

Given Together
Spring 2016, Course 2

Transition to Week 11

In the last class, we talked about the structure of thoughts. We can say that thoughts have content; they are ‘about’ something. This makes thoughts different from sense experience. For instance, I see the tree, but I think ‘of’ the tree. The tree is the content of my thought. Even though it’s just a question of grammar, the ‘of’ plays a specific role. It signals that the tree is at a certain distance, as though it occupied a different space from the ‘I’ that is doing the seeing. The ‘thought-of’ tree is cut-off from ‘me’ in a way that the seen tree is not.

Now, the content of a thought is similar to the space of the field we inhabit. The seen tree shows up in the field, and the thought-of tree shows up in the content of the thought. The difference is that while we can inhabit the field in which the seen tree appears, we cannot inhabit the content of the thought. But we often confuse the two. We confuse the content of our thoughts with the (story-shaped) field of our experience. It’s like mistaking the map for the territory, or the menu for the meal, to use two familiar images. As a direct consequence of this confusion, we find ourselves unable to inhabit space, even though the possibility for doing so is always there. As we discussed, practices like meditation are intended to help us inhabit space—to drop the content of our thoughts in favor of the immediate experience of inhabited space. Similarly, we have explored in this course various ways to inhabit space.

Still, that is not the whole picture. As we saw in the first course, even the seen tree is at a distance from me, since (in accord with the founding story of self and world) it is an object separate from the subject. In effect, the distance-making structure of thinking, symbolized by the ‘of’, leaks into sense-experience. I see a tree, but thanks to the subject-object structure of this seeing, I still do not fully inhabit space. Again, we have introduced ways in this course to ‘dislocate’ this limitation.

We can take the same point further. In Chapter 4 of *Knowledge of Time and Space* (pp. 19-23), Rinpoche writes that the self/world story [the text says ‘logos’] establishes “*a structure based on a center and directions that extend out from that center. [What] stands at the center of the structure is experience: the reality known to the self.*”

This move is in some ways more radical than anything we have considered so far.

The structure of ‘experience’ is central to our understanding of the world. The self experiences a world; what could be more obvious and unquestionable than that? We believe that experience is immediate, in the literal sense of not being mediated by thoughts, concepts, etc. But the passage just quoted says that is not so. The very notion of experience as something that ‘I’ have is rooted in the thought-out structure of self and world. The self/world story carries within it the distancing structure of thought, *and so does experience*.

That is why—as we discussed in class—we cannot draw a sharp distinction between being caught in our thoughts and returning to immediate experience. The world of ‘immediate’ experience is not actually immediate at all.

We return here to a point made in the first course. We live in a world of distance, location, and separation, in which space has disappeared (or become ‘nothing at all’). Now we can say that the source of this distancing is thought. We could say that thought-structures pervade the stories that frame our world, but in this case ‘pervasion’ does not refer to the ‘being everywhere’ quality we have discussed before. Rather, it means that the structure inherent in thought (‘thinking of’ or ‘thinking that’ or ‘thinking about’) is an essential element in conventional experience.

One practical consequence of this structural inescapability of thought is that we live in a world of emotions. The same chapter in *Knowledge of Time and Space* lays the foundation for this insight when it says, “*Just as substance at the center makes space dense, so experience at the center makes time tense. . . . ‘Tenseness’ . . . generates tension . . . , manifesting psychologically in confusion and a sense of being lost. . . . A sea of emotions seethes beneath the surface, occasionally erupting.*”

The analysis is more complex than this short quote suggests, but we do not need to follow it out completely. Instead, in next week’s class we want to begin to look at 3 questions. Their link to what I just wrote will hopefully become more clear in class. Here are the questions:

- 1) Why are we always thinking?
- 2) How are emotions related to thoughts?
- 3) What is the alternative to emotions and the steady stream of thoughts?

We will focus on questions 1 and 2 this coming week, and probably defer the third question to Week 12.