

Guidance for Week 3

The reading for this week raises a number of fundamental issues. It also makes some explicit comparisons to certain themes that anyone interested in Buddhism will find important: how meditation works and does not work, and why it is that the philosophical insights of Mahayana Buddhist schools of philosophy often leave us cold; do not, in other words, seem to have the power to affect the existential reality of who we are. We will not be discussing these points of comparison, at least with respect to Buddhist thought, but for those of you interested in such issues, the discussion here is rich and fruitful.

The chapter starts with the observation that our usual view that time flows, or passes, will be called into question. But before that can happen, we need to do some careful thinking about how time functions and does not function in our lives.

Starting with this aim in mind, it is important to recognize that at the outset our usual belief that time flows does not actually conform to our experience. It is easy enough to talk about time passing, but we have very little immediate access to this passage, or more generally to the dynamic of time. It is important to look in your own experience to see whether this is true. When are you cut off from the flow of time? When do you feel it more strongly? What distinguishes these situations; in other words, what accounts for the difference?

This chapter identifies three 'stages' of time. This week we read about stage one (lower time) and start the discussion of stage 2. We don't get to stage 3 till next week, though you are free to read ahead if you like.

It is in the discussion of stage 1 that the point gets made about our not ordinarily experiencing time's dynamic. Instead, the power of time bears down on us from outside, and we respond by trying to predict or control it. But because we do not have access to the temporal dynamic, we respond in terms of a world that is static and thing-like (literally, in the sense that it is made up only of frozen things). Our only option is to defend ourselves from time by relying on what amounts to a 'technology of things' (You may want to compare the discussion of 'technological knowledge' in Part One of Love of Knowledge).

Still, the very landscape in which we operate and in which we discover only things is itself 'created' by time. This is what Rinpoche speaks of the 'play' of time. Our responsibility in activating the vision is to penetrate the rigid partition of 'things' in favor of immediate access to things. As Rinpoche points out, this cannot be done by thinking ('thoughts' are another example of 'things'). Instead we need an experiential 'acquaintance' with time. In the beginning, this comes through momentary insights. Gradually, we can shift over to a more inspired view, one in which 'things' are better understood as symbols of their own arising. At that point, we have begun to bring the essence of the TSK vision to life.