

Week 6 - Guide

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

For the rest of the program, we will be working with material from the first part of Love of Knowledge. The idea is to use the insights that we have been exploring throughout the three quarters of this program to explore our conventional experience, to apply “free and open inquiry” in a way that challenges our usual positions and conditioning.

The reading for this week starts in the middle of a page, with the paragraph that begins with the words “Most of us cherish a self-image . . .” We are being invited to bring inquiry (a marriage of observation and analysis, as we discussed in the phone call) to our self-image and self-understanding.

The picture of the self-image that Rinpoche sketches in the first paragraph of the reading may seem a bit naïve in light of our modern psychological knowledge. He writes that we all have a “secret picture” of ourselves that is highly positive and flattering. So that is one question to investigate. As the events of our day unfold, do we refer experience back to such a “secret picture?” What about the view of ourselves that may be “unduly critical,” which he mentions in the same paragraph. Is one really more basic than the other? As always, this is not a question to ask in a theoretical way, based on some model of how the self is put together. Instead, we want to ‘observe’ and ‘analyze’ the self in action. This is a practice available to us in every moment.

One way to do this is to see the structures that the self erects. For instance, if we make a mistake, or fail to keep a promise, or find that others are angry at us, the natural tendency is to generate excuses, explanations, justifications, etc. These are the sorts of ‘structures’ I have in mind. We don’t need to second-guess the stories we tell. It’s enough to notice that they are stories. It’s the nature of what we do or how we respond that offers insight into the self-image, not the specific content of what we find ourselves saying or thinking. The distinction here between ‘contents’ and ‘patterns’ (top of p. 62) is already familiar to us, and it fits well with this perspective.

The rest of the reading lays out the difficulties that arise when we try to move beyond what we already know. For us, this should be a kind of reminder, because we have explored this theme extensively. The reminder that we can discover our patterns ‘in operation’ (p. 63), and that this kind of discovery is itself an antidote to limits of knowledge, is another way of expressing what we have been learning about free and open inquiry.

If you have time for some formal sitting practice, Ex. 8, which comes at the end of this chapter, invites us to look at a very subtle level of the tendency toward positioning (or ‘taking positions’) and conditioning (or acknowledging shaping conditions.)