TAYLOR: Oh yes. I too have been at that temple; that's very interesting. I had a vision at that temple; let me just share this quickly. I had a vision at that temple that it was right on that ground where the caduceus acquired the second snake that twines around it. I looked across at Turkey and Halicarnassus and I thought, "This is the ground where the two traditions of medicine came together -- the battlefield surgery tradition, and the homeopathic, herbal tradition." And it was at that place historically where those two traditions of medicine were taught as one thing.

MISHLOVE: Let's talk a little bit further, then, about the use of dream incubation -- incubating lucid dreams, and also other forms of dream incubation, which was cultivated at these temples as a healing practice.

TAYLOR: Well, it's an ancient technique, and it certainly is a technique that is experiencing a resurgence in contemporary times. In some sense we're incubating our dreams every night anyway. Whatever it is the dreamer is thinking about as he or she goes to sleep is likely to be woven into the fabric of the dream. So in some sense we're unconsciously incubating our dreams just by how we act and live, and it is possible to take that already existent unconscious process and take some conscious responsibility for it. As you go to sleep you can say, "I will dream tonight about X, Y, and Z, and in my dreams I will find a creative solution to this problem that I haven't thought of before." To repeat that intention over and over to oneself as you go to sleep, that is the incubation. Now, incubations can get extremely elaborate. My experience is that the more elaborate they are, the more they involve the whole body, the more likely they are to succeed.

MISHLOVE: Obviously in the ancient world, traveling to a monument such as a temple and sleeping there overnight in the presence of the god, or the statue of the god, was the way it was done at that time.

TAYLOR: Yes, along with a lot of healing baths and purifying rituals. Sometimes you had to hang around at the temple for weeks before the temple guardians perceived you to be sufficiently pure to actually go into the sanctuary and have the dream. In later decadent times, in Roman times, it became possible to hire somebody else to have your dream for you. If you were a busy Roman businessman and had gout, you could send a slave off to one of the Aesculapian healing centers and instruct the slave to have the dream for your cure.

MISHLOVE: Let's talk a little bit more about lucid dreaming. How does one incubate a lucid dream, as opposed to a regular dream?

TAYLOR: There are any number of techniques that work. The one that works best for me comes from Carlos Castaneda's work. When Don Juan is instructing Carlos about how to become a true warrior, a true magician, he makes the point that unless you have self control in the dream world you will never achieve self control while you are awake; you'll never be a real warrior. And the way to do that is to recognize first of all that that's what's happening, that you are dreaming. Don Juan says to Carlos, "You can use anything, but the best thing to use is something that you usually have with you in the dream." Although we sometimes dream without a body, ninety-nine percent of the time we have a body in the dream, so he says, "Look at your hands. Look at your hands while you are awake, several times, maybe once an hour. Look at them consciously and say, 'When I see my hands in my dreams, I will remember that it's a dream.'" So that the habit pattern gets built up of looking at your hands and saying, "Oh, this is a dream." And sooner or later, if that incubation practice is carried out seriously in waking life, the lucidity will come spontaneously. At some point in an ordinary dream you'll catch sight of your hands and you'll go, "Wait a minute; oh, this is a dream, right! Yes, there are my hands; I see my hands. This is a dream. My body's actually asleep in bed." And at that point, you can do anything. That's one of the things that's so extraordinary about this state, is that if you want to, you can say, "Shazam!" and turn into Captain Marvel. And if you want to, you can address the dream and ask for a creative solution to some life problem that you have; or you can turn to the dream and ask for a song, or an idea for a novel, or a symphony, or a way to bring world peace nonviolently. There is no limit to what can be asked for, and the dream will always respond. It may not always respond in the way that you expect, but the response, I have discovered over the years, is always to the point.

MISHLOVE: How common are these lucid dreams? Do you practice it daily?

TAYLOR: Oh no, no. I don't even think Stephen practices it daily. I would say I succeed in getting lucid maybe once a month. There are certainly friends and colleagues of mine who do it a good deal more often than that. I don't think the frequency of the experience is necessarily as important as what you do when you get lucid. For instance, if you only had one lucid dream a year and were really able in that moment to gather your wits together and ask the most important question for your life at that moment, it would probably then take about a year to manifest the creative energy that was made available to you in that moment.

MISHLOVE: There are various forms of yoga that really attempt to cultivate the lucid state.

TAYLOR: Yes, various forms of Tibetan yoga particularly, because the Tibetans believe that the state of the soul after death is exactly the same as what we experience as the dream when we are alive, so that lucidity becomes a spiritual discipline of a very high order in their belief structure. If you can get lucid when you're alive, then you will be free from the horrors of the Bardo world when you die. So they've developed a number of incubation techniques that are extraordinarily useful, and which work whether you believe their religious context or not.

MISHLOVE: You also mention that many of the traditions of ritual magic suggest that the real magic is done in the dream state, not in the physical plane.

TAYLOR: Yes, that all of those rituals -- burning the chicken feathers and walking around five times -- they were done in waking life, but they were incubations to do the same thing in the dream world.

MISHLOVE: It's as if at some level the dream world is real.

TAYLOR: There's a philosophical tradition with archetypal roots all around the planet, that says that the dream is the only reality -- that you and I and everyone are only characters in God's dream, and that we all exist in relationship to the divine, in exactly the same way that our dream characters exist in relation to us when we are awake. So that all true, effective action takes place in the dream first.

MISHLOVE: Jeremy Taylor, it's been a pleasure having you with me. We've really covered quite a bit of ground, from political action and setting up dream groups, to the divine connection that we experience through our dreams. Thank you very much.

TAYLOR: Thank you for having me. I had a wonderful time.