

Orientation to Winter Program – Week 1 (Jan 17)

Reading: LOK 121-126 (Chapter 15)

The reading for this week, the first for the winter program, is challenging. The discussion has to do with the nature of linear time: the way that time seems to go from one moment to the next. The main point is that this way of understanding time, this ‘story’ that we tell about time, does not really work. It doesn’t hold together.

Now, if you read carefully and thoughtfully, you should be able to understand what is being said. The real challenge comes when we try to link this analysis to our own lives and concerns. Why should we care whether our explanation of time and temporality is a good one? As Rinpoche writes, for practical purposes the linear view of time lets us get on with our lives. Isn’t that enough? After all, we don’t all have to be philosophers!

The answer, of course, is that when we accept the common-sense view of time, we limit our own possibilities. In the end (as Rinpoche wrote in a chapter we read in the previous program), we are asking about whether we are free. The same idea is hinted at in the title for this chapter: the compelling flow of time. The usual temporal structure seems to compel us to act in accord with what has already happened. We cannot approach each moment in a fresh, open way. Think of the way that very young children, who have very little sense of linear time, are always ready to turn to something new and to devote themselves to it fully. Could we have that same openness? As long as we accept the pattern of past turning into future, the answer is no.

The real challenge may be that Rinpoche is using language and logic to guide our thinking about time, and language and logic also depend on linear temporality. So even if we accept the logic of the chapter, it does not seem to make us more open in terms of how we experience the world.

There are two ways to deal with this difficulty. The first is to let the breakdown of our ordinary logic lead us into a truly heart-felt not-knowing. To accept that we do not know, if we can do that (it is not easy) allows for new possibilities. The second, which is the one I suggest we focus on, is to focus inquiry on the question of memory, discussed on the last two pages of the chapter. Memory is where time and our sense of personal identity connect, and when we start to engage our own identity, we find it easier to appreciate how much is at stake. So look at this part of the chapter with special care, and ask yourself how your memories shape your identity, and how memories limit who we are and what we could be. The readings for coming weeks move more directly toward our sense of personal identity. This week’s reading prepares us for that inquiry.

For people new to the program, here’s a brief review of three kinds of knowledge that Rinpoche has talked about earlier in the program. The first, mentioned repeatedly in this chapter, is descriptive knowledge. It describes and thus identifies and “makes real” the world that we experience, including our own identity. The second is polar knowledge. This is the knowledge that operates in the present (according to our usual understanding), and it depends on a subject (the subject pole) reaching out to know the object (the object pole). The third is intentional knowledge. This is the knowledge of the self, which intends to do certain things, wants other things, and so on.

Happy reading and practice.