

A Call for a New Vision of Therapy

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SYNOPSIS

The time and place of our birth convey the cultural language that shapes pattern of thought and organizes perception into meaning and things. Perhaps by not questioning our ordinary understanding of things, we take for granted assumptions that create many of the problems experienced in our daily living. However, human knowledge can transcend the limiting structures that convey the ordinary sense of separate self with its problems and concerns. Therapy as knowledge can explore and thaw the frozen self of identity enabling more connective and dynamic ways of being. The Time, Space, Knowledge teaching conveyed by Tibetan Lama Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche serves as an enlivened ground and liberating vision of our self and the nature of all experience.

We are born a knowing capacity and are taught what and how to know. The time and place of our birth convey a cultural language that shapes patterns of thought and organizes perception into meaning and things.

Our very identity is learned. We are told by the current conventional narrative that self is an entity; separate

from all it knows. We are taught through the structures of speech to label appearances and identify things. We learn our own name and become the subject of our own story; the 'I' that is the vantage point of the story and the 'me' to whom all events occur. We are the inheritance of a lived dilemma; if we are a small, single isolated point in the vastness, how can we be seen and recognized, while at the same time remain safe and secure?

Protective and expressive patterns emerge as our personality, all designed to defend and gratify the learned concept of self at the center. As styles of perceiving and relating are developed and practiced, these patterns become the identified self, with its characteristic way of knowing and acting. Self emerges as an interpretative tendency with conditioned ways of perceiving. Meaning and significance are attributed and tend to refer to the self that proclaims them.

We seek to find secure footing in the shifting landscape of our lives. We attempt to establish a strong, stable self that can deal with what we anticipate to be next in our lives. However, time has shown that the future we anticipate is frequently not the future that arrives, and that the stance we prepare leaves us off balance.

Perhaps we are making some basic assumptions that create many of the problems we experience in our daily living. Can we continue to know in a manner that maintains and perpetuates the separate self and still enjoy the full richness and intimacy of being? We cannot be invested in a stand-apart position and receive the dividends of full participation and the ease of belonging.

We cannot solve problems if we keep in place all the assumptions that created the problem. A new vision of our reality and circumstance is called for; one in which the self is appreciated as a way of knowing and not a fixed, solid entity, separate from the world of things. In order to surrender the central status of the self, Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche offers a larger vision in his initial book entitled *Time, Space, and Knowledge: A New Vision of Reality*. In this offering and the subsequent five books, he gestures to the ever presence of Time, Space and Knowledge (TSK) as both the contextual ground of all appearance and the intrinsic ingredient of all experiences.

In conventional knowledge, self is the designated knower of the world of objects and things; all appearing as foreground while the emptiness of space and invisible force of time are background. In this new TSK vision all appearances are ways of knowing the allowing nature of space and dynamic presence of time; all appearance are forms of Time Space and Knowledge.

Whatever appears requires a space in which to appear and a time for its occurrence. Time and space are appreciated not only as the allowing ground but also intrinsic ingredient; the context and the content of all appearance.

Tarhang Tulku Rinpoche impeccably deconstructs the assumptions of conventional knowledge in his six volumes and his challenges to ordinary appearances cannot be adequately represented here. However, we can draw from the vision and adapt some of its penetrating insights to our work as psychotherapists.

People come to therapy with a history that they believe defines them and a troubling circumstance about which they want to deal. They have people in their history and current lives that they perceive to be a 'certain way' and they hold everything they believe to be true. Thus they present with a self that is pre-recorded, and a frozen view of significant people in their lives to whom they react in patterned and conditioned ways.

Given this fixed self and set of circumstances, change seems difficult. However, we therapists know about all perception being interpretative; influenced by the where and when of the position assumed. The client's story as presented is usually ego centric and self-referencing; describing 'how this is affecting me' and 'what I think of that'. In the initial sessions the voice we hear is that of the story's protagonist. All that is spoken is usually intense and emotion filled. As time unfolds the client speaks the perspective of the narrator; reporting the distant and recent past with less attachment to the protagonist's point of view. As therapists it can be helpful to point out that experience is a function of the point of view and attitude assumed. It is useful to sensitize people to the dynamic interaction of what is seen and how it is viewed.

Recognizing a relationship between emotional space and knowledge, we can note that constricted states of hurt, fear and anger evidence a way of knowing characteristic of a reactive self. There is a tendency to maintain and perpetuate any experience that belongs to a self. If, however, experience were appreciated as merely a position, or way of knowing, rather than the possession of a self, these constricted states can be relaxed quickly and more open and responsive states of empathy, compassion and love can emerge. The aperture setting of the 'I' that sees reveals what is known.

The TSK vision encourages an inquiry into time's linearity and direction. A reframing of time can examine the assumption that time flows from the past, depositing its consequences in the present. Such a conventional

view forecloses awareness of an ever-arriving future. A shift in our knowing can appreciate the arrival of an indeterminate future gifting the present. In this manner the past recedes as memory, instead of driving determinant.

Reversing the perceived direction of time's flow opens to allow the possibility of an emergent self that is arriving along with the future. As time presents an emergent self, knowing can recognize that we are never established once and for all, and we are freed to enjoy the aliveness of becoming.

With a new focus, time can be apprehended as benefactor. Time births being, just as breath births life. We can consider that time runs through us much like electricity flows through a wire. The knowing that we are conducts the flow of time, and through our conduct, time does take direction from knowledge. Are we inclined to conduct new ways of knowing?

As therapists, rather than reinforcing a strong sense of self, we can help thaw frozen assumptions about who we are and the way the world is. We can recognize and indicate that both self and the world it knows are the consequence of a particular setting, which determines how and what we know. We can alert ourselves and those with whom we work to recognize when particularly narrow views are in force. The discomfort we feel in fear, resentment, resistance and withdrawal can signal that contracted ways of knowing and interpretative tendency are at play.

Such interpretative tendencies are conveyed by thoughts, and we recognize the power of these by their 'stickiness' and their gravitational pull. We know that the content of the thinking mind and the experience of the emotional body each reflect the other. In an effort to clarify, therapists have ascribed valence to thoughts, calling some of them positive and some of them negative. Efforts have been made to train more positive content, but it has proved difficult to think our-selves into happiness and harmony, because the very structure of thought sets limits on knowing.

The TSK vision does not address thoughts as things. Rather, thoughts are revealed to be without substance. Without substance thoughts lose their gravity, stickiness and compelling property. For many, it is a relief to know the non-substance of thoughts and thereby deactivate their determining presence. As thoughts are appreciated in a new light, they can be seen as forms of knowledge, containing and expressing an active knowing. Where ever appearance arises, so too is the presence of an enlivened knowing.

With Time, Space and Knowledge as our true nature, we can feel less solid, and the world less fixed. We can feel the presence of time in all movement and change. We can feel dynamically alive and open – a consolidating tendency that never establishes a fixed identity which needs to be defended or protected.

We can learn to live with less resistance, less friction and more ease. We do not need to perpetuate the self of the past into the future. Our old and practiced ways of being may not most usefully serve the arriving future. There are more open, flexible ways of knowing that are enlivening, allowing and responsive. Can we relax our identity sufficiently to permit new ways of knowing and new ways of being?

A more open, receptive and responsive way of knowing naturally emerges as we challenge the cultural story of an isolated self. What would it be like if we had nothing to protect, maintain and perpetuate? Would we be less defensive and reactive around those we so imperfectly love? How might we respond to their concerns if our self were deactivated and no longer a central interpretative point? What might happen to perception if it were merely less self-referencing? Might more connective, empathic and compassionate ways of knowing emerge?

Relaxing our identification with the conditioned self of history, we could function with increased freedom. This does not mean that the past would be forgotten, but merely that it would no longer be used as an exclusive lens defining an identity unable to change.

As the anxious singling-out tendency of the self is relaxed, we can feel more dynamically alive and open; enjoying a sense of belonging to a greater whole. Without an established self, nothing can be owned or possessed. We could relax the tendency to call a view point 'myself' and call thoughts and feelings as 'my own'. This would ease the need to defend perceptions and opinion as though we were defending our self. Instead, we could consider all perception as positions within a knowing field rather than the possession of a self; expanding the field of perception and allowing more room, more options and greater degrees of freedom.

How might we embody a new way of knowing? We could recognize the gift of imagination, and acknowledge it as a method of inquiry. As an illustration, we might imagine how it would feel if space were alive, a living presence that allows, surrounds, connects and permeates all that takes form.

As we contemplate this, we can draw a breath and

know of its animating presence permeating all organs, tissues and cells. As we exhale, we can imagine what it might feel like if we could breathe out of all our pores, connecting and merging with space that allows, supports and makes possible our being.

To 'be' another way, we must 'know' another way. If we were to appreciate the presence of time and space as a dynamic presence that supports, forms and runs through us and all we know, we might experience the joy of being fully alive. Given together with the whole, we can enjoy participating in an intimacy that is. **5**



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