

## Theme 5: Exploring Spaciousness

Spaciousness is an explicit theme in certain Tibetan practices. But it's also talked about elsewhere. Consider, for example, the so-called Formless Absorptions from ancient India or the following Zen story from China: Emperor Wu asked the patriarch "What is the First Principle of Holiness?" The patriarch replied: "wide open and nothing holy!"

As a term, Spaciousness is both good and bad. It's good because it sounds cool and appealing. It's bad because it also sounds esoteric and unattainable. Let's take it in small steps.

We'll start with the notion that most sensory experiences are spatial. To say that a sensory experience is spatial means that it has location, height, width, and (usually) depth. Its location is where it's positioned. Its height is how far it extends up and down. Its width is how far it extends right and left. Its depth is how far it extends front and back. Put another way, sensory experiences have location, approximate size, and general shape. Occasionally the size and shape of a sensory event is well defined. More often, those spatial variables are somewhat vague, ill defined, and may fluctuate with time. Despite all that, it is usually possible to ascribe a general sense of size, shape, and location to the things that we see, hear, and feel. That general sense of size, shape, and location is the "spatiality" of that sensory event.

So what? Why is that useful to know?

Appreciating the *spatiality* of a sensory event is the first step towards appreciating its *spaciousness*. The next step involves the concept of "Zooming Out." To zoom out means to intentionally spread your attention in six directions in order to cover the whole space of the sensory event you're noting. If the experience you're noting is the physical sight of a person, to zoom out would mean trying to cover the whole sight of that person with awareness—two arms, two legs, head, and torso, all at once. If the experience that you're noting is the visual memory of that person, to zoom out would be to do the same with the mental image of that person.

Now let's take it to the next level (literally). To zoom out means to spread your attention to the perceived boundary of a sensory event. Consider what it might mean to spread your attention beyond the boundary of a sensory event. That would mean that you spread your awareness out into the pure space surrounding a sensory event, if possible in all six directions at once.

Sometimes when you do that, the event's perceived boundary might get larger, i.e., the event might follow you out into space. No problem! Just keep zooming beyond its boundaries until you reach pure space, however far you may have to go.

You will probably find that it's easier to "zoom beyond" with some types of experience and harder to do that with others. So if you find some category of experience for which that's easy and natural, explore that.

This may initially involve a bit of guessing and groping. That's okay. It's like a golf swing or tennis serve. You just keep trying until you get the knack of it. Try it for a while. If, eventually, you can't relate to it, no problem. See-Hear-Feel offers plenty of other fun, interesting, and productive options. In other words, spaciousness is like flow. It's something you explore...

- Only if it's available  
and
- Only if it's of interest.

So is that it for spaciousness? Not quite.

Contacting the space around sensory events is only half of Focus on Spaciousness—the expansive half. The other half is contractive—finding the thinness within sensory events. This also may initially involve a bit of guessing and groping.

Here's a tip that might be useful. One way to learn about thinness is to first explore it in restful states. Recall that restful states (physical silence, mental quiet, physical relaxation, grayscale blank, and such) are sometimes spoken of as "attenuated" forms of See, Hear, Feel states. Attenuated comes from the Latin for thinned out or light. See if you can "taste" the thinness/lightness in See Rest, Hear Rest, or Feel Rest. At some point, you may be able to notice a similar thinness within ordinary experiences—body sensations, mental images, mental talk, and even physical sights and sounds.

So spaciousness has two sides...

- Expansive spaciousness: a sense of open space or even vast space surrounding an experience;
- Contractive spaciousness: a sense of thinness, lightness pervading an experience.

For any given experience, exactly one of the following four possibilities is true.

- Only expansive spaciousness is available.
- Only contractive spaciousness is available.
- Both are available.
- Neither is available.

In the first three cases, we'll say that that experience is spacious. In the later instance, we'll say that the experience is dense. Dense is not pejorative, neither should it be taken to imply solidity or

pressure. It's a technical term, an adjective describing a sensory event for which spaciousness is not detectable. In that way, it parallels the word "stable." As a technical term within Basic Mindfulness, stable describes a sensory experience for which flow is not detectable.

There can be a good deal of overlap between the themes of sensory rest and sensory flow on one hand and the theme of spaciousness on the other. This overlap is not a problem. You're not being asked to drive yourself crazy trying to distinguish between convergent themes. Just accept the fact that, in some cases, sensory rest, fine-grained flow, and spaciousness represent slightly different perspectives on the same phenomenon.

One final terminology point. The space around a sensory event represents a facet of Expansion. The thinness within a sensory experience represents a facet of Contraction. Expansion and Contraction are broad principles which encompass many facets.

In terms of focus options, there are four natural ways to explore the themes of spaciousness.

- Work with individual elements:
  - See Space – Note the spaciousness around and/or within visual experiences.
  - Hear Space – Note the spaciousness around and/or within auditory experiences.
  - Feel Space – Note the spaciousness around and/or within somatic experiences.
- Work with the whole system:
  - Focus on Space – Note the spaciousness around and/or within visual, auditory, or somatic experience.

(Note: Within this context, "Space" is just a one syllable abbreviation for Spaciousness.)

### **Emphasis and Label Options**

#### *Exclusive Emphasis*

The labels are:

- "See" for visual spaciousness
- "Hear" for auditory spaciousness
- "Feel" for body spaciousness

#### *Inclusive Emphasis*

The labels are:

- "See" for visual spaciousness

- “Hear” for auditory spaciousness
- “Feel” for body spaciousness
- “See-Hear” for visual + auditory spaciousness
- “See-Feel” for visual + body spaciousness
- “Hear-Feel” for auditory + body spaciousness
- “All” for visual + auditory + body spaciousness

### **Contact Stance**

Contact Stance refers to ways in which you take an active role vs. a passive role when contacting experiences in your focus range.

If spaciousness seems to grab you, take a passive stance. Let yourself be “spaced.” Otherwise take an active stance: intentionally zoom beyond what you see, hear, or feel to find the space around it, and/or look for the thinness within it. But don’t make yourself crazy if spaciousness is not readily available. If it’s not available right now, explore some other option.