

LEARNING TO WORK WITH LIVING IMAGES

Dream images are alive and embodied. This is the fundamental insight at the heart of Dream Tending and is at the heart of our work. The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to learning the skills of animating living dream images. In Part I, I will show how to prepare for Dream Tending. In Part II, I will cover the basic skill set, which includes accessing the archetypal ego, asking the core questions, and using language to vivify images. This will give us solid ground upon which to enter Part III, "Hosting the Guest," which introduces us to a series of more advanced skills. Then in Part IV, "From Relationship to Revelation," we will learn ways to interact with dream images on even deeper and more rewarding levels.

PART I: PREPARATION—

ENTERING THE REALM OF THE LIVING DREAM

When I listened to my great-grandfather tell his stories, I was transported from his little shoe shop in Pasadena to another world. With him, my imagination was completely active and open. He put me into a dreamlike state of mind, in which the images from his stories sprang to life in my mind's eye. This state of mind turns out to be crucial to Dream Tending. I have found that there are four attitudinal qualities to prepare us to hear dreams in this dreamlike manner. We must:

- 1) Meet the Dream in the Way of the Dream
- 2) Open Body Awareness
- 3) Become Present in the Here and Now
- 4) Engage the Dream in an Attitude of Not Knowing

These attitudinal qualities set the stage for dream images to come to life and reveal themselves.

1. Meet the Dream in the Way of the Dream

One of the most useful watchwords I have discovered is that "a dream loves a dream." This means that when we approach an image with an open, accepting, dreamlike attitude, it comes to life.

In the actuality of the dreamtime, everyone experiences dreams as alive. When we are dreaming, the characters and action seem as real as anything else in our lives. It is only when we wake up, remember them with our conscious mind, and write them down in our dream journals that they can become static and dead.

To explain away an image is to lose contact with an important visitor. Most folks who listen to a dream try to figure it out mentally. They look for what it "means." This is a trap. Dreams are not a product of the logical mind, and when a dream is met in the way of rational thought, images get folded, spindled, and mutilated to suit the rational mind.

When we approach dreams with an agenda to interpret or judge, the living image becomes stagnant, fixed, and eventually dies. For example, to interpret the dream image of a giraffe as a phallic symbol misses its actuality as an image in the inner landscape of our dream life.

It is crucial to sidestep the ego's desire to understand, make meaning, and dominate. A dream needs to be met in the way of the dream. This is particularly the case when we have an immediate idea of what a dream "means." When this happens it is very hard to find the patience to center ourselves, let go of our explanation, and then connect to the reality of the living dreamtime. So an attitude of wonderment, curiosity, and presence is a necessary first response to a living image.

2. Open Body Awareness

There is a line from Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese" that informs all my dreamwork:

*"You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves."*

When I work from my "animal body," greeting dream images in an embodied way, they in turn respond to me in the same way. It's as if a dream image is actually a kind of person or animal with a body of its own, albeit imaginal. Images have life force and walk about on legs of their own. Even the non-creature dream entities, like clouds or airplanes or houses, are living, personified presences of the dreamtime. They too have a vitality that blossoms into visibility when met body-to-body.

To meet images in an embodied way, I pay particular attention to the feelings running through me as I encounter an image. I take the time to listen to what is happening in my corporeal experience. It pays to be patient, because often when I try to tune into my body and feelings, the "knower" is the first on the scene. He scrambles to figure things out, take control, offer an opinion. When he shows up, I instantly lose the immediacy of contact with my body. So over the years, I have learned to simply say hello to the "knower" and let him pass by. Then after quieting down, I bring awareness back to the immediacy of my animal body. Connected to my instinctual sensitivities, I am now ready to make body-to-body contact with the living embodied images of the dreamtime.

3. Become Present in the Here and Now

A third attitude for preparing ourselves to work with living images is to get anchored in the here and now, to come into the present moment. A dream image is always here, always now—always ready to connect in the eternal timeless Now of the dream.

I have never heard of anyone having a dream in the past tense. They are always in the present. Therefore it is helpful to become centered in the present moment as a way to enter the dreamtime.

Think of meeting a friend at the park. When I am preoccupied with the demands of the day, I bring nothing with me but a cluttered mind. The interaction is stale and dull. I have not made the effort to bring myself mentally to the meeting, and so neither of us comes to life. We both remain trapped inside a compulsive mind and a deadened body. Sound familiar? It hurts to realize how often we are nothing more than a head, floating in the future and past, disconnected from our body.

Now imagine the opposite. Maybe on the walk through the park to meet my friend, I opened my aesthetic eye to the sensual riot of flowers and took deep, full breaths of the fresh scent from the trees. The sensual richness of the world displaced past regrets and future worries, and centered me in the luxuriant, beautiful Now. When I meet my friend I am awake, receptive, grounded, fluid, interactive. Rooted in present time, I listen in a different way. My friend feels this and engages me with his presence, attention, and openness. Rather than just a check-in, we have a rich, fulfilling experience.

This is exactly the attitude to take with a living image. When we let go of our past and future concerns and simply meet the image in the eternal Now, we create an appropriate environment for good Dream Tending.

4. Engage the Dream in an Attitude of Not Knowing

The first encounter with a living dream can create a sense of being overwhelmed or confused. This is especially true when we depend solely on the rational mind for explanation and meaning. Dreams can be complex, bizarre, confusing, and yet seem to have profound import. When feeling overwhelmed or confused, I have

found it quite helpful to reframe this experience as a positive state of “not knowing.” Not knowing means that we allow ourselves the comfort of not having all the answers about a dream. We give ourselves the luxury of taking the dream at face value, without struggling to unravel its knots. At its best, an attitude of not knowing is expansive, related, and attuned to the living actuality of dreams. Contrary to feelings of confusion, not knowing creates more room for the dream to present itself and for us to encounter it.

For example, let’s imagine a dream in which we find ourselves on a tropical island with a clear pond filled with colorful koi. Around us, swarms of fire ants are on the move. As the dream progresses, we are attacked by a snarling wolf. Presented with such a dream, it would only be natural to wonder what it all means. Any Jungian or Freudian would salivate at a dream like this! There is so much to make out of it. To find some answers would feel reassuring and insightful and remove any unpleasant sense of confusion. We could speculate forever about the possible implications. Yet for all our supposed insights, there is that which remains undeniably, unmistakably, and unchangeably true: a wolf with fangs is prowling, red ants are marching, and brightly colored fish are swimming. The dream itself is a *fact*. Everything else is conjecture.

However clever our explanations of dreams, they actually take us away from the clarity and reality of the dream itself. They are an attempt to deal with our own anxiety and confusion about such a compelling occurrence. If we become more comfortable with not knowing, we won’t be so motivated to explain away our dreams. In the long run it is much more satisfying and rich to sit with the mystery, wonder, and sometimes, even bizarreness of a dream. In not knowing, dreams stay fresh, alive, interactive, and surprising.

To experience the presence of living images in all of their wonder and possibility, we start out with these four fundamental attitudes: meet the dream in the way of the dream, open our body awareness, become present in the here and now, and engage the dream in an attitude of not-knowing. These four orienting attitudes bring us into relationship with the living reality that the dreaming psyche is presenting.

EXERCISE:

Entering the Realm of the Living Dream

Select a vivid dream to work with. Sometimes this is an obvious choice; perhaps the dream you had last night was so compelling that it hasn’t let go of you all day. Or maybe there is a dream from the past that has continued to come into your thoughts again and again. Whatever dream you choose, or whichever dream chooses you, write or draw it in detail before going further.

When you are ready, find a quiet place and get settled. Reconnect with your body in whatever way you know. You may want to pay attention to your breathing. Notice how you begin to relax and deepen into your body sensations. Allow any thoughts that arise to gently pass through your mind, like clouds floating easily through the sky. Return to your breath. Allow your mind to clear and let go of any interpretations of the dream that you might be considering. Relax in your chair or couch. Take a few moments to feel your presence in the room.

Next read the text of the dream aloud to yourself or take a few moments to really witness the sketch that you have drawn. See the entire dream in your mind’s eye, just as you saw it the first time you dreamt it. Imagine that you are in the theater of dream, participating in a live performance.

Notice carefully how entering this dream theater makes you feel. What emotions come up? What physical sensations arise in your body? Write down your observations in your journal.

By bringing yourself into the dream in an active and responsive way, in present time, you begin to open to the consciousness of the dream. You leave your daytime world ever so slightly behind, and begin to walk into the dream world. You are meeting the dream in the way of the dream. Begin to move forward, further and further into the dream. It is no longer an inanimate object that you are going to pick apart. You begin to see it as it really is—a living reality that is here and now.

Now close your eyes and notice your breathing. As you bring your focus to your body, observe where you are feeling tight. Allow your inhaling to naturally deepen, then bring your awareness back to the dream. Notice what you observe and write it down.

LEARNING TO WORK WITH LIVING IMAGES— PART II: THE BASIC SKILL SET

Contacting the Archetypal Ego

Once we have entered the realm of the dream, it is helpful to contact a part of ourselves that I call the “archetypal ego.” This more essential self is located in the depth of our being, not in our heads, and is often referred to as our true nature, or the authentic self. This is somewhat different from what Jung called the archetype of the Self. Aligned with the archetypal ego, we have a much greater ability to tend to living images. From this center place, we have the capacity to witness without feeling compelled to act, and the images thus begin to interact with us more freely.

Dream Tending depends on our ability to sustain contact with the archetypal ego. It invites and engages with the animated spark alive within dream figures. Through this deep contact, dream figures come to life and reveal themselves as embodied entities and we gain access to the innate intelligence of these animated images.

My experience is that connecting to the archetypal ego is easier to understand conceptually than to actually do. But I have specifically developed Dream Tending exercises to help you get the hang of it. Like learning most new activities, it's a matter of doing the exercises and keeping an open mind.

EXERCISE: *Contacting the Archetypal Ego*

To connect to the archetypal ego, identify a dream image that touches you emotionally. Sometimes it happens that the first image invites a second dream image into your awareness. If a second dream image shows up, stick to this new image and let the original one go. Spend time exploring this image. Use the skills of animation that you have learned to vivify the image and watch its activity. Meet the figure in the way of the dream. Notice what is particular about it.

Now enter more deeply into a relationship with this figure. Engage in a dialogue, either mentally or by writing it down. As you interact with the figure, notice how your connection to your breath, your heart, and your core deepens. Now imagine the figure alongside of you. Feel your feet on the ground, your breath deepening still further, and your heartfelt awareness broadening. From this awareness, you are now ready to meet the dream in the way of your animal body. You have engaged the archetypal ego, or what some call the authentic self. This is the desired state of awareness from which to continue tending the dream.