

Time Space and Knowledge

A different vision
of what is real and
what is possible



Caroline Sherwood and Michael Gray introduce the concepts of an approach to changing awareness that will be the theme of the first public retreat here next year

As we grow more familiar with the vision, we realize that we all share the same space, are related in time, and speak a shared language that embodies knowledge. Any basis for discrimination between self and others falls away. – Tarthang Tulku

What does the Time, Space, Knowledge vision of reality offer that is not also offered by the many other techniques, traditions, schools and visions now available in the West? Is TSK just another technique comparable to a variety of other better-known spiritual practices?

Tibetan Buddhist Lama Tarthang Tulku in his preface to *Dynamics of Time and Space* – one of the six books in his TSK series – shares how the TSK vision arose out of the need to bridge a gap between traditional Buddhist culture and the western world in which he found himself:

An inquiry centered on time, space, and knowledge... can draw on cultural concepts and terms that resonate with some of the most creative trends in Western thought. It also harmonizes well with concerns that arise naturally in a society where time seems always to be speeding up, space is subject to steady manipulation, and knowledge changes dramatically with each generation.

Jack Petranker, founder of the Center for Creative Inquiry, who leads TSK workshops around the world, amplifies:

TSK does not ask us to set aside our rational beliefs, but it does ask us to wake up from our comfortable conviction that we know the way things are. What is more basic than time and space? What if we misunderstand them and don't even know it? What if we shut knowledge down when we try to own it? The range of questions is vast and the payoff for really learning to question is tremendous ... The truth lies not in the answers, but in the questions.

TSK starts and ends with whatever we discover in our minds and daily lives. It is fully compatible with practices of meditation, yoga and mindfulness, but also provides powerful tools that empower us to penetrate whatever obstacles arise.

Why not just stay with meditation? Tarthang Tulku has addressed this question in another publication:

Beginning meditators usually focus on calming the mind or simply observing experience. This is natural, since our thoughts and imagination give us so much trouble. But tending to the mind and mental events the way a shepherd tends his sheep is inherently limiting. We may meditate in this way for years without a significant change in how mind operates ... Instead of staying focused on the content of illusion mind, we can investigate the body of mind ... All we need to do is learn to recognize our own projections and preconceptions in operation.

TSK fosters this recognition and provides tools to examine how we are relating to our lives. As we become aware of what arises from moment to moment, we are empowered to make intelligent and healing changes.

TSK points out that we are inveterate story-tellers. We scarcely have a thought, initiate a plan or entertain a memory, without weaving a new story or pulling out an old one. The problem with this is that these stories keep us from experiencing our present life. Tarthang Tulku puts the matter incisively:

Safe in our precarious nest – our position, our identity, our stories – we fear to go beyond its boundaries. Rarely do we step into the world of the actual to produce or manifest. Rarely are we willing to take on old patterns in ways that could make a difference for ourselves or others.

... Perhaps through study or reflection or meditation we develop forms of knowledge that suggest matters could be different. But still we do not know how to manifest this knowledge in time; how to restore the vital link between knowing and being that time can make available. And so we can only generate new stories.

As the quote at the start of this article suggests, we will care more deeply for the well-being of others when we learn

to understand the time and space we share with them. Now is the time to step into this wider landscape of possibility.

TSK sidesteps the tendency to rely on the authority of a teacher. The inquiry it stimulates is its own reward, offering our minds what they need to pursue knowledge in the middle of daily life. As Hayward Fox, a psychologist with 40 years' clinical experience, who has studied TSK for 33 years, puts it: 'TSK is a careful inquiry into the truth of all of our ordinarily held assumptions. You can add it to therapy, or meditation, or any other practice and it will open new dimensions of experience and understanding.'

Space

To go beyond space ... as an essential mystery, we need to challenge the view that assigns space only two possibilities: substance and its absence. – Tarthang Tulku, *Dynamics of Time and Space*

Most of us only notice the objects that appear in space. Space itself is viewed as a blank nothingness, or an abstract measure of the distance that separates things. This is a little like trying to nourish ourselves with freeze-dried food. TSK allows us to see the outer space of our object-centred lives as if it were a cloak worn by a more fundamental inner space. This inner space is then envisioned as an active medium that leaves room for all that arises within it, physical and mental phenomena alike. When we contact this spaciousness our experience shifts, becoming lighter and more open.

We experience our bodies as solid, separate entities, subject to Newton's laws of gravity and inertia. And as Descartes famously proclaimed ('I think therefore I am'), our thoughts and emotions appear central to who we are. We may well wonder what value there can be in questioning such deeply ingrained perspectives, until we notice that we have lost a spark of aliveness.

TSK points out that when we label and identify objects we are adopting a particular perspective. Unaware of the particular 'focal setting' at play in our perceptions, we treat them as evidence of some fundamental reality which we are powerless to alter. This insight can be deeply healing.

Some who have seen this dynamic at work have called it love or truth; others have spoken instead of wisdom or beauty or blessing. It does not matter: labels do not confine knowledge, nor do words bring it to a halt. – Tarthang Tulku, *Dynamics of Time and Space*

Greater love, joy, compassion and balance arise naturally once we feel less stuck with who we are and less mired in our

circumstances. The study of TSK inspires its students to care more deeply for this world and to engage more actively in it, as old barriers become transparent. Even pain and loss soften when we view everything that appears as being infiltrated by space, carried along by the dynamism of time and animated by the same kind of knowledge as we find in ourselves.

Like children who won't stop asking questions just because someone gives them an answer, let's ask again: What if we could really discover the qualities of open space in our perceptions and encounters? Might we then discover a new freedom? What if the solid, confining world we experience around us is really the result of a particular projection, and the lives we are living the consequence of this projection? What if we are actually free to experience our lives in a lighter way? Might we be able to perceive all that arises in time as an inner space arising into outer space – like a humpback whale breaching the sparkling ocean surface and rising into sunlight?

Bruce Alderman, teacher and creator of the online *Integral Post Metaphysical Spirituality* forum, confirms this possibility: '... my sustained engagement with TSK has subtly shifted my relationship to my sense of limits, boundaries, problems, and relationships ... There seems to be more 'space,' more open potential, around my experience, and less tendency to feel trapped or bound by whatever condition I am in.'

Time

We imagine that we are at the crest of the wave of time, the culmination of billions of years of history, the tip on the forward-looking arrow of time. But how can that be, when we do not even know where we are headed? – Tarthang Tulku, *Sacred Dimensions of Time and Space*

Usually we think of the present as real and the past as what has happened – what 'used to be' real. But TSK points us toward the future as the heart of time. The future is the source of present aliveness, a kingdom of infinite possibilities. It offers a beautiful alternative to the tendency to project anxieties and cravings, familiar from the past, onto a 'future' that is thereby dragged down into fear and confusion.

Jack Petrunker links the future to creativity: 'When we construct the 'bridge' of linear time, one moment after another, something solid is fixed in place. Creativity is just the opposite: flowing, indeterminate, undefined, without any fixed origin. That is what the future offers.'

It is inherently painful to live in a

present that is divorced from past and future. When we believe that time is linear (with past, present and future lined up in sequence) and that we are confined to a single present moment – conditioned by a past that has gone and anticipating a future that never arrives – how could we not feel powerless? We have no time or space from which to fashion a thoughtful response to the issues that confront our world. This sense of helplessness in the face of overwhelming global momentum is a rising torment in our technological culture.

Holocaust survivor and psychologist, Viktor Frankl exemplifies the human capacity to choose how we respond to circumstances, no matter how terrible. He puts it this way in *Man's Search for Meaning*: '...everyone's task is unique, as is his specific opportunity to implement it.'

David Filippone, a TSK student for 15 years, found TSK exercises deeply helpful at a very painful time in his life: 'When my wife passed away, TSK was a tremendous support. Beneath the normal day-to-day living, even beneath the sadness, I could contact the spark of aliveness that is always available. It was a deep source of healing and comfort.'

Michael Gray has found that another area where honouring the living dynamic of time has proved helpful is his work with people suffering from MS and Motor Neurone Disease. Progressive neuromuscular diseases move relentlessly through time and being put on a two-year waiting list for treatment does not help a man who has two years left to live. Whether we are afflicted with such difficulties ourselves or trying to help those who are, the point is to discover the aliveness of time right now. That can be transforming.

Knowledge

To enter the space and time of new knowledge, we do not have to turn away from what is happening in our lives right now or reject our previous history. Knowledge is available not only in the beautiful and the perfect, but in the twisted, the perverse and the misdirected. – Tarthang Tulku, *Dynamics of Time and Space*

'We discover knowledge,' says Tarthang Tulku, 'by relaxing into it, letting go of our perceptual concern that we are somehow at fault or at risk. The feeling is liberating, like warm sunlight after a fierce winter storm... We recognise that we have the power to shape the universe instead of simply inhabiting it, to become the architects of a knowledge that does not depend on our constructs or determine our reactions.'



Odiyan Country Center, built by volunteers since its establishment in 1975 and located three hours northwest of San Francisco with some 25 residents, is the home for the lineage of teachings brought to the West by Tarthang Tulku.

Tarthang Tulku received a comprehensive education in all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism before leaving Tibet in 1958. After teaching for six years at Sanskrit University in India he came to America in 1968. Renowned as an innovative teacher and a visionary, independent thinker, he has devised unique ways of communicating traditional Buddhist teachings to a western audience.

As founder of Dharma Publishing, he has guided a momentous project that preserves more than 2,000 volumes of Tibetan Dharma texts for a new generation (more than

four million books given away). He has also written more than 18 books and supervised translation of more than 20 others. He founded the mountain retreat centre, Odiyan (see image) as well as centres in North America, South America and Europe that offer classes, retreats and opportunities for meaningful work.

His activities embrace the restoration of monasteries and ancient holy places of the Buddha and the founding of the Ceremonies for World Peace in Bodhgaya, India, celebrating its 25th year in 2014 (see page 3).

Hayward Fox has put this insight to use with his therapy patients. 'What we hold as identity,' he says, 'either fetters or liberates ... TSK deconstructs the solidity of the self. It reveals 'self' as a position, a vantage point, an interpretative tendency... If our self is not a solid thing that has already formed, we can enjoy more lightness, freedom and ease.' Tarthang Tulku makes this point beautifully:

Let us imagine Knowledge boundless in its prospects, welling forth in waves, resonating throughout the universe, expanding beyond its parents, Time and Space. Let us ask Knowledge to sustain us and nourish us, sweeping us up in a beauty that feeds our hidden hungers and shelters our most noble aspirations. As we begin our inquiry, let us imagine we are donning the silken robe of Knowledge, a coat of many colours – a magical garment that gives us warmth, comfort, aesthetic delight and a sense of deep refinement.
– Tarthang Tulku

A new kind of Knowledge

What stops us from entering this richer world? The Christian myth of origin tells us that we were cast out of Paradise for tasting the Tree of Forbidden Knowledge. But too much knowledge

has never been the problem. The problem is how we relate to knowledge. We have relinquished our native curiosity and affinity for knowing, choosing instead to stuff our heads with labels, identities and stories. Instead of living in harmony under the branches of the Tree of Life, we scurry after whatever bruised fruit falls our way, frightened that someone else will grab it first. Instead of awakening to the inner knowledge in which we live and have our being, we attempt to appropriate, possess and copyright what has always been freely available to all.

But that is not all. We have turned from appreciating *time's* dynamic aliveness and pass our precious human lives traversing a tightrope of linear time that leaves us always anxious, always afraid of a treacherous slip and fall. And most no longer even notice the deeply healing openness of space, obsessing instead over the things we have learned to identify, like focusing on the darkening clouds instead of the serene blue sky.

On some level we know that there must be something deeper and finer beneath this world of pain and dysfunction, of clumsy efforts to find nourishment and peace. Tarthang Tulku's *Time*,

Space, Knowledge Vision presents a different picture of our human potential. According to his vision we do not have to wait to be rescued by a higher power, nor do we have to subscribe to any particular belief system. In fact, we do not have to give up, acquire or modify anything in the daily life we are currently living. We just have to enter into the time of our lives, appreciate the space of our being and know that we have a ringside seat at this magical, unfolding mystery. ☸

There are six books in the TSK series by Tarthang Tulku, published by Dharma Publishing (www.dharmapublishing.com); also a guide to the TSK vision by Jack Petranker: *When It Rains does Space get Wet?* (2006)
Online courses: www.creativeinquiry.org ; early bird bookings are now open for a UK retreat, led by Jack Petranker, 27–31 August, 2014 (see IFC) ukprograms@creativeinquiry.org.

Caroline Sherwood has studied, and written about spiritual disciplines for 40 years; ukprograms@creativeinquiry.org. Michael Gray has studied TSK for 25 years and is co-founder of Friends in Time, a group that works with the disabled; mgray@mnia.com.