

# Space Projecting Space

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*When we try to examine the mirror in itself we discover in the end nothing but the things upon it. If we want to grasp the things we finally get hold of nothing but the mirror. This, in the most general terms, is the history of knowledge.— Friedrich Nietzsche*

First-time readers of Tarthang Tulku's *Time, Space, and Knowledge* are often brought up short early on by a statement in capital letters on page 10 of the book. Here it is, with a bit of the preceding text:

It almost seems that an object which is 'here' has appeared from a past condition of empty space, needs that space to be here, and gives way to a future condition of, again, empty space—'non-existence'. It looks like space is projecting space—that is all! Even what seems to fill up the

space as a present tense, existing object, is also space. So,

**SPACE IS PROJECTING SPACE INTO SPACE!**

In context, this statement seems to say that our entire reality is nothing but space and the 'activity' of space. Most people do not know what to make of this, and the mystery is deeply unsettling. I have even met a few people who told me that when they came to this sentence, they felt utterly and completely stuck, and put the book down.

I want to explore one way of investigating the meaning of this challenging statement. I do not claim it is the 'right' way, or even that it remains true to the discussion that follows the quoted phrase in the original text. But I do think it can give a sense of how space actively shapes our experience, a fundamental insight at which the quoted passage is pointing.

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What is space? The straightforward view is that space is what contains physical objects. But the TSK vision draws out in countless ways a more encompassing understanding, one that can be expressed by saying that space is the necessary accommodating matrix for whatever we experience.

These two very different understandings of space—one focused on objects and the other on experience—can be linked. Ordinarily we think of an object as

something independent of the one who experiences it. But objects appear to us as independent only *after* we have abstracted their identity from the experience in which the object appears to us. After all, by definition the objects we actually have contact with are not independent: objects as we know them are precisely objects as we know them. We can theorize about objects all we want, but we can only know what we know, only experience what we experience.

Whatever we experience—whether it be a thing (a chair, a tree, the jacket we put on when we feel cold), a memory, a feeling, or a sensation—requires a space in which to appear. You might wonder if this is really so, or whether ‘space’ is just an abstraction we use to make sense of the possibility of experiencing. But if you look into the threefold structure ‘I-experience-something’, you can see at once that interrelationship is essential to all experience. For interrelationship to happen, there has to be a linking and a matrix, and that linking matrix is space. That is why it makes sense to say that the space that contains objects is also, and more fundamentally, space that accommodates experience.

Understanding the link between space and experience helps us see that space comes in many varieties, each of which has the capacity to accommodate particular kinds of experience. The perception of physical objects, along with the physical objects perceived, is one kind of experience and depends on one kind of space. Other kinds of experience (for instance, memories) depend on other kinds of space. What shows up in one space may show up in a very different form in

another space, or may be barred from showing up at all. For instance, scenes from the past that regularly arise in the space of memory do not show up in physical space. If they do, we call them delusions or hallucinations, expressing by these terms the basic assumption that the different spaces appropriate to different kinds of experiences are incompatible with one another.

Suppose I am walking down the street. Brilliant roses bloom in the garden on my right; my new running shoes put a pleasing spring in my step; the wind streams past my face. But after a while, I start to think of what I will have for lunch. Now I am somewhere else, planning a menu or a shopping trip. As this very different kind of experience wells up, I do not just shift the object of my attention within a particular space (for instance, from perception of wind to perception of running shoes): I shift spaces. The space of the meal I will be having in a few hours accommodates in a particular, restricted way the supermarket where I will buy the food, but it does not accommodate at all the wind on my face. And the space of my walk down the street does not accommodate the anticipated meal.

Tied directly to the various and constantly shifting kinds of experiences available to me, every shifting space I inhabit is given structure by a founding story that lets me make sense of it. (for more on the founding story, see LOK, parts 2–3). This sense-making structure means that for every space, I could in principle give some account of my presence and participation in that ‘worlded’ space, including the various ways I relate to the other entities that the space accommodates.

Each space we inhabit is thus inseparable from the knowledge that tells us both ‘what’s happening’ and ‘the way things are’ within that space—the knowledge that sets up the prevailing story. We do not first enter a space and then make sense of it; rather, we can shift to the space that will accommodate a particular kind of experience only as a sense-making, story-telling knowing is activated. Without this knowledge, we cannot inhabit space. It comes with the territory.

The intimate relation between space and knowledge gives us two distinct ways of looking at space. Because it has the capacity to accommodate unlimited appearances (countless stories), we can say of space that it is empty. But because it accommodates only what makes sense within a specific known world of experience, we can also say that space is full—filled to capacity by the world that the story makes available. This filled-to-capacity space is in turn full of the specific objects it can accommodate.

This twofold space-structure lets us reframe the statement that “space projects space into space.” Space as shaped by the ‘story of what is so’ projects that story into the limitless capacity of space as empty. Within that story, specific objects are projected, and they too are space, in the sense that their arising depends completely on the space within which they arise. There we have it: space projects space into space!

Space-projecting typically passes us by, because we are too focused on objects to notice the space that accommodates, sustains, and even projects them. As a result, we are also blind to the knowledge that informs

space, the knowledge that 'worlds' space, even though we rely on that knowledge completely. The TSK vision of reality gives access to that inherent knowledge, belonging not to us, but to space itself. The more we exercise this unexpected capacity for knowledge, the more the invitation to see all appearance as "space projecting space" takes on force.

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I turn now to some practical suggestions for how to activate the space-knowledge toward which the "space-projecting-space" insight points. I will present these suggestions in terms of three (overlapping) kinds of experience: the perception of objects, the felt experience of our own embodiment, and the world of the mind, populated with thoughts, emotions, moods, and so forth.

### A. The Perception of Objects

Perhaps because we link space with the physical realm, it is fairly easy to get a sense of 'object-centered' space. Look around the room, noticing the objects that meet your gaze. Be sensitive to the space that 'contains' those objects. This will include the space that surrounds the object, the space that the object occupies, and the space that the object shares with other objects (along with the sense of that shared connection). Cultivating a sensitivity to these aspects of space does not mean turning away from the objects that space

reveals. Nor does it amount to the claim that these objects are 'nothing but' space. The objects are what they are, appearing along with their accommodating space.

Experimenting with the space-openness of objects in this way seems to make objects less weighty or heavy and more light or transparent. They become more fluid in their identity as well, for the space that accommodates two or more objects does not really differentiate between them. Experience itself may feel lighter. All of these tendencies are strengthened if you consider yourself (not your body, but your 'self') as another object occupying the same space as the physical objects you perceive.

Another way to experiment with the space of the perceived world is to move around in that world. As you walk through space, it may feel as though you are carrying the space you occupy with you (see KTS, ch. 29). At the same time, however, you are entering a new space with each step. Asking in terms of your experience how these two ways of experiencing space interact helps loosen the tendency to turn space itself into an object, which can otherwise be a limiting factor in the exploration.

Cultivating a sense of space-lightness and openness 'within' the objects we perceive can be both relaxing and illuminating, but eventually the tendency to focus on objects over space will reassert itself. Even if objects continue to seem lighter and more accommodating, this may simply mean that we have entered a different space. In this new space, perceived things may manifest a different and less burdensome 'weightiness', but

this is only a first approximation of the “space projecting space into space” insight.

One way to deepen this emerging insight is to investigate the knowledge dimension of space. When an object appears in space, it bears an identity, which in turn is sustained by a story. *Love of Knowledge* explores the “here I am” at the heart of this story: the self asserting its own identity (the ‘founding story’) in relation to the world in which it operates. Story and identity shape every encounter between self and the physical world it inhabits, and it is in this interaction that space-knowledge makes itself available.

For instance, as I type these words, I can be aware of the keyboard, my fingers, the computer screen, and so forth. I can also be aware of the space these objects share, and of the way that this space, by linking each of these objects with the others, challenges (in a felt sense) the boundaries of fixed identities. Beyond that, I can be aware of the knowledge-bearing space within which all of this makes sense: the ‘world’ in which I am writing an article, anticipating the reaction of its potential audience, reflecting back on how the article has been taking shape, and so on. It is out of this ‘worlded’ space, with its inherent coherence and meaningfulness, that each new moment of experience emerges. The more I can contact this unifying whole (without losing contact with the immediacy of the particulars), the more appearance is empowered as an expression of knowledge.

Notice that it is possible to expand space-experience in this way without an explicit focus on space. All

I need to do is ask after the larger meaning or context of what I am doing right now. Another approach is to simply let the object be in the wider web of its own relations, without losing track of my own connection to it. Doing this is something like letting two spaces interact, so that their inherent spatiality and accommodating capacity stand out.

An obstacle to this kind of inquiry is 'losing track' of objects, which also means losing track of space. When we first focus on the space within which objects are embedded, we may find the resulting experiences deeply interesting, so that we naturally keep our focus. But after a while, the old patterns that focus on objects rather than their accommodating space emerge. We turn whatever experiences we have been having into objects in their own right, and this shift takes us back into the standard mode of experiencing, in which we occupy space without being aware of space. Having settled back into this old habit, experience loses its special aliveness, and soon the mind has wandered away from the object of perception and inquiry. Lost in space, we drift unaware from one space to another.

One way to counter this tendency is to continue to explore the space dimension of experience even when our attention shifts away from the original focus of inquiry. Whether experience presents physical things and settings, remembered situations, ideas, worries, or anything else, the space that accommodates that presentation will be available. Since that is so, 'losing track' of the space of physical objects need not mean losing track of space. In fact, non-physical space offers

interesting complexities that can deepen exploration. For instance, when we remember something that happened to us recently, there is the space of the remembered scene, including the space-relations between various objects in that scene; but there is also the space that situates that memory alongside other, related memories, as well as the more encompassing mental space within which the memory as such arises.

In carrying out such investigations, it generally seems better not to focus on space directly, but instead to let space be available in the course of being aware of objects in space. To focus on something directly is to make it into an object, and the moment that space becomes an object, it can no longer serve to accommodate. (A possible exception is when one is aware of an object in another space while inhabiting a more encompassing space; for example, in viewing a painting.) Instead of making space the focus, it seems enough to let objects be 'space embedded'.

## B. The Felt Experience of Embodiment

The space of physical objects is also the space that we inhabit in being embodied. Our embodiment, however, is not physical in quite same way as everything else, because it has a felt dimension to it. For instance, when I rub my finger along the top of a table, I feel the table, but I also feel my finger, and in a much more immediate, intimate way.

When I focus on the embodied aspect of inhabiting, I open up a range of experiences that are not available

to perception in a more narrow sense, and this means opening to new dimensions of space. Charged with energy and feelings, embodied space carries a kind of knowledge different from the knowledge inherent in the perception of objects.

The focus in embodied experience is different from the focus in perception. To focus in perception is to direct the attention toward or at something. In contrast, if I focus 'on' the belly in an embodied way, I do not direct attention 'at' the belly but 'from' the belly. The belly becomes the center of the looking and experiencing, in much the same way that my intention to do something becomes the center of each action I take to fulfill that intention. And belly-centered space projects space into space very differently than, e.g., head-centered space.

Staying with embodied experience is a practice many people find deeply nourishing. However, it carries with it the risk of sinking into the felt qualities of the experience, losing track of space-projection and space-openness. A more balanced approach is to explore the story that gives meaning to the space we inhabit, starting with the founding story, "Here I am." Any such story has a narrative to it, an *account* of 'what's happening'. But the story is more than its telling, and embodiment is a pathway into that 'more'. By staying centered in the embodied sense of presence as we become aware of the story in operation, we see how we tend to turn stories into narratives—turn inhabiting into telling. If we let this process unfold unchecked, we will abandon the felt knowledge of space in favor of identity, from which

space is excluded by definition. But if we can stay within the felt experience, space remains available even as the telling takes hold.

Meditative physical movements that focus on the belly or spine seem especially helpful in encouraging this continued openness to embodiment. However, the same openness is potentially available within any sense experience. In each case, it is the experience of embodied presence (which can engage past and future as well as present) that gives more knowledgeable access to space projection.

There is an interesting tension between opening to sense experience and being caught up in thoughts. The process of thinking, at least in the way we usually engage it, seems to activate a reflex that shuts down sensory experience. It is as though we cannot think and sense at the same time. But that sharp division makes sense mainly from the point of view of thinking. From within embodied experience, thinking is just another telling, which can unfold within a more richly dimensioned space.

### C. The World of the Mind

There are countless kinds of mental objects and experiences, and each arises within its own space. How we can connect with them in the most powerful or revealing way is a vast topic, one which I cannot claim to have explored in depth. Still, a few observations and reflections may be helpful.

A shift in focus from identity to the space that accommodates identity has a strikingly different impact on different kinds of mental entities. When I turn from thoughts to the space within which thoughts emerge, the thoughts simply disappear. When I turn from emotions or feelings to space, the emotions do not disappear; instead, they are transformed, the energy within them released. And when I open to the space within a visualization or a heartfelt feeling such as love or devotion, the visualization or feeling becomes more powerful, more present, more real.

Why would this hierarchy operate? Perhaps because a thought (whether verbal or visual) depends completely on assigned identities; when these dissolve, the thought simply vanishes. In contrast, a feeling, especially one that engages the heart of experience, gains its power—its claim to be real—from a deeper and more encompassing dimension of space. One might even speculate that the more ‘real’ or fundamental the experience one engages, the more fully it opens into space.

Since the relative unreality of thoughts sets them in opposition to space, other kinds of mental activity give more ready access to space-projection. Perception and embodiment can be the starting point. For instance, I can enter the world of the mind by simply expanding whatever sense of space I am operating with at the moment. As I sit here typing, I am aware of my fingers striking the keyboard and of words forming on the screen in front of me. I can expand that perceptual focus to encompass other objects in the room, the room itself, the room in the building, and so on. As I do so,

various associations come up automatically; for instance, the set of books that I notice on my left as I type are not just any books, but books that I helped produce over the course of several years, and a host associations and memories shadows their presence in my field of vision.

The idea here is to open and open and open without ever losing the original focus. Although I am back in the realm of perception, I am engaging a wider perspective in which perception is a kind of mental activity. A powerful example of this kind of expansion into the realm of the mental can be found in the Giant Body exercises in TSK. Exercise 5 asks the reader to regard the outlines of the giant body as “unobstructive” to the reader’s knowing presence; next, it suggests adding to the outlines “an ecstatic quality.” This instruction suggests that energy and feeling, both grounded in space, are translatable across the gulf between subject and object (mental and physical) in a way that matter, conceived as the opposite of space, is not.

A very different way of exploring space in the mental realm is to start with whatever feels most ‘solid’. It may take some experimenting to be able to identify this quite specific sense of something being solid, because we regard what is solid as real, and what is real cannot ordinarily be further questioned. In my own experience, what is most solid is often connected to the self. Its telltale mark is an emotional overtone: dull insistence, stubbornness, anxiety, or the agitation of a restless, thinking mind. At other times, the solid shows up as the vague but impenetrable ‘mind set’ that

prevents me from directing my attention in line with my intention. Simply focusing on this solidity can be enough to melt it, releasing the openness of space. If it does not melt, it may at least change form, and in the transition become more accessible to inquiry. A new solidity, perhaps harder to comprehend or acknowledge, is likely to form almost at once, but still there has been a relaxing and letting go that authenticates space-projection in action.

III

Another path to activating space-projection involves simply letting go of what arises, accepting it for what it is without accepting its assigned identity as fixed. Such a letting go will engage not only the objects that appear within a given space, but also the 'space/world' within which those objects arise. Since that world centers on a self, this approach ultimately turns on letting go of the self—perhaps the most challenging practice of all.

Walking in the woods, I come to a beautiful glade. The moment I say, "How beautiful!" I invite a reaction of greed, of a self wanting to possess. Unless I let go of that reaction, I have shut space down; or rather, I have filled it up completely with 'my' concerns, wants, and needs. In one sense the difficulty is that I am focusing on 'things'—and my reactions to them—rather than space. But the problem goes deeper. A world that is mine is a world in which space is an inaccessible mystery. When space centers on 'me' and 'mine', on what I

want and do not want, it can no longer accommodate. 'I' am out of breath, out of space, out of room.

Tarhang Tulku reminds us again and again in the TSK books that space is around and within, always allowing, always offering freedom. Yet we do not accept that gift. In fact, we actively reject it. Instead of projecting space, we project ourselves. Setting up a position, we set ourselves at odds with space. No wonder we find a space-centered understanding so challenging, so close to being nonsensical. Reacting as selves, we react against space.

We should not let that reaction stop us. In fact, we should regard it as a pointer to something deeply important. When the self says no; when it regards space as empty or meaningless; when confusion and dismay pervade our world, can we open that reaction up? Can we find the space within?

Can space project space into space?