

Week 4 Orientation

DTS 56 (3 paragraphs)

The reading for this week is especially short, just 3 paragraphs. Next week we finish the chapter, and the week after that we move to a later part of the book.

The reading notes (in the first paragraph) two alternatives that lead nowhere: affirming the truth (the substance) of what thoughts proclaim to be the case, and trying to shut down the thinking process entirely. The problem with the first alternative is that it gives us no way to understand thoughts themselves: thoughts, as we saw in the previous reading, become a zero-point, which means they disappear. The problem with the second alternative, which came up during our phone call this morning, is that it may not even be possible to connect to experience that is not already shaped, identified, or named by thoughts. And even if it were, we would have no way to make sense of this experience or report it to ourselves or others. All this was covered in the previous reading, but it is useful to reflect on it.

The challenge posed in the text is understand something about how it is that thoughts just 'pop up'. And the way to do that is to investigate the thinking process, to notice just what it is that goes on when we are thinking. That kind of active investigation is central to how we are proceeding, and I encourage everyone to do it. I have suggested before keeping a journal as a way of intensifying this possibility.

We have been using two ways of investigating. One is the 'orange ball' exercise. As I suggested in the phone call, the reason for working with this exercise is that 'visualizing' the ball is something like the 'simplest-possible-thought'. You can control that thought, or else you can just let it go and unfold on its own; you can experiment with it in any way you like. People had some interesting ways of doing that they described during the call.

The second way of doing this is to notice thoughts coming up and see what they are like as they come up. When we tried this during the phone call, people had several interesting observations to make. As a starting point, I asked what it is that counts as a thought: an image, words, something more diffuse? The discussion seemed to show that any simple answers to this question fail to capture the complexity of a thought. Kathleen is going to post the exchange that took place in the chat section of the website, which seemed to me fruitful.

Is the point here to arrive at a satisfying theory of what constitutes a thought, or how thoughts arise? No, not at all. We are interested in the freedom that space offers, or (a different formulation) the richness of experience not shaped in advance by our thoughts about it. If we don't learn to experience thinking 'from the inside'—if instead we either accept or reject them—those alternatives are not likely to be available. But if we know what it is to think (you might say, 'thinking inside the box'), that knowledge will take us in the direction we are interested in.

A technical point: people participating in the phone call today made good use of the chat function, and more of you were also on video. Both are good. One nice feature of the video software we are using is that when someone who is on a video call speaks, the image automatically shifts to that person. That makes for a nice, dynamic exchange that I encourage you to make use of.