



What does it mean to become a child of illusion? What does it mean to see the world as illusory? Illusory has a very specific definition here. It doesn't mean that things don't exist. That is the near enemy of nihilism.

What it means is that the way things appear is not in harmony with the way things actually are. In other words, looks can be deceiving.

In the Buddhist tradition, there's a big difference between appearance and reality. In fact, one could argue the trajectory of the path is to bring appearance in harmony with reality. To bring relative truth in harmony with absolute truth.

One image I use is: here's reality, and here's appearance. The trajectory is to bring appearance in harmony with reality, form in resonance with emptiness. What that implies therefore, is that we currently do not see things the way they truly are.

This is what it means to be asleep, in *samsara*. We don't see things the way they are, we see things the way *we* are, which is a common teaching in the Talmud, among many other traditions.

We can see this even colloquially, when we wake up in the morning in a really bad mood. When we're all pissy and depressed, that mood tends to color and affect our experience, our reality during the day. Or if we wake up in love, the world responds in kind and becomes more lovely.

So this is a more surface expression of a deeper type of co-creation of reality that runs at the foundation of the spiritual path as I've come to understand it. I refer to this as the King Midas effect. What I mean is that what we do so unconsciously, so unwittingly, is run around, and with our senses we unwittingly transform reality into our version of gold, to ego's version of gold, which is seeing things as solid, lasting, and independent.

What this means is that at the deepest level of projection, not merely projecting bad moods or good moods, we project the very qualities that define, that are archetypal of the nature of ego. Ego as solid, lasting, and independent. In a certain sense, it's the mother of all things. What we unwittingly do is we impute, we project, these qualities of the ego upon the world and freeze it in our image.

We freeze it in our image of gold, ego's image of gold, which is seeing it in this dualistic way. In so doing, of course, we ensure our suffering.

### **The Co-Creators of Reality**

By nature, reality is ineffable. Whatever you say about it isn't. But we have fingers that can point to the moon, we have ways of suggesting what this reality might be like.



The nature of reality is fluid, malleable, open, flowing, groundless. All expressions of this thing we call emptiness. What we then do is we freeze this reality, this fluid reality, we freeze it into concrete and steel. Then we wonder why the world is so hard.

Well, the world is only as hard as we are. We are the co-creators, we are not the victims of our reality. We are the victims of how we project reality to be. So this is what we're going after when we work with these practices of illusory form. The world is only as hard as we are.

We are trying to soften it by softening ourselves, by working within us. As we get softer, our world responds in kind and it gets softer. It gets more open, more fluid, more malleable, more empty. We see it in this way.

When the practices of illusory form and dream yoga are accomplished, and really by extension all spiritual practice altogether, in my estimation, we're no longer fooled and therefore seduced by appearances, which is exactly what defines a non-lucid dream.

A non-lucid dream is getting seduced into appearances, not realizing that the dream is a dream, mistaking it to be real. In so doing, we become victims of our projection, we become victims of the dream, a dream that we reified by taking it to be real.

We take the example of how it is that we reify our dreams, become non-lucid to them, we use that as an example, sometimes called the example dream that helps us understand the primary dream, how it is we freeze this so-called waking reality.

Because it's such a critically important point, another way of saying this is that samsara—confused, conventional, conditioned reality—is born when we lose the essence in the display, when we lose the empty nature of reality in form, when we lose emptiness in form, when we get lost in form.

By doing so, we no longer perceive a world of empty forms or illusory form, we perceive what we perceive now, which is a seeming world of solid, lasting, and independent form. This is exactly what it means to be asleep, spiritually asleep.

### **Perceiving a World of Illusory Form**

What the practice of dream yoga is designed to do, is to help you find the essence in the display, find the emptiness, relocate the emptiness in form. The result of course, in doing that, of balancing this equation of form and emptiness is perceiving a world of illusory form. What might this really mean?



Who knows exactly what it is that Buddha sees. But what I want to do now is give you some ideas using supporting references and quotations from some of the great teachers of our age, some ways to fingerprint, to suggest what it might be like to see the world in this way, because otherwise these teachings can appear somewhat abstract when they are left at the level of the absolute.

An introductory statement Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche says:

*As perceived by a Buddha, all the experiences that samsaric beings have, are no more substantial than dreams. It all looks like dreaming.*

I would argue that the Buddha is the ultimate lucid dreamer. Let's unpack this using a number of other great quotations.

### **A More Spacious View**

The first way of looking at the illusion, illusory form, is to look at things as being more open, more spacious. I think a more applicable way of understanding this difficult issue of emptiness is a synonym for emptiness is openness, which is beautifully connected to this idea I mentioned earlier as meditation being habituation to openness. So the underlying teaching here is the deepest forms of meditation, our habituation to emptiness, habituation to the true nature of reality.

Our beloved teacher in the West, Pema Chödrön, says:

*When you say everything is a dream, another way to say that is, there's just so much room. We have an enormous amount of room to move around in. Our minds are really vast. We're not constricted by anything. If we can loosen the grip of our thoughts regarding them as dreams, we've just made the world and our ability to experience this world evermore larger.*

So we go with these practices then as the Zen tradition puts it, from small mind to big mind. From constricted, constipated, myopic egoic mind to vast Buddha mind.

To dovetail this back into some of the material I presented earlier, samsara is getting sucked into appearances, just like with a really good movie, or like a really good, so to speak, non-lucid dream.

### **Samsara as a Movie**

This is in fact what movies are designed to do. And we love to live our lives in these movies, overt and covert. A very interesting kind of thought experiment here is to imagine that you are in a theater, you're the only person in this theater. It's pitch black and you're in the front row. You're watching an incredible cinematic display. Of course, what constitutes a good movie is a movie that completely sucks you in,



when you get so into it, you're laughing, you're crying, you're living within the context of the movie, because it's so captivating.

So imagine you're sitting in the front row of some Academy Award winning production, *Gone With the Wind* or whatever, you're in it, you're in the front row, you're totally captivated by what's happening. Then all of a sudden, you find yourself in the back row of this theater, and the walls of the theater fall away. The roof is blown off.

You find this movie, the cinematic display is still taking place. But it's now taking place in a vastly different arena of vastly different contexts of openness. The movie is still there. *Gone With the Wind* is still playing.

But you're no longer captivated by it because you have reframed it in a much larger and more spacious and accommodating perspective. You feel the wind, you hear things around you. Your awareness is so much larger than just what's happening on this screen.

So, of course, this is analogous to the meditative path, using a term that Daniel Dennett, the cognitive scientist and philosopher uses of the mind being like the Cartesian theater.

With meditation practice we distance ourselves, we gain a new sense of perspective, we learn to detachedly witness as Ramana Maharshi's quote intimated at the outset, we learn how to detachedly witness what previously was so all encompassing. This, of course, is the transition from non-lucidity to lucidity. And this is what we aspire to do.

Appearances are still there, but they no longer have the same power over you.

Sam Harris, the author and provocateur says this:

*Your perception is unchanged, but the spell is broken. Most of us spend every major waking moment lost in the movie of our lives. Until we see that an alternative to this enchantment exists, we are entirely at the mercy of appearances.*

You could therefore say that truly at the end of the path, we don't actually attain enlightenment. We simply cease to be deluded by appearances. This is implied in the terms *nirodha* and *nirvana* which mean respectively, cessation and extinction.

We cease to be seduced by appearances, which is again precisely what happens when we get seduced to the appearances of our dreams.



### **A Lighter World**

So a second way that enlightened beings or awakened beings may perceive the world is as literally and metaphorically lighter, more enlightened. And by contradistinction, we are all victims of an endarkened view of reality where we see everything that appears, is heavy and solid. Therefore we're burdened by this perception that we ourselves actually bring to appearances.

Traleg Rinpoche supports this by saying:

*You would still see objects as solid, but you would not believe in their solidity. You would not suffer from any kind of belief system, and you would no longer carry the normal kind of naive assumptions that make you see objects as solid and obtrusive. You would no longer make any distinction between how things are and how things appear. You would just see the nature of the things themselves, and no longer make a distinction between essence and appearance.*

Once again, it's this unity of form and emptiness. We still take things seriously, but we no longer take them literally. So our reality with this more enlightened view becomes more childlike, not childish, but more childlike, more free, more playful.

I have to say in my extensive experience with Masters in Asia and the United States, a very common characteristic of these meditation masters in my experience is this truly playful, childlike, light hearted approach.

My teachers Khenpo Rinpoche, Palga Rinpoche, Trungpa Rinpoche were often the great jokesters, pulling the rug out from under our realities, constantly sending us hurling into outer space. Not always pleasant, but certainly highly illuminating.

### **A Transient Reality**

The third way is seeing things as illusory implies to me, you see things as more transient and ephemeral, more impermanent. Impermanence, transients, these are expressions of emptiness. And this can increase our sense of appreciation towards things.

This is why the study of impermanence and death, somewhat ironically, actually brings us to life by enhancing a deeper sense of appreciation for the transient nature of all existence.

And Sogyal Rinpoche helps us here when he says:

*What is our life, but a dance of transient forms? Isn't everything always changing? Doesn't everything we have done in the past seem like a dream now? The friends we grew up with, the childhood hearts, those views and opinions we once held with such single minded passion, we*



*have left them all behind. Now, at this moment, reading this book seems vividly real to you. Even this page will soon be only a memory.*

One image that I often play with here is imagine that you're driving home after a spring rainstorm and you come around the corner and see before you this extraordinary rainbow, absolutely breathtaking in its beauty. You step outside of your car, and simply marvel at the splendorous display of light in space.

You never once for a second say to yourself, *I want to own that, I'm gonna buy that rainbow, I'm going to purchase that rainbow, I'm going to own that rainbow.* It doesn't even enter your mind. Because you realize the impermanent, ephemeral, transient nature of that appearance is just the play of luminosity and emptiness, the play of light and space.

I believe this inner meaning of rainbow body is the way the great awakened ones perceive all of reality. Everything appears as the celebratory display of light and space, and they never, for an instant think I'm going to possess that. Because just like the rainbow, they know it isn't going to last. And, again, by then, perceiving the world in this way, a greater sense of appreciation and delight comes about.

We appreciate rainbows, I would argue, in part because we understand their ephemeral, transient nature. And so by reframing, or in this case, unframing and seeing the world in this rainbow way, we literally bring a sense of de-light into the way we perceive all analysis manifest reality.

### **The Systemic and Empty Nature of Things**

A fourth way of seeing the world as illusory is that we see things as more interconnected in a sense of deep ecology. We see the deep systemic nature of things. We come to realize that emptiness doesn't mean nothingness. Emptiness means no thing-ness.

It means that when you look at something very closely, there is no thing there. There is only a vast interconnected nexus of causes and conditions going back to the beginning of time. And what we do out of fear, out of convenience, for a lot of deeply psychological and spiritual reasons, we freeze frame, we zip lock this world into a concretized reified way when that is in fact, not the nature of the world.

This is what Thich Nhat Hanh, the great Vietnamese Zen master refers to so beautifully with his teachings on interbeing. This is really important because it adds an entirely new dimension to emptiness.

Because of the term there's often the negative, nihilistic tinge to emptiness. But understanding emptiness in its truest way, really means understanding fullness. Because empty of self means full of other, and right away we can start to see, with this aspect, the illusory nature of things. This gives birth, this wisdom way of perceiving things, to compassion.



Because when you realize there is no self, everything is really constituted of other, that when the great beings look out across the world, they do not see others, they see themselves. So the suffering that they witness is their suffering and they want to get rid of it. So this is really the basis of compassion.

And Kalu Rinpoche inserts this really beautiful, contemplative quote, when he says:

*You live in confusion and the illusion of things. There is a reality, you are that reality. When you know that, you will know that you are nothing. And in being nothing, you are everything. That is all.*

That's a wonderful summary statement of how emptiness doesn't mean nothingness. Emptiness really means fullness.

Thich Nhat Hanh, in one of the most elegant references to this that I've ever come across, says this on his view of interbeing:

*If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no water. Without water, the trees cannot grow. And without trees, you cannot make paper. So the cloud is in here. The existence of this page is dependent on the existence of a cloud. Paper and cloud are so close.*

*Let us think of other things like sunshine. Sunshine is very important because the forest cannot grow without sunshine. And we as humans cannot grow without sunshine. So the logger needs sunshine in order to cut the tree and the tree needs sunshine in order to be a tree. Therefore, you can see sunshine in this sheet of paper.*

*And if you look more deeply with the eyes of a bodhisattva, with the eyes of an awakened one, you will see not only the cloud and the sunshine in it, but that everything is here. The wheat that became the bread for the logger to eat, the logger's father, everything is in this sheet of paper. The presence of this tiny sheet of paper proves the presence of the whole cosmos.*

This is really a fantastic way to talk about the way Buddhists see the world, this illusory way, is a vast, interconnected nexus of causes and conditions. No thing means everything.

### **The Cutting Through Practices**

Finally, the fifth way is that seeing the world is illusory means having the ability to see through, to penetrate through the facade of mere appearance. In the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon of practices, there are a whole series of practices referred to as the cutting through practices, *Trekchö*, which in a certain sense means cutting through appearance to reality.





This also dovetails into a deeper, even more refined version of right view, the first of the eightfold factors in the Eightfold Noble Path. Through the practice of dream yoga and illusory form, we develop these kinds of x-ray eyes, the eyes of Superman, or Superwoman in western kind of mythology—which, one could argue, are western analogues to the Daoist version of the superior man or the superior woman. These are men and women who can see through things.

And we can get some sense of what this might be like, again, this larger sense of perspective, when for instance, we're dealing with our children, and you can extrapolate this type of perception to any circumstance.

Imagine that you're sitting on your deck, and your child is playing with a handful of neighborhood children. And all of a sudden, a great emotional upheaval arises because one child steals the toy of another. And you realize that within the context of the limited view of the children, there's a heap load of suffering going on there.

But with your adult level of perception with your ability to see through their silliness, you can step into this chaotic environment with a great deal of compassion and understanding, and help illuminate an otherwise intractable situation. In a similar way, the type of vision that's cultivated with illusory form and dream yoga, you develop this type of superior insight that always comes with understanding and compassion. That allows you to see in the best way through people and through situations.

You're no longer caught up in superficial politics, posturing, pretense, the games that people tend to play. You've seen through it all, because you've cut through the appearances that bring about so much suffering.

### **Diagnosing With More Accuracy**

As a final analogy here, just like medical X rays are used to benefit others to see through outer form into underlying conditions that may bring about a disease, in a similar way, this type of penetrating cutting through vision, allows us to diagnose worldly situations with more accuracy, and therefore, bring greater benefits simply because we have this type of perception.

An image that also comes to mind for how this ties back into compassion yet again, is to imagine a scenario where you're in a vast basketball arena and all your loved ones are lying on the floor sleeping. You're the only one awake.

As you gently walk around, you notice that several of your loved ones are tormented. They're writhing and moaning from an obvious nightmare. As a spontaneous gesture of compassion with your awakened perspective, you would naturally come towards these people rouse them from their slumber and say what? “It's just a dream. You don't have to take what you're perceiving so seriously.”





In a highly analogous form, this is what in fact, the bodhisattvas and the great Buddhas do. They run around, seeing how we unnecessarily suffer from being so entrapped in appearances. And their job, of course, is to rouse us from our collective slumber. And the teachings of illusory form and dream yoga are in large part designed to do just that.

So as a summary statement, in relation to the practice of dream yoga, and its relationship to illusory form, we could almost say that dream yoga “reifies dreams” as a way to de-reify waking reality, until we can come to see the equivalence, the one taste, the ultimate equanimity of them both.

As Ramana Maharshi said in that beautiful quote:

*The sage dreams, but he knows it to be a dream, in the same way he knows the waking state to be a dream.*

So the sage sees all states of consciousness in this equanimous fashion, and this is our aspiration with these practices.

So with illusory form in particular, and dream yoga, these practices allow us to retreat into a perspective from the awakened mind, from the clear light mind, from the Buddha mind.

Where it is absolutely true to proclaim when we look at everything, this is a dream.