

Given Together
Online Course, Spring 2016

Transition to Week 4

Let's step back and take a look at the trajectory of the course so far, and where it's headed.

As human beings (or sentient beings), we stand in a mysterious relationship to existence. We can frame that mystery in terms of space. In ordinary understanding, space is a container for physical objects. An object is real only if it occupies space, so that it can be given a specific location in space. A chair I sit on occupies space, and so it is real. A chair I sit on in a dream does not occupy space—it has no location apart from the dream—and so it is not real.

Human beings, however, do not exist in this same way. We can say that our bodies are real, because they occupy space and we can specify their location. For some purposes, it makes good sense to think of ourselves as located where our bodies are located. But if we look at our everyday experience, we soon see that our experience cannot be located in our bodies. We have feelings, think thoughts, feel emotions, perceive through the senses, and so on. In other words, we don't just occupy space; we experience a world. Experience, however, cannot be located in space. For example, when I have a thought, neither the content of the thought nor the activity of thinking is located in space (and this is true even if we try to explain our thinking-activity by locating its cause in our brain).

The ordinary understanding of space does not 'make room' for our experience, but that just means there is something wrong with our ordinary understanding, because it would be foolish to deny that our experience is real. That is the mystery referred to above: part of us is not 'real' in the same way rocks and trees are real, yet precisely that part of us in what we identify most strongly as 'me'.

The usual way to try to resolve this mystery is to say that as selves, we have a special relationship to space: we are bystander-observers: the ones who know and who experience. But this just gives a name to the mystery without resolving it. As bystanders, we engage the physical world of objects, but we also stand outside it. We occupy two conflicting positions at once. The result is that we are separate from the world, cut off from it, even as we also claim a special status within it. Existentially, this is a very troubling position to be in. As experiencing selves, we are constantly expressing and assessing the meaning of our actions, the values we

hold, and the quality of our experience. But none of these things have any significance in the objective world made up of ‘things occupying space’. Because everything that truly matters to us does not show up in space, it is less than real. No wonder we feel alienated and alone.

In the course so far, we have been developing an understanding of space that can heal this split between our experience and the reality that space allows. We have described the shift in this way: instead of simply occupying space, we can inhabit it. We have been exploring through experiential exercises what it means to activate this understanding of space. Can we be fully present in space, unifying what is usually understood as split apart—the subjective and the objective, mind and matter, the self and the world? Our ordinary understanding would say that we cannot, for it insists that space is only physical. But we do not have to accept this kind of ‘space fundamentalism’.

In ordinary understanding, space can simply be ignored, because it is ‘nothing at all’. To initiate a shift to a more accommodating space, we began with a simple appreciation for space. Appreciation is powerful: it can help bring space alive. Once this begins to happen, we can allow for the possibility of inhabiting space, bringing our own living presence into communion with the living and accommodating reality of space. Our relationship to space can become heartfelt; we can feel supported by the world we inhabit instead of cut off from it.

This transformation of space into a living, sheltering matrix for the whole of our being is one immediate consequence of an expanded understanding of space. To activate it, we looked in the last class at what it is like to ‘dislocate’ space: surrendering our tendency to understand experience in terms of ‘here’ and ‘there’ or knower and known. We will continue this approach in the coming week, looking at our ingrained tendency to engage space through the categories of distance and separation.

A second consequence of activating the TSK Space Vision is that our relationship to our own experience—thoughts, emotions, and so on—no longer needs to be understood in terms of the rigid categories that our usual thing-oriented understanding presupposes. As we learn to bring space into contact with our experience more fully, we can free experience from the tyranny of substance and identity. We will turn toward these possibilities in the weeks to come, and especially in the next program.

Exercises

Here is a more formal presentation of the exercises we introduced during the last class. You can practice them at odd moments during the day. Do also try to set aside 20-30 minutes or so a day to explore them in more depth. In the third exercise, allow at least 10 minutes for each part.

Exercise: Inhabiting the Whole

Relax and take a few deep breaths. Then let the breath flow naturally. Keep the focus on the breath and especially on how it relates to the body. At the outset, focus on the rise and fall of the belly and the expansion of the rib cage. After a while, you could shift the practice: on the in-breath, keep the same focus, on the out-breath, focus more on how breathing flows through the throat, the mouth, and the nose and into your surroundings.

When it seems that your attention to the breath is relatively stable, let awareness follow the breath out into the surrounding space, so that your sense of being present permeates space. This does not mean that your body expands to fill the space, though some people might have this experience. Rather, it means that your sense of presence expands. You are present in your body, and you are also present in the room. Expand that sense out as much as possible, without straining to go beyond what you are truly experiencing.

Exercise: Being Present

Start by doing the previous exercise, 'Inhabiting the Whole' for a few minutes. Now, let your eyes wander round the room. In doing this, don't take the role of the bystander/observer. Simply use this opportunity to be present. Your relaxed awareness of what is located around you is a way of encouraging and expanding this awareness of presence.

Exercise: The Field of the Senses

Usually when we use our sense faculties—seeing, hearing, touch—our focus is on the object seen or heard or felt. At the same time we assume that there is someone doing the seeing, the hearing, or the touching. Thus, we say to ourselves, "I see the tree." All this is consistent with the 'located' understanding of space. In this exercise, we shift to space as the field that we inhabit. This means letting go of the model in which 'someone' here senses 'something' there.

1) Start with the sense of touch, or, more accurately, your global sense of embodying or being embodied. Let yourself rest in a felt sense of the body, which can gradually expand into a more global sense of inhabiting the whole of space. You might experience this as a radiating outward from the center—literally, from the heart. The embodiment itself *is* the awareness of being embodied—there is no gap, and the distance suggested by the phrase ‘awareness of’ is not actually there.

2) Continue on with hearing. It’s easier to do this with the eyes closed. As you listen, you will hear this sound or that sound, but each sound arises within the *field* of hearing. Here’s an example of the difference: if we focus on sounds, we automatically distinguish sounds that are near from sounds that are far away. Within the experience of hearing, however, those distinctions, while they are there, have no role to play. It is natural to assign a source to the sounds we hear—a person speaking, a refrigerator humming, and so on. That is not a problem. Just set aside the usual concern with the source and its location. You might like to try this practice at some point with recordings of soundscapes or ambient sound.

3) Now move on to seeing. Start with an open seeing, not looking *at* anything, as in the Being Present practice we did earlier. Then look at specific objects, still focusing on the seeing rather than ‘what’ is seen or ‘who’ sees. Notice that this kind of global seeing includes the space between you and the object, the space around the object, and even the space within and around you as the seer—possibly including the space behind you.