

SLEEP-FOCUSING: A PATHWAY TO SLEEP

By Elizabeth English

I wake up, sensing deep night all around, with just a hint of dawn. I float deliciously for a few moments in a dream-filled, sleep-soaked, semi-conscious state; then roll over. I'm intending to snuggle down again into that sleepy warmth—but the sad fact is, I'm still awake.

Sleep is still close by, and I can feel it in and around me. But now there's something else too—an anxiety, a dread even, about what this night will bring. Groggily-tired, I begin to search for sleep: it grows elusive. I start to grow restless, with a touch of creeping despair, as I wonder how I'll cope next day. I'm even wider awake now, and feeling helpless too, because my mind has dispatched itself to some buzzy hinterland, and I know that I might as well give up on sleep, although I'm too tired to do anything else...

Instead, I'm wandering amidst hazy thought-streams; or bumping up against some hard, knotty core; or I'm pinioned in a place where inner voices chatter unpleasantly; or a fantasy has taken hold, an anxious impulse that won't quieten, a tense, fretting day-dream that obtrudes into the space where night-dreams ought to be...



1. <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/encyclopedia/images/articles/emeralddream.jpg>

I imagine most of us know what a sleepless night can be like. And how for some people sleeplessness comes in bouts, even in periods of debilitating insomnia. I'm lucky in that my sleepless nights have come mostly in phases. Over the past few years, since I learned focusing, I've tried to deal with them by focusing alone during the early hours. But I've found it hard to do at that time, tending to drift, or becoming easily merged with what is in me, not quite having the energy or resources for the focusing to be effective.

So I was quite stunned, on a particularly wakeful night about eighteen months ago, when I happened upon a rather different way of focusing which magically and dramatically opened a clear and almost immediate, pathway back to sleep.



2 Henri Rousseau *The Dream* (1910, The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

Since then, I've applied my discovery regularly, whenever needed, and it has become a practice in itself; a sort of focusing that I now call sleep-focusing, and which seems to bring about a fresh relationship between my wakeful self and sleep. Nowadays, sleep finds its way back to me almost every time; and often after doing sleep-focusing I have extraordinarily rich dreams. The couple of times I have not been swept back into sleep, I've felt surprisingly alert and whole during the following day, as if I had really rested deeply.

The discovery of sleep-focusing has been a journey, and I've needed to practice it, because it is quite different from the way I would normally focus. Still, I would like to share what I've discovered so far. Perhaps my best approach is to let you know the steps I follow, in so far as they are linear, and the results these bring. If you try them, your experience may of course be very different. But this is how it goes for me.

Steps Towards Sleep

i. Interrupting sleep

When I notice I'm awake, I roll over onto my back (I sleep on my side), and I bend my knees so they are raised up towards the ceiling, my hands folded onto my stomach. This is probably the hardest step, and the most important. In a groggy-tired state, making the effort to roll onto my back feels utterly untempting. Even now, there are nights

when I am sleepy enough to think that I will fall asleep again soon—when the heaviness I feel in my bones is so strong that I don't want to move. But I know that if I short-cut this first step, I am liable to lie there for ages, drifting in and out of some half-awake-half-asleep place, or growing more and more awake.

Because as long as I try to bury myself back in sleep, I am actually merged and identified with my sleepy parts. And in that state, I do not want to be awake at all. This sets up a conflict, a restless tension, between my wakeful self and the rest of me that wants to sleep. So I have learned that without purposefully interrupting my sleep, and giving my attention to what is awake, I will not succeed. I turn onto my back, settle myself there, and begin.

ii. Searching for 'Awake'

Paradoxically then, I start by searching for a felt-sense of 'Awake'. This is actually a step away from focusing as I normally practice it. Usually, I would sense into the heart of the wandering thoughts, or the tight, constricted impulses which seem determined to keep me awake. After all, I know that there, in those very places, are rich seams of felt-sensing, waiting to be experienced. So not to turn towards these places is a radical departure from my normal focusing practice. But here, I gently turn away from the felt-sense of what is present, however strong it may be. And I start to search for something wider, or different: a felt-sense of awakeness.



3. http://heavenawaits.files.wordpress.com/2009/02/jovian_dreams.jpg

iii. Finding what lies between me and sleep

I am trying to find an edge or a place which is different from the uppermost thoughts or feelings, what I might call the content of my experience. The actual activity of my buzzy night-mind is, from this perspective, not my main focus. It is just a consequence of being awake; and the thoughts and feelings are symptoms or ramifications of awakeness. They are like ripples which emanate from the state of wakefulness itself. (I know that if I were asleep, those same impulses might still be experienced, but they would arise differently, and communicate themselves to me differently, for example, as dreams.)

It is as if I am giving attention to the one thing that lies between me and sleep. When what is awake can be held in my presence, then there is space for sleep to come naturally, of its own accord. So what lies between me and sleep is something more than the present content of my mind. It is a sense of 'Awake' which is beyond or behind the mind's activity; it is a kind of final frontier between my wakeful mind, and sleep itself. That is what I am looking for.

I wonder whether this process is akin to experiencing some aspect of Presence, or Awareness? I don't know. Perhaps I'm simply trying to describe what it is like to be directly conscious of what is conscious. What I do know is that, for me at least, this sense of 'Awake' does seem to be something that has its own quality and its own location. So I see it more as the last 'something' between my conscious awake self and the very different consciousness of sleep. For you, who knows? That may be different.

iv. Exploring 'Awake'

Finding the sense of 'Awake' is not always easy, and it can take me a while—especially as my sense of 'Awake' may shift as I explore. I use various questions to help me:

- What is this 'whole thing' of being awake like?
- What is 'being awake' like, right now?
- What sort of awakeness am I feeling?
- What is the quality of this 'Awake'?
- What is its texture?

Here I am on a real focusing-edge, feeling my way into what 'Awake' is like in the moment; allowing myself to feel that as fuzzily, fully or mysteriously as it comes.

- Where is 'Awake' in me?
- Whereabouts is 'Awake' around/outside of me?

I try to find the exact location I feel most awake. The place where the conscious mind is pin-pointed. For example, it might be right in the

centre of my skull; or something like a bar running through me, or somewhere just outside my actual physical body.

- This 'Awake' is like-what? [Looking for a metaphor or image]

Often a felt-image comes, sometimes in the form of daylight flooding me, or light from a high-up gothic window in a cathedral. For me, this is often the fullest and most potent experience of 'Awake' I can have.



4. http://www.edpadgett.com/blog/uploaded_images/dreams-707326.jpg

v. Knowing 'Awake' may be hard to find to find

In case my description of 'Awake' still seems rather abstract and elusive, perhaps it would help to say that this is actually true for me too. A little akin to a background feeling, it can be hard to describe (and maybe not even be wise to, as your experience of it may be so different from mine). So it helps me to know that it can take time. No wonder! 'Awake' is so embedded in us; our conscious minds must be deeply merged with it all through our waking day. My body-mind is so intimately tied up with my experience of being awake that it's a bit like trying to see the surface of a mirror; I know the mirror has a surface, but it's so full of reflections that it's easier to see those than the edge on which they are formed.

So it makes sense that this discovery has also been a journey for me. Although nowadays I find it quicker to find, sometimes almost immediate, still on some nights, my wandering thoughts seem to dominate. On those nights, I try to notice when I have been caught up and merged in some thought-stream. Then I bring my intention back to finding and experiencing 'Awake', whatever that may be. This process is a little like meditation, where it is a constant return to my intention that itself forms the practice.

vi. Allowing 'Awake' to enter in



5. <http://coolrain44.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/cosmic-dream.jpg>

Spending time with 'Awake' in the middle of the night feels paradoxical and counter-intuitive, if not rather crazy. When my whole being is aching for sleep, why would I allow myself to move towards more wakefulness? But I know that unless I truly allow myself to experience the awakeness, then the genuinely sleepy-tired feeling will not come. I recall Gendlin teaching that, 'what is not felt remains the same' (*Let Your Body Interpret Your Dreams*, 1986: 178). So it seems that when I consciously open up to receive the sense of awake—despite the strangeness of doing this in the middle of the night—I allow it to be felt more fully; and this is what enables a more global shift to take place. Sometimes it feels like throwing open the curtains to allow daylight to flood the room—quite the opposite of what I want in the dark, inward-seeking hours of the night. On some nights, it takes me a while to do this, because my sleep-wanting parts need time to agree to this radical change of direction.

I also find that my experience of 'Awake' needs to be well-established before I tune into the sleepy tiredness I now feel coming over me. If I roll over to sleep too soon, the sleepiness is not strong enough to engulf me, and I stay awake. So I return to the first step, and again lie on my back, knees raised—interrupting sleep in a pointed way, giving a real physical weight to my intention to be present with my waking consciousness. Some nights, I repeat this process several times before rolling over for the last time and falling asleep.

vii. Checking my intentions

The final steps are the most crucial—and the most unfair. I have evoked the promise of finding sleep, and now I must tell you the worst of it:

The only way to guarantee sleep is to genuinely give up wanting to sleep. In fact, the goal of sleep-focusing is not to go back to sleep!

So what is the goal? As in focusing in general, it is simply to spend time with whatever it is within me that wants to be heard. In other words, I need to spend time with my sense of 'Awake'. I assume 'Awake' really does want to be heard, because it has cleverly caught me at one of my most vulnerable and receptive moments: at night, while I'm sleeping. And I imagine 'Awake' has an important reason, because it is in strong competition with the rest of me, which still wants to sleep.

Sometimes I have the impression all that is needed is for me to spend some quiet time with this wakeful mind; as if my daytime busyness has prevented it from really having the space it needs. So it asks for it later, when it knows I will not be doing anything else. Just stopping to be with 'Awake' now is the best thing I can do. The goal of sleep-focusing is to be with it, however it wants that, and for as long as it wants. As Ann Weiser Cornell often says, 'we can only move as fast as our slowest parts.' Of course, the part of me that feels deprived of sleep may need my empathy too. Sleep-focusing is a practice in holding both.

viii Not wanting to sleep

So if my practice of finding 'Awake' is not sending me back to sleep, I check to see what my goal is. I look to see whether I am attached to sleep as an outcome, and where that wish may be hiding in me. Why is this so important? I believe it is because my wish to sleep is lodged in my waking mind. It is driven by the waking mind. So in order to be fully present with 'Awake', I must dis-identify from what it holds. While I cling to a wish to sleep, I am still part of the awake mind; I am merged with it. I am not fully present with, and listening to, the real nature of what wants to be awake. So the wish to sleep is like an invisible thread which holds me within the awake mind. It is something else to welcome in a 'no-wonder' sort of way, simply as another ripple emanating from that sense of 'Awake' itself.

This final step is interesting because it must be genuine, and making it genuine may take a little time. In order to free up any lurking intention to sleep, I remind myself that just by resting in a sense of 'Awake' I have found myself refreshed and rejuvenated in the morning. Also, that the 'Awake' mind is in itself a pleasurable, expanded state. Of course, as I lie there practicing sleep-focusing, I dip in and out of contact with this enjoyable sense of 'Awake'; I touch into it only as far as my worried or wandering mind will allow. But by doing this, and honestly giving up on an intention to sleep, I find I relax, feel calmer, and most of the time (so far, all but twice since I discovered sleep-focusing), I fall asleep.

The effects of sleep-focusing

The extraordinary thing about finding that sense of 'Awake' is, that as soon as I touch it, my body immediately responds. It feels deeply and healthily tired, just as it does before one slides easily into sleep. The tiredness is delicious and very real. When I feel this, I know I can roll over onto my side, and sleep will nestle into me, often within seconds. Sometimes it takes a little longer, but by keeping the sense of 'Awake' with me, sleep arrives.

Curiously, even on disturbed nights, when I have been woken because I am ruffled or upset by something, I have found it more useful to look for the sense of 'Awake' than to give my usual focusing space to the upset. Once I have found 'Awake', I experience it as innately pleasurable. My body relaxes and my mind expands. As I have discovered through Gendlin's work: 'the process of...changing feels good. ...like a relief and a coming alive.' (Focusing, 1st Ed 1978 / 2007: 9)

I also practice sleep-focusing in the daytime when I want to rest, and the process is the same. Sometimes I find my body responds to the sense of 'Awake' by growing suddenly warm and cosy, my temperature rising naturally, as it does before we sleep.

Focusing approaches to sleep

I am sure there are other things we can do to help ourselves sleep—especially as a preparation for good sleep. I imagine many other people could add their own methods or suggestions. An article on the subject was published in *The Focusing Connection* by Rudnick and Kappy ('Softening at the Edge: Focusing into Sleep.' 2006 Vol. XXIII, No. 6 pp.1-3), which included questions which 'assist in creating a better relationship to the wakefulness.' For example, "What is it that my body needs right now to relax?" Or, "What is it that I am thinking about that is keeping me up?" I also find 'Clearing a Space' a very helpful preparation to sleep-focusing, as it allows the minutiae of my daytime existence to settle, and opens a gateway into the 'vast space' (Gendlin, *ibid.* 2007: 71-82).

Whatever we do to prepare for sleep, the most important thing is probably our attitude towards it. I try to treat sleep like a welcome guest: something I can prepare for in a way that will make it most likely to arrive, and most willing to pervade me when it does. As focusers, we know that the body can take time to move towards some new state, often needing time to adjust to external change. So giving the body space to realise where we are heading when we set off to bed seems a good way to allow sleep to arrive, happy and consenting.

Conclusion

Nowadays, I always practice sleep-focusing before I sleep as a preparation for a good night's rest. It brings me a better quality of sleep, and my dreams are clearer and richer. If I wake in the night, I often find sleep-focusing quite miraculous. I stop searching for sleep, and give attention to what it is in me that holds the sense of 'Awake', a part of me which wants attention, and which seems to lie between me and sleep. This clears a way for natural tiredness to re-surface, and find its course once more. And, as that happens, rejuvenating rest—usually in the form of sleep—comes to me naturally and easily.

Whether you try out my discoveries, or find your own ways into sleep, I hope you sleep sweetly and deeply tonight... and often enjoy the blessings of peaceful sleep!



6 http://seraphic.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/dream_standard_1280x960.jpg