The Dream Navel

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I. Dream

_I dream that there are two poisonous snakes in a room with me, of two different species. I am glad they are in the room, so I can keep an eye on them. The snakes start twining together amorously, it’s a strangely sexy scene. I wonder if they will reproduce since they are different species. Then the door opens and they get out. Now I’m more worried—will I always be fearfully looking for them?_

In Zen, there is a strong tradition of seeing life as a dream. The character for dream, _yume_, is often hanging on the walls of Zen temples, a show of great respect. In keeping with the Japanese tradition of writing a poem about the essence of life at the moment of death, the Zen master Takuan picked up his calligraphy brush and wrote _yume_, dream, as he died. In the great myth of the birth of the Buddha, his mother is called Mahamaya, which means the Great Dream of the World. Buddha is conceived in her dream of a white elephant carrying a lotus flower melting into Mahamaya’s uterus. And so there is a way that our tradition originates in this dream conception, and like most dreams, it’s a little strange.

Zen koans, too, partake strongly of the dream. Koans, like dreams, are enigmatic, not to be understood with ordinary logical mind. They point us to something ineffable, something we experience in the body, in emotions and images.
Dreams and koans help us explore the pregnant place where all things are possible, and where things flow into and around each other in surprising ways. In my dream, two different snakes twine together and offer creative possibilities. In this way, the human psyche is an egg endlessly hatching into the dream world. Koans are a way to explore the dream world creatively, but also systematically. Feel the dream qualities in this koan.

*In a well that has not been dug,*  
water ripples from a stream that does not flow.  
*Someone with no shadow or form*  
is drawing the water.

*(Acequias and Gates: The Miscellaneous Koans Collection, translation by Joan Sutherland)*

This koan evokes a deep well in the mind, from which the streams of the world flows. And yet, there is no well or stream. What’s it like to sit next to this stream, and draw no-water with your no-hands? This is only possible in a dream.

II. The Dream Navel

“The is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown.” (Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams)

In this footnote to his influential “The Interpretation of Dreams,” Freud points us toward a spot in every dream, it’s navel, where it opens out into a territory that is unknown and perhaps unknowable. For Freud, dreams were representations of aspects of the unconscious, and important descriptors of who we are as individual psyches. Freud saw dreams as representations of our deepest wishes and desires, and as crucial to understanding the true causes of neurotic suffering. He called
dreams the "royal road to the unconscious," and advocated sustained attention to dreams as essential to healing. His writings on dreams have been hugely influential to many contemporary psychotherapeutic approaches, and also to academics and intellectuals in many disciplines. However Freud, a man of his time and place, wasn’t able to elaborate much on the dream navel, and to explore more about portal into the vastness. He pointed toward the depth of this mind, but he said that he himself had never had an experience of what he called “an oceanic experience” and left it to future generations to enter his footnote, to find the dream navel, the place of its point of contact with the unknown.

Freud noticed that in dreams the ordinary rules of logic don’t apply. It would not be unusual for someone to say, in my dream I was my age now, but I was also an old woman. When we enter the world of dreams, things can be fantastical, magical, terrifying. Time and space and identity are pliable. Freud taught that dreams are emissaries from the unconscious and so partake of its qualities. He identified five characteristics of the unconscious: timelessness, displacement, condensation, replacement of internal by external reality, and absence of mutual contradiction (Freud, 1900, 1915). In other words, in dreams and in the unconscious mind, time is not always sequential, and space is pliable. We find time and space fantastically expanded, or infinitely repeated. We also find that anything can happen in dreams, we can fly or become someone else. And the language of dreams tends to be condensed and imbued with layers of meaning. It’s not hard to see that these qualities of dreams also influence art, myth, and eros. In the koan of the well that has not been dug, we come up to a place of no contradiction, and a negation of categories of time and space. We have an invitation in the koan to sit with these mysteries, and to see where they take us.

Freud’s dream navel is a border concept. It is a frontier of exchange between what he calls the unknown and what rises up as a dream experience. The dream always bears the stamp of the unknown, in the form of the navel. It’s notable that Freud’s metaphor for this link is the navel, the marker of the point of union with your creator, Mother. The dream navel evokes associations to our connection to origins, to our actual mother, and to the Mother we relate to in life and in practice. It
also evokes an image of the severance from this source, and perhaps a phantasy of a portal back into that point of original union.

Many teachings have described the vastness as like an ocean, out of which particular waves arise, and then fall away. Each one of us, each poignant or painful moment, is a wave that arises and then falls back into the vast ocean. Koun Yamada Roshi taught that reality is like an equation, where the denominator is always zero, the infinite vastness, and the numerator is all phenomena, each thing in its particularity. In koans, and in dreams, we explore the place where ocean meets wave, the place Freud called the dream navel. This is a liminal zone, a place where dream and mystery come together. I imagine it as a kind of umbilical cord that leads out into the vastness.

Perhaps we can climb into the dream navel, and check out the view from there. In this liminal space, we can see the dream and the mystery at the same time. One eye always in the play of the dream, and another on the navel, the portal into the unknown, the inconceivable. When we stay in this dream navel, life gets richer, deeper, stranger.

The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion used the term “bi-nocular vision” for the kind of perception that allows multiple perspectives at once. He noted that seeing with bi-nocular vision both the conscious and the unconscious mind leads to an experience of depth that is profoundly meaningful to many people. Sitting in the dream navel is a bi-nocular experience. In the dream navel, we find yet another dimension beyond conscious and unconscious mind, the unborn mind that deeply constitutes them. When we feel simultaneously the transience and the beauty and the heartbreak of the dream, and watch it pour ever into the vastness, we are both deeply alive and deeply at rest.

My teacher, Joan Sutherland Roshi, says that the experience of awakening can be felt as a quality of shimmer, a dance between the particular and the vastness. She quotes the Lankavatara Sutra, which says, “things are not as they seem, nor are they otherwise.” When we attune our inner gaze more and more to this quality of shimmer, we find that we can trust the dream of life, and even join in and dream it further. Sitting in the dream navel, we experience the shimmer between each thing
that rises up—teacup, Iphone, heartbreak—and the vast unknown that it is always arising from and falling back into.

III. The Great Dream Body

In Buddhist thought, the great dream body is the sambhogakaya, the body of bliss and play. It is one of the three mythical bodies of the cosmic Buddha nature, the other two being the dharmakaya, vast emptiness, and the nirmanakaya, the body of form, of particularity and the everyday world. The sambhogakaya is the realm between the vastness and each manifestation in form. It is a dance of form and emptiness in play.

Form (nirmanakaya) is a way of knowing externality, there really is a world that is external, not a part of the self system. It is also each thing in its vivid particularity. It's this boy in a hoodie playing with his cat. This cancer diagnosis. This sound of distant traffic.

Emptiness (dharmakaya) is the essential truth of oneness, of no difference, no separation. We come to know the joy of this in deep practice, and find what happens when we allow our awareness of the vastness to permeate more and more deeply into our lives.

We are caught between our particular lives and the infinite, and in this place we find the vast stage of the sambhogakaya, the theater of dreams. Here we at first find our epic dramas of love and hate, loss, terror, and love. Koans and psychoanalysis help us honor the strangeness of the dream world, and to attune to the many teachings to be had in the realm of the sambhogakaya.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke called awareness of the interplay of form and emptiness, “in-seeing.” He described how, in in-seeing a dog, “to let oneself precisely into the dog, the place in it where God, as it were, would have sat down for a moment when the dog was finished, in order to watch it under the influence of its first embarrassments and inspirations and to know that it was good that nothing was lacking, that it could not have been better made. . . . Laugh though you may, dear confidant, if I am to tell you where my all-greatest feeling, my
world-feeling, my earthly bliss was to be found, I must confess to you: it was to be found time and again, here and there, in such timeless moments of this divine inseeing."

Rilke is showing us what the view is like from the dream body when we can fully participate in the dance between form, the particular dogginess of this dog, and the vastness, the place from which she rises and falls.

IV. The Staff Dragon Dream

Zen koans are a kind of dream for us to experience and begin to understand. When we work with a koan, we can’t just take it up as a problem to be solved. We must live it emotionally, relationally, socially. Each koan is a marker for a type of contact with the vastness. Of course in Zen there is nothing separate from Buddha nature, it is fully present right now. But in our human lives, we lose sight of this, and we live in the dream (or nightmare) of our lives. Working with koans helps us keep our eyes open for the dream navel present in every moment.

Yunmen held up his staff and said to the assembly, “This staff has become a dragon. It has swallowed up the whole universe. The mountains, rivers and great earth -- where do they come from?”

(Blue Cliff Record case 60, translation by Joan Sutherland and John Tarrant)

In this koan-dream, Yunmen invites us along on a breathtaking, fantastical journey into the inconceivable. He shows us the swooping movement between the three kayas. We start out in the ordinary world of form, the staff. In Zen, the presentation of the staff is often seen as a complete presentation of the dharma. This is what we call tathagata, thing-in-itselfness. Before we know what hits us, the staff becomes a dragon, a swoop into the sambhogakaya, the dream. It is a fantastical beast from the big dream, the big unconscious. And then, another swoop, the dragon swallows the whole universe. Nothing left. There is a feeling of
spaciousness, emptiness, and at the same time fullness. This is the feeling of tipping into the dharmakaya, the realm of the vastness.

Then, with this mind of holding the three kayas as simultaneously existing, we face the mystery. The mountains, the rivers, the great earth, where do they come from? What is the source? Our practice is to sit in that mystery, to really look into this great matter with love and curiosity and fearlessness.

V. Dream Navel Redux

Where might we locate the dream navel of this koan? In one sense, we might find it in the action of swallowing up the universe, the movement of the dream from the dragon into the swallowed-up universe. A movement into something vast and still and beautiful.

We might notice, as would Freud, that the action here is one of swallowing. It is an image of what we would call in psychoanalytic terms, incorporation, taking something in from the outside. The dragon swallows the universe. This points to a link with the early relationship with the mother, in which we might have a lived experience of swallowing the whole universe, the feeling of completeness that could be had. Here we have a feeling that something infinitely vast can be taken in and swallowed in one gulp. Then the universe and the staff and the dragon and the swallowing all disappear. In this way the dream navel is a poignant connection to the original mother, who we can swallow and take completely in. And then, swallowing even swallows itself up, folds in on itself, and disappears.

In another way, this dream is full of navels, it is made of navels, nothing but navels. When we work with koans, we practice in the dream navel. We sit in the tidal zone, in the transitional zone of meditative space. We watch the dream, and that watching is always interpenetrated with an awareness of what Freud calls the unknown, the Great Mystery. We watch as we eat mangoes or make love or undergo an emergency dental procedure. We show up fully for the dream, for the beautiful
and heartbreaking experience of being human. But we also feel an awareness of the navel, of the vastness from which the dream streams, and to which it returns.

Zen training is fundamentally about changing our identity. Many of us live primarily in the theater of the dream of the separate self. We live as though how we feel, what we want, is the most important thing. But through practice, we begin to identify with the process of transformation from staff to dragon to universe and back again. We experience how we are always rippling in this dance between materiality and the vastness. We don't have to get stuck in a cul-de-sac of repetitive habits of mind and heart. Instead, we know that we are just the pattern of flow swirling between form, emptiness, and dream, and our task is simply to step into the dance.