

Spring 2010 – TSK Online Program – The Self in Question: part 3

Week 1 – Guide

Welcome to this third program in this year's TSK Explorations, which takes as its general theme "The Self in Question."

The reading for this week could be viewed as a summary of some of the ideas explored in the last two programs. At the same time, it takes them to new levels and explores them in new ways.

The chapter begins with a wonderfully clear and concise presentation of three (related) moves we may wish to make to escape the limits of the self and arrive at a more reliable knowledge.

First is the option of relying on tradition. This move will be of special interest to those of you interested in Buddhism or other great spiritual traditions. When we choose a spiritual path, we commit ourselves to entering a tradition. This may be a wonderful move to make, because in this way new, more encompassing forms of knowledge do indeed become available. But if we do not at the same time question the role of the self as the one who is practicing 'within' this tradition, we will limit the possibilities for knowledge and transformation. We are leaving the most fundamental questions unexamined, and this will come back to give us problems later.

Second is the option of relying on the heart, intuition, and feeling. This is again a very natural move for anyone interested in the TSK vision, and again it has its values. So we should look with special care at Rinpoche's claim that this when we make this move, "it only reinforces old patterns." Do you understand why this might be so? Can you put it in your own words? The fact that TSK identifies limits here is one element of TSK that sets it apart from many other approaches. It's not that the heart, the intuition, and feeling are not important, valuable, perhaps even at some point indispensable. TSK indeed encourages experiences of this kind as a way of going beyond the usual structures the self imposes. But they are not enough. This is also one of the really challenging parts of TSK: if not conceptually, than as a matter of our experience.

The third move is to 'take refuge' in something 'beyond'. This is a characteristic move in TSK: to make sure that we do not try to end inquiry too quickly by setting up a reality beyond all limits.

Rejecting (or at least questioning the ultimate significance) of these three moves may seem to leave us at a dead end. It's important to look closely at the next move Rinpoche makes (in the section that starts on p. 250), a move that returns us back to the discussions found in earlier chapters, but of course also takes us further.

Here is a suggestion for a practice to carry out in daily life as a warm up for the themes we will explore this quarter. It is something you may already be doing from time to time. As you interact with people, try to get a sense of the stories they inhabit, the purposes they are enacting, the concerns that drive them. To do this, you have to look a little below the surface (this moment, this emotion, etc.) Clothes are one pointer. This is a practice best done with strangers in public places; another approach is to be aware of it as you watch a film (it should be a film with well-developed characters, of course). Doing this practice may also lead you to ask similar questions about yourself, but you don't need to go to that level if you don't want to.