

Session 5, Unit 13, Week 2

Transition and Orientation

In our phone call this past week, there was a lot of discussion of polar knowledge—the theoretical point-instant interplay between subject and object that makes perception possible. This is a topic we covered earlier in the program, but looking at it here gave us the opportunity to contrast it with the role of the self in crafting experience. Let’s look briefly one more time.

According to a polar knowledge model, there is a kind of bare experience prior to interpretation. But this model is incoherent. Each single moment of polar knowing gets used up in the subject-object interplay, leaving no time for the necessary acts of interpretation that let us make sense of the world. In addition, even polar knowledge itself involves interpretation (a point that did not come up in the phone call), because the division into subject and object is itself an interpretive structure. When meditators reject the interpreted world of the self in favor of ‘pure experience’, they are not so much returning to the point-instant of polar perception as activating a radically simplified (and therefore therapeutic) interpretation of the world. But this therapeutic approach involves a limitation: when we turn away from our usual constructs, the fundamental role of the self in crafting stories that make sense of the world does not become available as a topic for inquiry.

The story-telling structure is a central focus for us in these opening classes of Session 5. We don’t want to turn away from the stories the self generates, because it is in the realm of meaning and significance that stories make available that a new vision of time and temporality become available. However, it’s important to acknowledge that stories engage time in a particular and self-limiting way. They insist—and depend—on the flow from past to present to future, a flow so fundamental to our experience that we cannot really imagine how we might question it. All knowing arises (174) “after the flow of self-centered experience is already in operation.”

The result is to leave us with what seems to be an insoluble problem. We cannot step out of the flow of linear time, the time in which the self’s stories—including the founding story, “Here I am”—unfold. As a result (175), “experience eludes illumination.” We are determined by the past as the source of what is real, and conditioned by the future, which manifests in the goals toward which we move. The outcome is the single-minded, linear knowing (174) that we referred to briefly in the phone call. The multidimensionality of the field that we explored in the last session is lost.

Incidentally, depending on how you look at it, you could think of the central structure that we are investigating here as being that of the self, or else as being that of the story. The two are interdependent, because the self is the actor/narrator/owner at the center of every story.

This leads to the walkabout for this week. As you engage your experience, be aware of the stories you tell to make sense of experience from moment to moment. At one level, this may involve sensitivity to the central story of the self; for instance, “Here I am . . . doing this . . . ; here I am, worrying about that.” At another level, it may involve taking a closer look at the stories that are so familiar that we tell them in a very abbreviated way; stories, in fact, that we may not tell at all, but just take note of, taking them for granted (For guidance in what to look for

in this second domain, see LOK 171-72.)

Awareness of the stories of the self is not meant to make us feel hopelessly limited to existing structures. That would be true if we were not aware of the stories in operation. But once we activate the necessary awareness, sensitivity to story-structures lets us tune in to the presence of the self as a living, active force (189-190). This aliveness can serve as the gateway to investigating more directly the dynamic of time: the temporal element of experience that has disappeared (Or, since 'disappeared' seems more appropriate to space, perhaps we should speak of the dynamic of time that has become frozen.)

The reading for next week suggests that we could activate this dynamic through "turning inward" (for more on 'turning inward', see DTS 112-114). The knowing that this turn inward makes available does not depend on the self-as-witness (whose centrality was emphasized at LOK 189, as well as in earlier readings). We will look next week at what that might mean, exploring the DTS metaphor of 'conducting' time.