

LESSON 8 • JANUARY 8

“My mind is preoccupied with past thoughts.”

Practice instructions

Purpose: To teach you that your mind spends all of its time empty, because it is always contemplating what is not there (the past). While it thinks about the empty, it itself is empty. Recognizing this emptiness makes way for something new to come in: real thoughts, which will produce real vision.

Exercise: Four or five times (three or four if you find the practice irritating), for one minute or so.

- Close your eyes and search your mind for a minute or so without investment, noting the thoughts you find and naming them by the central figure or theme of each one. Say, “*I seem to be thinking about (name of person), about (name of an object), about (name of an emotion)...*”
- Conclude with, “*But my mind is preoccupied with past thoughts.*”

Remarks: If you find the exercise arousing feelings in you—for instance, irritation—you may want to apply the idea to those feelings just as you would to anything else. This is a helpful tip for many of the lessons.

Commentary

“This idea is, of course, the reason why you see only the past” (1:1). This clearly assumes that what we see simply reflects the thoughts occupying our minds. If that is so, then because our minds are preoccupied with past thoughts, we perceive pictures from the past in the outside world. “No one really sees anything. He sees only his thoughts projected outward” (1:2). This idea is so central to the Course, yet here it is simply slipped into this discussion of the past and time. We don’t really see anything! Everything we see is “the outside picture of an inward condition,” as the Text puts it (see T-21.In.1:1–5).

I’ve always loved the first line of the second paragraph: “The one wholly true thought one can hold about the past is that it is not here.” Ponder that a moment. You may have some extremely clear memories of the past, especially the very recent past. Yet if several people who experienced the same thing firmly disagreed with you, you would probably begin to doubt your memory—because you cannot really be completely certain it is reliable. You know very well from experience that your memory can deceive you. We think, “I could have sworn I left that key on the table!” Or we say, “Didn’t I tell you about that? I thought I did.” We say that sort of thing all the time without realizing how shaky our memory really is. But there is one absolutely trustworthy thought you can have about the past: “The past is not here. This is the present.” Now, if the past isn’t here, how can it have present effects? “To think about it at all is therefore to think about illusions” (2:2). You are thinking about something that no longer exists, which by definition is an illusion.

Okay, so if my mind is preoccupied with past thoughts, and all thoughts about the past are thoughts about illusions, and all that I see is a projection of my thoughts—where does that leave what I am “seeing”? Nowhere. We are seeing reflections of memories of an illusion. When we are picturing the past or anticipating the future, the Course says our mind is actually *blank*, because it is thinking about nothing (2:4).

This lesson is trying to get us to recognize when our mind is not really thinking at all, but is full of what it calls “thoughtless ideas.” This is why “these thoughts do not mean anything” (Lesson 4). To open ourselves to “vision” we have to stop blocking the truth with these

meaningless mental images of something that isn't here. The first step towards vision is becoming aware of the things that are *not* vision, which are the thoughts that normally fill our minds.

I find this kind of exercise helps develop a kind of mental detachment. You step back, as it were, from your thoughts and observe them. Don't make the mistake I made at first: Trying to force these thoughts out of the mind and make it blank. We don't need to do that because it is blank already! Just observe your thoughts and apply the lesson, saying, "My mind is preoccupied with past thoughts." Be willing to let go of your investment in the thoughts, or in having them be real thoughts, or deep ones, or important ones. Unclasp your fingers from them, let them go, be willing to see that they are without real meaning if they are based on the past, and thus based on something that is not here.

The lesson is a gentle wedge, prying loose our attachment to what we think of as our thoughts.