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PUTTING GREAT SPACE AT THE CENTER:
A COMMENTARY ON THE TSK SPACE EXERCISES

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Questioning Space Through Experiential Practice

The first TSK book is divided into three main sections: Space, Time and Knowledge. Each consists of analytical investigations and experiential exercises designed to unfreeze the rigid presuppositions that ordinarily influence our embodiment of these three facets of experience. I believe it is no accident the starting point is a focus on Space, for a new appreciation and understanding of Space seems central to the vision. Reflecting on my own early encounter with TSK in 1982 during the 10-month program, I believe the Space exercises had (and still have) a transformative effect on my mental outlook, embodiment, and emotional disposition.
In the Space section of TSK, a progressive series of exercises complemented with commentaries and text serve as a foundation for achieving a shift in “focal setting.” The first series, referred to in the text as the “Giant Body” exercises, employ imagination, creative visualization, and observation. The second series involve attending to familiar aspects of experience (such as mind, body, feelings, thoughts) by seeing them in their Space aspect, along with questioning the location and source of thoughts and mental experience. The last set of exercises in the Space series deepen and integrate previous insights through challenging subtle habitual tendencies and by working with more intensive gazing at an open and clear blue sky for extended periods of time in retreat (See Exercise 15, “A Mountain Retreat”).

Tarthang Tulku instructs us that Space is very much the nature of our embodiment. By learning how to appreciate Space more, we can enjoy a more open and spacious sense of being. However, our usual way of relating is “…often very rigid which restricts our potential as embodied beings” (1977, p.25). It is important to point out that embodiment includes our view of reality, that is, the way we know. In fact, in TSK, “…some kind of knowing is a primary fact of embodiment” (p.24). The implication here is that a more primordial way of knowing, grounded in a more space-like embodiment, is available. This primordial knowledge is not predicated or limited by our usual habitual structures of knowing, which have rigidified into a split between self and world. Our habitual focal setting (which we embody and live out), presupposes a fundamental duality between subject and object. The TSK exercises and inquiry are designed to “thaw out” or unfreeze this rigid, dualistic focal setting, allowing “…a greater measure of liveliness, clarity and intimacy” (p.25).

The Giant Body Exercises
The “Giant Body” exercises are designed to open up our perception of the body, which is usually felt to be dense, rigid and solid. The exercises begin by having us imagine a Giant Body – seemingly projected above us “out there.” However, I have found it very helpful to imagine the Giant Body as my own, and not as some separate image projected at a distance. The instructions to the exercises also ask to develop a measure of accuracy and detail with regards to viewing the various structures, sub-structures and micro-structures.

These exercises do require some discipline and training in concentration. CD-ROMs are now commercially available that provide a 3-D illustration of various components of the human body, a helpful support. It would be interesting to know whether TSK practitioners who already have detailed knowledge of human physiology have found their practice of the Giant Body exercises “easier” or more vivid compared to those who lack such familiarity.

A number of people attempting to conduct the Giant Body exercises have expressed difficulty with visualization, and in developing precision and stability with regards to details of the body’s systems. My advice to them is that they should not think too narrowly or rigidly about what visualization is supposed to entail. It might be more fruitful to conduct the exercise in a more playful fashion. For example, what if we could experiment with allowing our imagination to imagine the body’s systems in full detail without any mental effort? Or perhaps we can use the power of emotion or feeling to build up the image. We might even imagine that we are sitting in a large movie theatre about to watch the best special effects that Hollywood has to offer. We should also not be discouraged if we cannot see a clear visual image at first; feeling the “feel of the image” may be enough and provide entry into a different way of knowing.
I have always had a fondness for Exercises 4 and 5 in the Giant Body series, “Just Interactions and Shining Outlines,” and “Released to Space.” These two exercises help to counteract our ordinary perception that things (in this case the body) are permanent, solid, and self-existing entities, inherently and independently existing from their own side. Instead, we develop a new perceptual capacity to see the surface structures that delineate a part of the body (for example, the eyes) as composed of many dynamically interacting sub-structures (retina, blood vessels, tissue, cells, etc). Exercise 4 extends such perception to the entire body and its networks of dynamic interactions, amplifying the dynamism so that such interactions become “translucent.” In Exercise 5, we are asked to go further—to open up the “outlines” of every surface and structure of the body until it becomes completely gone, released to Space.

These exercises activate a penetrating way of knowing that “sees” objects in a new light. Upon closer analytic scrutiny we see that any form that we normally designate or single out as a solid object can also be seen as a dynamic system of interdependent interactions. Whether we refer to a whole (e.g., the body), or a part (e.g., the eye), no object can be isolated or seen to exist on its own. What we commonly perceive as “our body” has no intrinsic, self-existent reality; rather, it is a composite phenomenon, as is each so-called part. The more we exercise and become familiar with this more penetrating kind of knowing, the more we begin to appreciate that the body (and all appearances of form) are malleable and lacking solid substance.

As we learn how to counteract our tendency to fixate on objects (in this case our body) as solid and opaque things, a new type of “knowing faculty” emerges. Tarthang Tulku suggests that this amounts to a “mode of seeing not limited to a particular position or point of view” (p.27). In other words, this new knowing faculty is not derived from
taking a stance, a position set apart from the object to be known. Nor is this new mode of seeing predicated on the conventional elements of knower, knowing, and known (or perceiver, perceiving, and perceived). Instead, we can imagine it as pervading an “open field or dimension” (p.28), which is already “in” experience “before” experience is divided into conventional dualistic categories.

In the latter part of Exercise 5, the form of the body is released into Space until it is completely gone (and “gone beyond gone”). This experience elicits the insight that the ultimate or true nature of any object or thing—any feature of ordinary appearance—is fundamentally Space. As Tarthang Tulku states: “So perhaps ‘things’ could actually be said to be, fundamentally, nothing but this ‘space’ or ‘openness’” (p.30). Yet Space is not merely empty, devoid of qualities: the exercise also suggests that a new knowing faculty is co-emergent with a greater recognition of Space. The “knowingness” that emerges restores our capacity for “primordially fresh encounters,” clarity, and ease. We might say that such knowingness (what later in the text is referred to as Great Knowledge) abides within the nature of Great Space (which is not a “thing”), yet can still cognize the appearance of conventional things “in” lower-level space.

This latter point deserves further comment. Great Space is not an object which can be known by a subject. In other words, Great Space is not an experience to be grasped at or attained. And because Great Space is not an object of (ordinary) cognition, it is beyond thought and our attempts at grasping it in a conceptual manner. On the surface this might suggest that the different way of knowing the Space exercises are geared toward helping us access is either inaccessible or of little value to our life. However, because Great Space is infinitely open, it does not exclude thinking or thoughts. It is just that the path to Great Space is not traversed by staying within the
dualistic limitations of lower-level space, time and knowledge (substance body/linear
time/ordinary thinking mind). We might liken a “Great Space-Time-Knowing” to a
completely uncontrived naturalness and undirected awareness, or what the TSK text
refers to in a special sense as “intimacy.” Part of the benefit of the TSK exercises is that
we learn how to differentiate between lower-level knowledge and Great Knowledge, and
subsequently become more familiar and adept at relying on the latter.

Great Space is not actually elusive, remote or mysterious. Rather, our usual self-
orientation (which in TSK is equated with an active lapse in knowing) gets in the way of
appreciating that every condition, every event, every thought, form, or circumstance is
expressive of Great Space directly. Great Space is not something that we are missing, nor
something to be seen or experienced in contrast to ordinary appearance. It is so close (an
“uncontrived intimacy”), that we fail to know it, and thus fail to know the true nature of
appearance as it is. Because Great Space is non-localizable, it is already “here.” It is just
that as long as we are ntent on grasping for an experience or object, we tend to look
elsewhere.

There are many adjectives one could evoke to express the nature of Great Space:
ungraspable, inconceivable, unlocatable, unapproachable, unconditioned, unborn,
baseless, traceless, immeasurable, limitless, boundless, boundaryless, infinite,
transparent, open, free, deep, and empty. But words are only crude pointers. We could
imagine Great Space metaphorically as a “single-sphere,” “non-dual,” unbroken or whole
in the sense it is never divided or compartmentalized into separate existents. Great Space
(seen with Great Knowledge) does not affirm the arising of any form or existent (or non-
existent), since it is an inexhaustible absence of obstructive phenomena.
TSK exercises help us to unlearn, relax, and open up the tendency toward grasping for experience. The exercises described so far help us get a feeling or appreciation for Great Space by relaxing our fixations on ordinary appearance, particularly our taken-for-granted sense of being an isolated subjective knower engaged in experiencing a substantial external world. Exercises 4 and 5 help us do this by encouraging us to see the body more in terms of Space. Yet to stop at this point would lead to the erroneous conclusion that it takes a special or extraordinary experience to perceive the body (and all appearances of forms) as essentially Space. The transition to Exercise 6 in the Giant Body series challenges this assumption, inviting us to critically examine and compare the ordinary appearance of the body as dense and opaque with the newfound translucent way of seeing of the earlier exercises. Tarthang Tulku poses the question, “Is it possible that both of these versions, as they are experienced directly, are equally a kind of ‘space’ experience?” Underlying the question is the suggestion that there is no real dichotomy between appearance as substance and the accommodating nature of Space. That is, what appears as unquestionably dense and opaque is just that: an appearance that is inseparable from the nature of Space. Space is thus not remote, not some hidden absolute or underlying strata of reality. Rather, the union of appearance and space is felt as an embodied quality of experience.

A more formidable question emerges: Given the appearance of form-body, is there really any thing substantially there? If we are challenged to look for or find “the body,” or any part of the body, what will be the result of our analysis? As Exercises 1-5 demonstrate, our analysis first yields a deconstructive de-layering of the body and its parts. This transitions to a complete openness devoid of substance. The form of the body is seen to be a conventional frozen perception (in TSK language, an output of a particular
“focal setting”), a mere label which is imputed upon a dynamic interaction of composite forms which themselves have no ultimate point that cannot also be opened into Space. Exercise 5 challenges any lingering sentiment that the body inherently exist as substance, while Exercise 6 (Opacity versus Translucency) challenges us not to go to the other extreme that “nothing exists.” The appearance of the body as form is not being rejected; what is at issue is our habitual tendency to view/experience the body as something solid, rigid, and separate from space.

The Commentary to Exercise 6 in TSK is very instructive, as it suggests that there is an intrinsic unity between appearance (forms) and Space, and that we have the knowing capacity to keep this unity in view. It is here that Tarthang Tulku begins to utilize such phrases as “higher-order space,” and “higher-order knowledge.” As he states: “We might say that higher order knowledge does attend to conventional items and perspectives. However, it does so in a way that appreciates their participation in the higher-order space” (p.30). My interpretation of this statement is that we can access a higher-order knowing capacity that can operate on several levels simultaneously: knowingness is cognizant of appearance (forms, bodies, objects, mind, events, etc.) as fundamentally Space, while simultaneously cognizant of the conventional features of appearance in all their multiplicity and complexity.

Practice of the Giant Body series up to this point begins to give us a glimpse of a new view of reality and a new appreciation of a higher intelligence. Experientially we begin to feel a greater sense of openness and ease as we gain familiarity with a knowing capacity that can remain aware of the fundamental nature of appearance as completely open and space-like, while still being able to operate in a field of conventional designations habitually predicated on a set of dualistic concepts (self vs. world, subject
vs. object, body vs. mind, existence vs. non-existence). With the experience of space
more available in the midst of ordinary appearance, we are less taken in by what
ordinarily would seem absolutely solid, real, rigid, and opaque. Situations we encounter
seem more flexible, fluid and workable. As we begin to relax more, we are less caught up
in our habitual conceptual way of reacting to conventional appearance. Less physically
tense, less emotionally reactive, less mentally blocked, we discover more options for how
we can “be” in any situation. We begin to get a taste for the totally unobstructed quality
and freedom from restrictions that “higher spaces” offer. However, this statement has to
be qualified. While brief glimpses of “higher spaces” are a gateway into the vision,
fruition requires stabilizing and integrating “space experience” with the apparent
movement of time. And the Knowledge exercises later in the text are designed to peel
away the gross and subtle layers of dualistic habits associated with conventional “lower
knowledge” that ordinarily obscure “higher knowledge.”

**Transition: No Freezing Tendency**

Sincere and dedicated practice of Exercises 1-6 will generate inspiration to go
deeper into the remaining Space exercises. Preliminary to the next series of exercises, the
text investigates a model for the development of a person in a world (pp. 32-34). Four
alternative views are presented, suggestive of a developmental process for the emergence
of our ordinary worldview that presupposes the birth (and death) of a person with a
permanent identity in a standard world order. I have found myself going back to
contemplate this section many times over the years, and it serves as a good example of
how one can gain access to different levels of meaning of the text over time.
Contemplating the meaning of the four-stage progressive model can help to loosen our habitual tendencies involved in “freezing” space and time—giving rise to the appearance of opaque and stable things that also appear to undergo change through time. Tarthang Tulku states: “…persons and objects . . . are only lower level summaries of the ongoing tendency toward freezing and screening out the full openness of space” (p.34).

The progressive model suggests that such appearances in space and time are dynamic rather than static, and that any reference to a point of permanence or stability is the result of some sort of “freezing tendency.” Our ordinary notion of personal identity is an example of such a habitual and ongoing tendency. Yet as the fourth stage of the model puts it, even the process of freezing is also space and time, and has no real or inherent existence that sets itself up in contrast to the freedom of space:

No ‘freezing’ or anomalous tendency has set itself up in contrast to ‘space.’ The frozen pattern is neither frozen nor even a ‘freezing.’ Worlds, things, and persons remain ‘space,’ rather than only deriving from ‘space’ as in [stage] ‘3’. (p.34)

Internalizing this view can help us to further relax. More familiarity with the immediate availability of space can help to facilitate practice of the exercises; we need not try so hard or exert so much effort, as the opposition between space and objects is seen to be only a stubborn pattern rather than the way things are. While practicing the exercises, we can gain more confidence in this view by keeping in mind that we have never really strayed from Great Space. While it seems “we” are embarking on a particular exercise, Great Space is unconditioned, and doing the exercise is not going to improve Great Space, create it, or bring it about. In other words, we do not need to meddle so
much. If we view the practice as the cause for bringing Great Space into view, we are still practicing from a “first-level” focal-setting, where we see the “self-as-agent” doing the practice. We will then be overcome by an incessant worry whether we should be doing something or not doing something or whether we are doing the practice correctly. We will have too many expectations or fears or concern ourselves too much with whether we will attain or lose some special experience.

TSK practice involves progressively unlearning the tendency toward seeking. We do not realize or know Great Space by moving away from some place or status that we consider to be lacking in this open dimension toward a distant state or condition that is more characteristic of Great Space. That is often the mode we start from: We are propelled by a strong desire or goal-orientation to attain a more desirable state we presume is not available in the present moment. In some respects, the TSK exercises offer training in the confidence that will allow and deepen our experience of what already is. They invite a profound non-doing that allows Great Space to permeate our preconceptions of doing. We might think of allowing the “Grace of Great Space” (my expression) to facilitate the unfolding of the exercises, rather than being directed by the “effort-driven I.”

If we can allow a relaxed but alert orientation while “doing” the exercises, we can come to see directly that the body's real nature is space. This assertion is not merely a philosophical musing or metaphysical sleight of hand. In fact, conducting the exercises protects us from deadening embodied insights into mere intellectual concepts “about” space. It is quite easy to engage in “TSK-speak,” reducing space to just another mental concept. Simply to believe and espouse that “everything is Space” is to hold in mind a
concept. In that case the limits of conceptual mind remain solidly entrenched, obscuring the true nature of Space.

These considerations apply to the person as well as the body. The essence of a person is not a permanent identity or a body, but what Tarthang Tulku refers to as “a condition of open uncommittedness” that appears to become frozen or “consolidated,” collapsing into a standard 3-dimensional world order. Like other discrete entities, persons are subject to the laws of causality. They are born, remain relatively permanent and unchanging through time, and then suddenly cease to exist at the moment of death. In this way, existence/non-existence is translated into life and death. But this view presupposes that personal identity exists in some atemporal position as a bystander to the linear flow of time (until it encounters its apparent destruction at death). Our attempts to freeze space are closely linked to the desire to maintain the permanence of this self. The result is that we inflict on ourselves an inherent sense of lack and dissatisfaction. By challenging the tendency to freeze and consolidate space, the Giant Body Exercises can have a powerful effect on the felt experience of being alive.

The Embodied Mind Exercises

The next set of Space exercises (7, 8, 9 & 10) go on to investigates the embodied mind—the lived dimensions of thoughts, feelings, sensations, volitions; the conventional partitions between body and mind; as well as the emergent position of the observer. This exploration is critical to the TSK vision, and deserves extended commentary.

At first glance, Exercise 7 “Body-Mind- Thought Interplay” appears to resemble simple mindfulness practice as taught in various Buddhist traditions. But there is an important twist to the exercise, as we are asked to note how various interplays of body-
mind-thought constitute “you in that situation” (p.35). This meta-observation helps us to take notice that an observer is constituted in juxtaposition to the stream of mental events, an observation amplified in Exercise 9. We tend to take the existence of this observer for granted, perceiving that we (as observers) are the owners of our thoughts, feelings, and experiences. But for this to be the case, partitions must exist between the observer and the constituents of experience. We ordinarily say, “I have a feeling, I am thinking a thought, I had this memory, I have a headache,” as if the observer were separate from the body, thoughts, feelings, volitions, and perceptions. Such a view presupposes the “self-as-doer,” the “self-as-agent,” the “self-as-experiencer,” the “self-as-knower.” Exercise 8 challenges us to examine these partitions and open them up to space, just as we opened up in the Giant Body exercises the outlines that defined particular components of our body.

Practice of Exercise 8 also sensitizes us to how our mind perceives and then reacts to its own perceptions. Not only does the observer stake its claim as an autonomous agent, producer and owner of its mind, body, thoughts, feelings and actions, but it also identifies with them. There seems to be a contradiction. On the one hand the observer claims to be positioned in some aspatial and atemporal location--the seeming passive watcher. Yet usually we find ourselves completely identified with our experiences: They are mine, and I am them. The more we observe, the more we may be astonished to discover the extent to which we are enmeshed in self-created mental prisons, built by the recycling and consumption of habitual reactive patterns. In a constant flow, information received from our senses fuses with our prior memories, concepts, and past habitual reactions. Like our belief in a world independent of our perceptions, our commitment to a reified flow of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions amounts to a kind of modern idolatry.
Exercise 8 skillfully guides us to embrace the interplay of experience along with the partitions that normally constitute our feeling of being from that experience. It asks us to offer it all to Space. I like to think of Exercise 8 as an “inner Space massage,” which dissolves the seeming separation between mind-body-thought-feeling.

Practicing Exercise 8 can help heal the sense of fragmentation, dividedness and inner conflict we often experience between our body-mind-thoughts-feelings. We have grown used to viewing the mind as frozen and compartmentalized (Just think of the way that the Myers-Brigg Type Indicator, a popular psychological assessment instrument, relies on polarities such as “extroversion/introversion,” “thinking/feeling,” “intuition/sensation,” and “judgment-orientation/perception-orientation”). Opening up the bodymind complex not only results in integration, but frees up the energy frozen into “mental blocks,” habitual defensive postures, and inner conflicts.

Exercises 9 (Participation as Observer; Participation as Embodied Person) and 10 (Participation and Space) are more inclusive than Exercise 8, because they take into account the subtle position of the observer, co-emerging with the perception of objects. These exercises give guidance on how to completely open up our experience of the mind-body-thought interplay, with a special emphasis on letting go of our notions that the method being employed is a cause for transcendence. The result is “unqualified openness” that does not require an observer in order to be “known.” We could call this an “auto-cognizant space awareness,” a way of knowing “prior” to subject and object and mental commentary of the observer.

Exercises 9 and 10 help us to see the self as a habitual configuration of space-time-energy that has become frozen. As Tarthang Tulku notes, “the self exist in a frozen energy state,” (p.?) and “thus we are not flowing-floating-properly” (p.18). These
habitual configurations impede our natural freedom, blocking our creative capacities, while inhibiting our ability to respond fully to the challenges and changes we face.

In practicing these exercises, our habitual tendency to “know things” makes us “come out” of such a non-dual mode of awareness. We are asked to pay special attention to this “coming out tendency” (which may take the form of trying to report back to oneself, or grasping the non-graspable nature of such an unqualified openness). The “coming out” tendency reveals the habitual belief that the observer is a real, self-existent entity—and that knowledge can only arise through the position of the observer. Practice of these exercises reveals that the observer is a lived presupposition, a participatory fiction. By freezing the open dimension, it collapses space into a locatable and fixed position, which the observer then claims to “occupy.” This occupation (or preoccupation) lies at the root of a self-orientation, the founding story “I am.”. Biased, distorted, and delusional, it obstructs Great Knowledge. Just as there is no inherent existence to the Giant Body (or any of its constituent parts), there is no inherent existence of the observer and no basis for asserting such existence.

Knowing without being filtered, channeled down or biased by an observer may seem unfathomable. We are so deeply conditioned by our conventional dualistic view that it is hard for us to imagine any alternative to a knowing that is filtered through an observer. But consider a thought experiment. Entertain the possibility of awareness floating free in the emptiness of deep space, with no objects in sight. Lacking any solid points of self-reference or external reference, awareness would have no need to contract or fixate on some point in order to reflect on itself. Knowing would simply be free to know, resting naturally, abiding in the emptiness of free floating space, without any tendency to “come out.” If reference points did appear or emerge, they would be seen as
expressions or symbols of deep space, characterized by a kind of “zero gravity” (DTS, pp. __). Thoughts generated from the cognizing of these substance-less appearances would be “taken lightly” as symbols of Great Openness. The imaginary zero-gravity world would have no hold on Great Knowledge, and perception—never departing from Great Space, would be freed upon arising.

In contrast, our ordinary knowing could be thought of as arising within a single sphere, a beautiful crystal ball, Mistaking the reflections visible on the inner walls of this great sphere as an external world, made up of objects “in” space and time, we come to view ourselves as observers at the center of the ball, viewing an environment or external world “out there.” The only way for the observer to make sense of what is observed is to “come out” of what is observed, singling out forms and phenomena and referring them back to the position of the stationary observer. Both the observer and the objects it perceives are reified into self-existent, solid entities, occupying space rather than being space. It is as if the crystal ball repeatedly shattered and cracked apart into the fundamental duality of “I” versus “the world.” In this implosion of knowing, the gravity of identity prevails, sucking awareness into a black hole occupied by the observer. The “I” (one’s “own mind”) is felt to be the source of all knowledge and experience, while space fills up with finite objects.

Such crowding and proliferation lead to a kind of endarkenment that shuts out higher spaces. Cut off from the light of awareness, our bodymind complex chases after the reflections that arise in the field of this lower-level space. Since each reflection is insubstantial and transitory, no reflection can provide lasting fulfillment or satisfaction. Fixated on the knowledge and concerns generated within this field, we lack clarity, energy, higher purpose, and joy. We construe ourselves as the “field-assemblers” of the
“field communiqué” (DTS), not recognized how knowledge has degenerated, muddled and confused by the endless processing of our own secondary reflections. In the dark field of the shattered crystal, friction and disharmony prevail. Forms and perceptions appear solid, feel heavy, and are taken to be unquestionably real.

The TSK book uses a similar image: a confining chamber in which echoes (meanings) reverberate off the walls, and even constitute the walls (pp. 102-103):

In returning to the lower space images of a platform or vantage point for observation, and the image of a containing chamber, we can see that is precisely meanings that, in order to mean, require a relatively static position defined by similarly static surroundings (and container). Meanings deal in terms of ‘things meant,’ which must necessarily be marked out by unbreached boundaries, opaque partitions. Meanings depend on limits being set on our attention to the dynamism and process of partitioning. (p.102).

Focusing exclusively on substance and content, the observer comes out and declares its independent existence. We accept as a given that some independent agent is the producer and receiver of our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions—that the events in the external world are happening to an internal, isolated, but constant point of reference, the “me.” Our-lived view is that “I have a body,” “I have a mind and experiences,” “I am subject to constant change,” “I am born,” and “I will die.” The fundamental duality between subject and object correlates with a mental activity or thought-generating process that is intent on “pointing things out,” fixating on meanings derived from linguistic and conceptual structures. With all of our attention fixated on the rational, linguistic stream of consciousness, no other alternatives for knowing seem available.

But what if the observer in the crystal is only another reflection? What or who would “observe the observer”? Who would “own” knowledge? Or do these questions still reflect the need to force knowledge into a dualistic structure?
Consider the analogy of dreaming. The dream is structured into a mosaic of the dreamer, dream characters, and the dream setting or environment. Yet all of these components are a unity within our consciousness. There is no inherently, independently existent subject or object within the dream. Usually the dream is felt to be real until the moment we wake up, so that even here the observer is unobserved. Yet if we wake up within the dream (lucid dreaming), we have the chance to realize that even the observer (or dreamer) is insubstantial, not inherently real. Knowing this, we feel tremendous freedom. It is not that we suddenly disappear or go blank. Rather, we feel liberated from the drama of the dream. We can play as we wish.

In Exercises 9 and 10, the TSK text presents the nature of the observer as co-emergent with the focal setting on Space. When the observer “comes out,” it is like falling back in the dream of duality. But can we nourish our insight into the “duality dream” by viewing the bodymind complex (which includes the sense of a bystander-observer) as an illusory image, an image that appears to be solid, fixed, and separate from an external world? Rational analysis can help: if all I perceive is a projection of meanings, if no objects within my range of perception exist independently, “from their own side,” then this “I,” the seeming organizer of this field of experience, may also be a dependently originated construct, void of an inherent, independent existence. The apparent sense of being a “by-stander” to our experience can be recognized as a limited space, one that can be opened up.

Yet let us not get too inflated; Exercise 10, which explores these possibilities in some depth, still offers only a glimpse of Great Space, a “transitive view” (TSK, p. __). We can understand this qualification on several levels. First, insight into the illusory nature of the observer can also become a new mode of grasping—taking hold of the
absence of an observer! Rather than declaring victory, we must turn to investigate the voice that claims it cannot find the observer! Does the mind that is apparently opening up the observer have any inherent or independent existence of its own? Is there really some independent entity called “the mind” that is doing the exercise, or is this also the product of the focal-setting? (Exercises 11-13 will take on this challenge directly.)

Second, the insight that challenges the observer is still couched within a hierarchical framework (first level, second level, and third level space) that suggests that the “place” we start from seems temporally and spatially distant from the space and time of higher realization. To try to “get rid of the observer” or fight “the ego” from this perspective may end up affirming the realness of such designations rather than relaxing and seeing through them.

Third, experiences will quickly fade unless practice is sustained. Glimpses of higher spaces need to be “achieved” many times to counteract the coming-out tendency. Having an intellectual grasp of higher spaces, based on a few partial experiences, is a far cry from the knowledge that comes from having done the exercisesconcertedly over time. Talking about or intellectualizing TSK material is not the same as actualizing insights through embodied experience.

**The Openness of Space as a Challenge to the Self**

In many respects, Exercise 10 “Participation and Space” seems to be a pivotal point in the text. It also forms the foundation for Exercise 14, “A New Focus on Space,” which leads to a more experiential insight. But I have found that it is just at this point that habitual tendencies toward grasping raise their ugly head. Our cherished self-image—that
illusory observer that we have built our entire life around—does not surrender its position so easily. Deep insight into the insubstantial nature of the entire bodymind complex, along with the so-called external world, is not an easy pill for the self to swallow.

Exercise 10 calls into question the image of the self occupying a “change-free” zone that leaves it both continuous and independent. But rather than accepting that the observer can be understood as a distorted or biased version of Great Space, the self prefers to hold on to its existence, even if this means remain sick and deluded. Taking a defensive posture, the self attempts to freeze space and time. At a subtle level, insight into the absence of an observer can also become frozen, a subtle “coming out” that sets another cognitive obscuration in place. Adherence to such an insight into Space becomes yet another position for the self to proclaim, a clever dogma and an opportunity for indulging in “TSK Speak.”

Exercise 10 (and also Exercise 9) anticipate this response by challenging us to let go not only of our fixed ideas of self, but also our preconceived notions of the absence of the self/observer. Simply quieting the mind and watching the body-mind-thought interplay is not enough. When we are instructed to open everything up in the body-mind-thought interplay (including the observer) until it is all space, even our notions of “opening up,” and “being gone,” have to be opened up. This amounts to a letting go of all conceptions and views, a complete surrender of effort and habitual tendencies of needing to fix, improve, change or alter our immediate experience. In a very real sense, there is nothing for the self to do.

In the TSK vision, the self's stubbornness and defensiveness is still Space, Time and Knowledge. However, from the position of the confused, illusory observer, no easy reconciliation is possible. The prospect of letting go into the freedom and liberation of
higher spaces feels like a great loss, an existential terror, a complete dissolution into non-existence. At this point we may back off from the TSK exercises. We may find ourselves that we no longer have time to practice; or we may keep a safe distance by restricting our involvement to reading the text. We may confuse intellectualizing our understanding with actualizing it, or fall into doubt, or seek out a different method/teaching and start the whole process all over again. Or we simply give up.

That is why honesty and perseverance are necessary to actualize this great vision, and why practicing with other serious students can be such a great support. The TSK teaching is not just a compendium of philosophical views, but an experiential vision for liberating the capacity to be fully human. This may sound attractive, but in practice it can lead to challenges we are not prepared to face.

Exercise 10 seems relatively simple, amounting to a letting go of effort. Yet it is incredibly difficult for the self to do, because the self is itself an obscuration or distortion on Great Space. The exercise calls for shifting from a potent self-as-agent view—the felt sense that I am engaged in effortfully doing the practice—to a more open, allowing, and gentle unfolding of experience. The self’s existential anxiety is due to the mistaken notion that such openness will annihilate existence, that the self will disappear into nothingness. Caught in the duality between “is” and “is not,” the self is fearful that unless it remains the center of attention, it will not be able to manage and control its world. As Tarthang Tulku states, “Great Space is too much for the self to handle (TSK ___).” And so the self freezes experience, affirming its realness, permanence, and independence at the cost of enormous expenditures of space-time energy.

The lived view, or output of this focal-setting is that consciousness is located inside one’s head, “behind one’s eyeballs,” looking at discrete objects, independent
“things” that are separated by space. We interact with what appear to be solid things “out there” by moving from here to there. This mode of awareness typifies lower space and time, a designation used in TSK to signify a limitation on our knowledge and way of being. Awareness becomes “desire-directed,” driven to grasp fulfillment by acquiring “things” or experiences that seem remote, distant, or hard to get. As the “I am” is afflicted with an insatiable feeling of lack, the nature of mental experience is one of constant movement or unsettledness. As our awareness is “taken over” by continuous thought-streams of identification (manifested as “hope and fear stories”), we lose sight of Space and Time as resources for human being.

In this respect, the Time, Space Knowledge vision is really an active inquiry into and process of recognizing our true identity, the nature of our own being. Is the self with all of its anxieties, limitations, and fears our true identity, or can we look instead to Great Space, Great Time, and Great Knowledge? This is the central question, the heart of the matter that activates inquiry and embodies the vision.

Concerted practice of Exercises 9 and 10, along with “thinking things through,” offers the higher-knowledge insight that the demarcations separating subject and object are simply the way “reality” appears when seen through the lens of the observer or bystander. With this insight, we begin to “see” appearance as appearance (rather than as being absolutely real). Even “solid,” “concrete,” and “inherently existent” are more appearances. When we know on a higher level that we are really seeing “no things,” our need to fixate or grasp is released into the freedom of space.

Appearance in Great Space is not compartmentalized into such constrictive solid entities. Rather, Great Space is co-emergent with a knowing dimension (knowingness or Great Knowledge) that is beyond the realm of an isolated subject knowing a distant
object. This seeing is the result of a “thawing out” process, an unfreezing of the bodymind complex that serves as a fitting metaphor for this whole series of Space exercises. It is as if we learn how to melt the solid iceberg of our frozen body-mind complex until it merges with the deep and vast ocean of Great Space. Of course, the frozen ice and deep ocean have the same nature. We are shocked to see that there was never any solid or self-existent body or mind there in the first place.

**Shifting the Center of Gravity: From Self to Great Space**

The Space series of exercises in TSK could be condensed into one question: *What would it be like to full of Space rather than full of oneself?* Rather than feeling and thinking that experience was happening to an innate, isolated self, what if we were able to experience experience as simply “happening,” arising as Space, in Space, to Space? What would such a radical re-ordering of perceptual embodiment imply?

To put Space at the center is to be in the mandala of the body-mind complex. “We” arrive at the “centerless center,” where all forms, all perceptions, all sensory experiences are directly Great Space. Putting Space at the center silences mental commentary and narration. At the same time, it allows direct sensory perception and even thoughts unmediated or biased by an observer. Free of the gravity generated by an insecure self, we participate freely and joyously in the intimate dance of Space and Time.

Space-centered concerns are wider, more comprehensive and inclusive in scope than self-centered concerns: “One point is all points” (TSK, p. __). Instead of an isolated observer weighed down by the gravity of identity, a dynamic presence embodies the whole. Secure in the fullness of Space, our conduct is no longer compelled by self-centered concerns (Etymologically, “security” comes from the Latin for “carefree.”) Fear
lessens, and the heart opens, for in this centerless center every appearance is united. As
mind and heart are opened beyond the boundaries of “here and there,” “me and “mine,”
genuine and spontaneous responsiveness wells forth. Being “Space-Full” but “self-less,”
we emanate Great Love, spreading Great Knowledge in all that we think, say and do.

Ah-Ah-Sha-Sa-Ma-Ha