

**Fall 2011**  
**Why 'Nothing' Matters**  
**Orientation for Week 2**

In the Week One phone call, I tried to emphasize that this course is not about interesting theoretical ideas. Rather, it is about how we live our lives. The TSK teachings are deeply important, not because they offer a new system for explaining reality, but because they call into question all the old systems that we are already using to make sense of—and limit—our lives and our possibilities. Please keep this in mind as we go through this course, and if you get the sense that I am getting to intrigued by subtleties that have no immediate application in our lives, please remind of what I said.

It's because of this focus that it's important to participate on the website: if you share your experiences, insights, and questions, the material we are discussing will come alive for you. That's when it can really make a difference.

The reading for this week is the first half of Chapter 2 in DTS, pp. 9-14. Like Chapter 1, Chapter 2 starts with an image, or thought experiment. That's where I'll focus in this orientation.

The thought-experiment that began Chapter 1 involved expanding or stretching an object until every component part of the object (molecules, atoms, and so on) disappeared. We spent some time discussing whether it was legitimate to say that a shift in perspective or scale like this is really the same as saying something has 'disappeared' into empty space. Isn't the object still there? In one sense yes, in another no. But we don't really have to resolve that question. To say that something 'appears' in space literally means that it shows up. When it dis-appears, it no longer shows up. We are used to thinking that what appears also 'exists', and that what doesn't appear anywhere at all does not exist. But claims like that, about what exists or does not exist, fall more in the realm of theory than observation. Space-disappearance is not a claim about something going 'into' or 'out of' existence. This is a question we looked at in the first phone call.

But what about space itself? Can we stretch or expand space? If we do, does space disappear? This issue was raised in Chapter 1 (p. 7). It's like the question about the stretched-out cell, but asking it about space itself seems more fundamental, and also more puzzling. Perhaps it's based on a mistake. Take some time to reflect on the question, not in order to solve it, but as a way of engaging the question of how space 'operates'. If you see no way into the question, don't just shrug your shoulders and move on. Give it a chance.

The image at the beginning of Chapter 2—space as box specially designed to hold the objects that show up in space—continues with this same theme. Before we can get too far, though, the text points out that we really don't know how to ask about space (Perhaps this is why we have to proceed by way of images and thought experiments!) The problem is that we cannot explore space and space-possibilities in the same way we would investigate an object, for the simple reason that space cannot be an object. Space is what holds objects, and objects don't hold other objects, at least in this sense. When we speak of space as 'nothing at all', it is this non-object aspect of space that we are pointing out. (By the way, this paragraph makes the point I am aiming at rather crudely. The presentation in the book is really quite elegant.)

The key move in laying out the image of the box, of course, is that when we take it apart, the space that the box contained, the space 'designed' to hold the contents of the box, also disappears. So this is a kind of answer to the question of how we could make space itself disappear. But disappear where? Or into what? Another kind of space? Those are some good questions to get you started.

I suggested that during this coming week, you experiment with 'expanding' or 'stretching' elements in your experience to see what effect this has. You could do this with things or objects, which is sure to be interesting. Experimenting with whole situations, however, may be even more fruitful. For instance, since the text speaks of cells, you might think of yourself and the people you interact with as being part of a 'cell' in the (now old-fashioned) sense of a Communist cell. How would you expand that?