

The first sentence of the reading for this week starts with a phrase that I found surprising. To paraphrase, it says that the present (as one of the three possible temporal 'places') borrows its substance and dynamic from the future, while establishing its form on the basis of the past.

The surprising part of this for me was the suggestion that the substance of our present experience comes from the future. I would have said that the substance of experience comes from the past. But as I thought about, the claim in the sentence made more sense to me. The form that the past gives to the present is one in which substance is understood in a specific way: as real, fixed, identified, and so on. But the substance of the present is not really separable from the aliveness of time. It's just this 'substantial aliveness' that makes our experience into presence, rather than (for example) a story we read in a book.

This thought, together with some themes I've been exploring, led me to reflect on a question that the reading does not directly explore, but that I want to go into here. The reading has pointed to a sharp dichotomy between the aliveness of the future and the 'dead hand' of the pre-recorded past—the reality to which the witness testifies. But framing the matter in this way does not fully acknowledge an important fact: the reality that the witness affirms doesn't feel dead. It has its own aliveness, which can also be very powerful; for instance, when we experience a strong emotion or craving.

Here's an example to show what I mean. Suppose I eat a delicious piece of cake. In the first bite that I take, the marvelous taste lights up experience, and my world comes alive. The unexpected intensity of the pleasure forms a direct bridge to the aliveness of the arising future. But by the time I take the second bite, or the last bite, I have already begun to substitute for that aliveness for the recorded memory of how good the first bite tasted. Soon I am eating the 'lip-synched' version of the cake, not the cake itself. I have traded in the future for the past.

Now suppose that later that evening I find myself thinking about the cake, and craving another piece. Doesn't that craving have its own aliveness? If so, what is the relation of that aliveness to the aliveness of the future? We might say that one is the watered-down, lip-synched version of the other. But I don't find that completely satisfying, because we know that emotions or cravings or desire can be very powerful (think, for instance, of addiction). So what more can we say? Here are some preliminary thoughts.

When the witness presents the craving for another piece of cake, it is referring back to the original aliveness of the first bite and 'hijacking' that aliveness. We might even say that the position that the self takes at the center of experience maintains itself exactly by hijacking the energy of the future in the service of its own wants and fears. If the witness couldn't do this, the craving would have no power, but of course it does, and that's just the point I want to investigate.

More generally, a thought comes up, and with it—inseparable from it—comes a desire, or perhaps simply a restless agitation. This desire-filled thought solicits our attention. The witness testifies to its reality, making that its 'single-minded' object, the content of the field communiqué (see the Space section of DTS). This wanting becomes the truth of a story that unfolds within the structure of linear time, thus affirming that structure. In the words of a wonderful phrase from Love of Knowledge, "the force of the self's desire unfolds as the momentum of linear time."

We can make this more concrete, using our example. The witness says something like: "This evening I had a wonderful desert, now I could go have some more." Saying this, referring back toward the past and forward toward the future, the witness establishes the present as the place where the self—pushed and pulled by its desires—is situated, and from which it is now determined to act. This is the witness hijacking the aliveness of time for its own purposes: by making the desire real, it makes the present substantial, and the self along with it.

It's tempting to dismiss the importance of this move by saying that desires of the self are just a pale imitation of the original aliveness of time, just as the last piece of cake is an imitation of the first. But we don't want to make that move too quickly, for the reason I've already mentioned: craving and emotionality can be very powerful, and a 'lip-synch' explanation for how they operate misses this power.

In terms of practice, what this suggests is that we can explore the aliveness of experience within the realm of emotionality and craving, a point that was already made at the top of p. 100. The past may be pre-recorded, but it still relies for its substance on the aliveness brought by the future-centered dynamic. And we can work with that. For instance, if I feel sad, or agitated, or confused, the energy of those feelings can be a gateway to the more fundamental aliveness of time. And indeed, if we learn how to make that transition, the story that the witness has told to make sense of or justify or give form to the emotional reaction may drop away, meaning that the emotion itself yields to something more clear and open.

Connecting to this more fundamental aliveness within emotionality can be challenging. Partly this is because emotions can sweep us off our feet (a point related to what the opening of the reading discusses). But partly it is for the opposite reason: often the stories that the witness tells are so well-worn, so habitual, that they prompt us to act even when they only offers a little trace of aliveness, a tiny flicker of time's energy. When I sit watching a television show that I know is dumb and unrewarding, and then go ahead and watch another episode, I may just be responding to small bursts of excitement that are almost unnoticeable, but are just strong enough to keep me sitting in front of the screen, because they conform to the form I have learned to accept as real. We may have to very attentive to the subtle energies coursing through experience to notice such flickers, even though they play a big role in our inner lives. But if we can learn to engage the aliveness of experience and engage its aliveness more fully, we may gradually become more able to shape that aliveness in more positive directions.

These are just some tentative thoughts. Fortunately, there is a place in the TSK books where Rinpoche explores some related themes. It comes early in Knowledge of Time and Space, in a chapter called 'Intensification of Time'. I am going to post an excerpt of that chapter for you to read for next week, and we will probably discuss it when we have our phone call, along with the reading for the week.