

LESSON 4 • JANUARY 4

“These thoughts do not mean anything. They are like the things I see in this room [on this street, from this window, in this place].”

Practice instructions

Purpose: To train you to lump all your normal thoughts, both “good” and “bad,” as well as all the things you see outside you, into one category: they are meaningless, and they are outside you (outside your real nature). This will open your mind to the fact that there is a whole other realm than that which you are aware of, which is fundamentally different, which is truly meaningful, and which lies deep within.

Exercise: Three or four times (no more), for one minute or so.

- For roughly one minute, watch your thoughts. Include both “good” and “bad” ones.
- Then apply the idea specifically to each thought you noticed, saying, “*This thought about [name of central figure or event] does not mean anything. It is like the things I see in this room [on this street, and so on].*” You may also include unhappy thoughts you were aware of before the practice period.

Response to temptation: Optional.

In addition to (not instead of) the formal exercises, feel free throughout the day to use the idea as a way of dispelling specific unhappy thoughts. This is the first instance of a practice that will become a major focus of the Workbook.

Commentary

The introduction to the Workbook states, “The purpose of the workbook is to train your mind in a systematic way to a different perception of everyone and everything in the world” (W-pl.In.4:1). This lesson begins to teach us to work directly with our thoughts, and the first lesson is: They don’t mean anything.

There is an assumption in this lesson that we are very inexperienced (5:4) and therefore completely, or nearly completely, out of touch with what the lesson calls our “real thoughts” (2:3). The thoughts it is referring to as meaningless are the thoughts of the ego. It is the contention of the Course that our minds are nearly completely ego-directed (see T-4.VI.1:4). The tone of this lesson is based on that assumption; therefore, whatever thought you focus on, you can regard it as meaningless.

Our real thoughts are the thoughts of the Christ within us; they are not meaningless. What we call thinking, however, is not really thinking at all (this is made clear in Lesson 8). We have identified with our egos. The ego is like a tiny corner of our minds that we have cordoned off from the rest; we have convinced ourselves that it is the whole thing. The thoughts that swirl around in this little pocket of mind are totally unrepresentative of our true Self, and therefore, whether “good” or “bad,” they are meaningless. When we have trained ourselves to look at these thoughts objectively we will realize how true this is (1:6–7).

The ego thoughts cover up our real thoughts. The “good” ones are at best shadows of the real, and shadows make it difficult to see. The “bad” ones are outright blocks to sight. “You do not want either” (2:6). Realizing that we don’t want the “bad” ones is fairly easy; realizing we don’t want the “good” ones is much more disconcerting and difficult.

The lesson calls itself “a major exercise” (3:1) and promises to repeat the exercise later. It says that the exercise is fundamental to three long-range goals, and serves to begin implementing these goals:

- to separate the meaningless from the meaningful

- to see the meaningless as outside you, and the meaningful within
- to train our minds to recognize what is the same and what is different

First, it helps us learn to separate meaningless thoughts from meaningful ones, our ego thoughts from our real thoughts. Note that there is a kind of judgment going on here, and even separation, although these are two terms usually given negative connotations. This kind of looking at our thoughts is one form of what the Text calls “the right use of judgment” (T-4.IV.8:6).

Second, we are learning to see the meaningless as outside us. We may ask how, if it is our thoughts that are meaningless, we can see them as outside us; aren't thoughts within us? Here, I believe, the Workbook means our true Self when it speaks of “you.” Our meaningless ego thoughts are not representative of our true Self; they are not really part of it, but outside it.

Third, we are learning to recognize what is the same and what is different. We think “good” thoughts are different from “bad” thoughts, but this lesson is training us to see that they are really the same, both different forms of madness.

In suggesting that we might use the idea for today “for a particular thought that you recognize as harmful” (5:1), the Workbook is introducing a new form of practice, one that will become part of its regular repertoire. Besides scheduled morning and evening practice, we can use the idea as a response to random “temptation” in the form of a harmful thought. Response to temptation will be brought in as a practice exercise many more times as we go on. In asking us to do the exercise three or four times, the lesson also introduces midday practice sessions in addition to the morning and evening ones.

