

Orientation for Week 3

I'm going to start with some further thoughts about space, and then turn toward our new engagement with time.

In the chapter on space that we just read, Rinpoche emphasizes the need to “re-evaluate the idea that the self is an independent knower that *has* experiences.” (TSK 49; cf. 54). You might wonder in what sense this is a *space* question, since it connects so closely with the self *as knower*. But the answer is clear from the chapter: the self as an independent knower in effect creates its own space: a “stable or motionless platform” from which the world can be viewed. That space, the space of the self, does not intersect with the space of the world. Here's an analogy: in certain extreme forms of the caste system in India, it was a grievous sin for an untouchable even to let his shadow fall on someone from the upper castes. The two realms are not allowed to mix.

When we look at the self and its claims to own knowledge from this perspective, we see that what we have is a problem of distance: the self is impossibly far away from its own experienced reality, and the gap cannot be bridged. And this suggests an interesting ‘variation’ for us to practice: to experience with no intervening distance. This is the suggestion made at the bottom of TSK 61: the subject encounters experience without the notion “that there is a distance intervening, separating the subject and object. Notice that the distance being varied here can be physical distance (for instance, if you are look at an object), but also mental distance, such as the distance between the one having the thought and the thought you are having.

Of course, in varying the usual sense of intervening distance, you are not trying to make the distance disappear. Rather, the subject, the object, and the distance between them are all given together, all ‘in’ the same space or (better) ‘as’ the same space. This is the variation we're interested in.

To ‘vary’ experience in this way, it helps to have a sense of the whole of the space in which subject and object appear. So if you are looking at a tree, the tree is not an isolated object; it appears in the physical setting (for instance, a park), but also in a particular relation to past and future, with specific associations, etc., as well as in relation to your physical, embodied presence. This is why it makes sense to say that every new moment of experience, every minding, has its own space, which may well involve both mental and physical aspects.

Incidentally, this kind of ‘no-distance’ experience may have significant psychological benefits. For instance, separation and distance seem to encourage fear reactions. If we are not distant, can we be afraid? The answer to this question may be complicated, but it seems worth asking.

Now let's turn to time. The readings from LOK question the linearity of time. There is a parallel to the reading on space: there, we questioned what seems most obvious about space: that it is a three-dimensional ‘container’ for physical objects; here we question what seems most obvious about time: that it flows from one moment to the next, unfolding from past to present to future. The challenge is put in a simple but powerful way in the quote from the reading found at WIR 53: can we really uphold the idea that the ‘realness’ of reality is simply a function of my being alive?

Chapter 14 in LOK, which we read first, uses two terms introduced earlier in LOK:

'descriptive knowledge' and 'polar knowledge'. If you're not familiar with these terms, start with polar knowledge, defined in the first paragraph on p. 101, then look at the last paragraph on 104 for 'descriptive knowledge', reading through the first full paragraph on p. 105. The basic idea is that our subject/object way of inhabiting space makes knowledge depend on the subject pole somehow making contact with the objective pole. Once this happens, we use those moments of polar knowledge to describe what has been known, giving rise to a world known through descriptive knowledge.

Once again, we might ask how a discussion that relates mostly to knowledge can help us understand time. The answer is that polar knowledge presupposes the notion of moments of time unfolding in sequence. That is where we want to investigate. Notice the suggestion at p. 111 that we do not actually have experience of polar knowledge: it is just a hypothetical construct.

The second chapter from LOK in this week's reading is more specifically about time, and also about the self *in* time. Here is where we will want to look to see how the logical problems and difficulties of LOK ch. 14 transcend abstract argumentation to affect our lives. But a preliminary version of the question has already been raised in ch. 14: "Investigating polar knowledge means asking whether we are free.