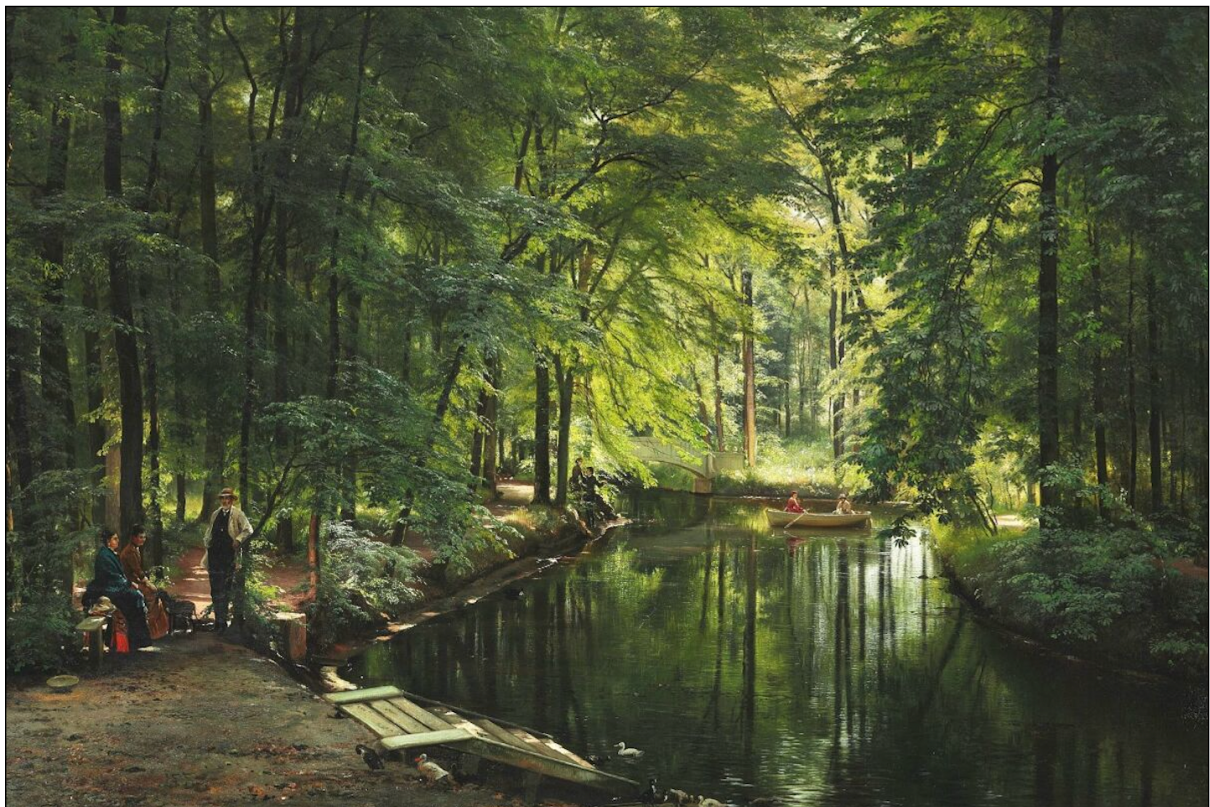




Life Is But a Dream

*I was not looking for my dreams
to interpret my life, but rather for
my life to interpret my dreams.*

Susan Sontag

ROW, ROW, ROW YOUR BOAT,
gently down the stream...

It is the most familiar of all lullabies—
or as the writer Hugh Prather eloquently
described it, “the greatest of all hymns.”

Most moderately reflective people—
especially those that practice meditation—
are familiar with the concept of *lucid
dreaming*, in which one is able to recognize
while dreaming that they are actually
asleep, and to consciously take control of
the content and direction of their dreams.

For a few fortunate people, this ability to
dream lucidly happens effortlessly and
spontaneously, but for most people it
requires some preparation and practice.

Apart from practicing relaxation exercises,
refraining from the use of stimulants, and
keeping to a regular sleep schedule, some
advise habitually repeating various ‘reality
checks’ throughout the day as a means to
increase the prospect that one will enter a
lucid state while dreaming. These include
such things as closely observing one’s face
in a mirror, or looking down at the hands.

Repeating such exercises while dreaming
—or performing tasks that wouldn’t be
possible in waking life, like flying through
the air—can serve as mental triggers to
remind the dreamer that they are dreaming.

But while one can certainly find pleasure
in being able to consciously direct one’s
dreams in a more adventurous direction or
to a more desirable outcome, for many, the
ultimate goal of lucid dreaming is to
enhance the ability to experience what
might be called *lucid living* while awake.

To return to the lullaby, what do we actually mean when we say “Life is but a dream,” and why does the saying seem so compelling, even just on an intuitive level? For that matter, how do you even know you are ‘awake’ right now, if you didn’t know you were dreaming while you were asleep?

The saying suggests that the waking and the dreaming states share something in common, and from the point of view of Non-duality, that ‘something’ is that we aren’t actually fully awake in *either* state, and what we call being ‘awake’ is actually sleepwalking, one step removed from the dreaming state. We feel ‘awake’ simply because we aren’t asleep and dreaming.

From the point of view of our limited, self-contained ego, we have no control over our dreams, and are mere spectators, but from the point of view of our true nature as Awareness, there is no dreamer, only dreaming. We might even say that in a sense, *the dream is dreaming us*.

As the great teacher of Advaita Vedanta, or Non-duality, Nisagadatta Maharaj, put it: “Our lives, instead of being lived *by* us as we seem to think, are in fact being lived *for* us like all the characters in one’s dream.”

This insight, taken fully to heart, has profound implications, not just for how we view our dreams but for how we view and conduct our waking lives as well. Viewing dreaming as an analogy for our waking life can be very useful as a way of dealing with life’s problems in a fearless, detached way.

For example, what seems important in the dream, even a matter of life or death, we realize upon waking wasn’t important at all. (Prather cites the example of being chased by monsters in a dream. If we were to suddenly realize we are dreaming, we might not necessarily wake up *from* the dream.

But we might continue, now awake *in* the dream, without the fear that we felt before: Being chased by monsters can even be fun!)

Similarly, we can’t wake up *from* the dream of being a person—a separate, limited entity. But like watching a movie and momentarily pulling our eyes away and looking around at the audience, we can wake up *in* the dream. The movie goes on but somehow everything feels different. A bit less fascinating and melodramatic, perhaps, but after all, we are free to go back to sleep anytime we wish.

The ‘waking’ dream continues as before, but simply knowing that we are dreaming changes everything. The same detached, fearless attitude we had toward the monsters in our dream can be applied to our waking worries and fears, and while we shouldn’t ignore our problems as if they didn’t exist, we might be inclined to treat them much differently, simply doing whatever needs to be done without the usual doubt or anxiety.

This realization can also free us to be more authentic—to not care so much what others think—because concerns about being judged spring only from the ego’s basic insecurity. We might also become less inclined to judge others, since after all, we are all sharing a common dream, and everyone is in a sense equal (equally imaginary!) in a dream.

One might be concerned that this attitude could lead to one withdrawing from life or taking a passive attitude toward the world’s problems, but the truth is just the opposite: *The more we wake up in our dreams, the more we wake up in our lives*.

Upon awakening from the dream of being a person, we carry on with our lives as before, but with a deeper sense of our true nature and our power to shape our own reality.

Only when nothing really needs to be done does everything becomes possible. ■