

## Session 3, Week 2

### Orientation for Week 2

It is often said that most people naturally see the world in dualist terms: the inner world of mental events such as thoughts and feelings, and the external world of objects in physical space. But that view is only 'natural' once we accept the claim that Rinpoche describes at TSK 49: the claim to be a self that somehow stands at the center of experience but apart from experience, as though it were sitting on a motionless platform while everything else moves and shifts all around it. When the self takes this position, looking out over the world, it automatically establishes a world to look out over. Self and world arise together. Descartes famously said the only absolutely certain thing was the existence of the self, but once we see this connection, we realize that he was deeply mistaken: if a self exists, it must have a world to exist in.

Now, the existence of the self as 'real' is exactly the issue that TSK calls out as most worthy of challenge. If we were to be able to mount that challenge, we would call into question everything. We would be on our way to a new vision of what makes reality real.

How can we challenge ordinary experience? A first answer is that we can look closely at our own experience. We can do this in terms of time, space, or knowledge, but right now, we are focused on space. Again, we could look at the experience of space in terms of mental space or physical space (without necessarily accepting that these two realms are separate in the way we usually think (last week's reading from KTS helps make this clear).

In the readings for this week, we are focused on mental space, so we want to look at our experience of the mental realm. Specifically, we want to look at thoughts, which is the approach taken in Exercises 11-13.

First, however, we have to look at a more basic question. Is it legitimate to investigate ordinary experience by looking at what arises in the mind? The reading from TSK for last week presents two objections to this approach, and then responds to those objections in a very interesting way: these critiques, the book says, are plausible, appropriate, and even verifiably valid, "as long as we function with the tools and orientations of the ordinary realm" (53).

So why do the exercises at all? Given what was just said, it's not because we believe we can trust the results we get. Instead, we might think of it this way: Just by doing the exercises, we challenge our allegiance to the orientations of the ordinary realm.

The underlying point here is really important for understanding how to activate TSK. A good description of what is at stake is found at the end of this week's readings. Rinpoche writes that when we do TSK exercises, or even carefully trace out ideas and images in the TSK books, we are "working with . . . outputs of the 'mind-setting' in ways that are uncharacteristic for that setting." (64) In other words, we are exercising our imagination in a particular way (Recall the quote from VOK 8 that we went over in the phone call.) A description I like to use for this is that we are trying out or inhabiting variations on our ordinary reality. With this in mind, I'm going to start calling the 'walkabout' exercises I've been suggesting 'variations'. The reading for this week advises us to give up the urge to "tidy things up;" to make everything make sense. Variations are one way to do this.

One more point: It is when the old, accustomed order begins to break down or show cracks that new possibilities open, so we want to make room for that to happen. You might think of this in terms of dreams. As last week's reading from KTS pointed out, we accept sudden shifts and transformations in dream space that would seem crazy or impossible in ordinary space. Suppose, however, that when we experience such a shift—a variation—in what was going on in the dream, we asked ourselves how this could be. Perhaps this would help us realize that we were dreaming! More generally, variations work in this same way.

In the phone conversation I suggested as a variation letting objects 'pop up' in space from moment to moment, while maintaining the awareness that each object appears in its own space. One aspect of doing this practice is that whatever object you focus on will involve the background against which it appears: to take a simple example, looking at the flowers on the desk involves everything else in the room. Another aspect is that each new object (things, thoughts, memories, etc.) has its own space, and tracking these spaces (as far as you can—the changes happen very quickly) is in some ways central to the variation