

Look: You are Not Your Mind

“You are not your mind,” I tell my clients. “You aren’t.”

This statement is usually followed by a mixed look of skepticism and pity: “She’s a psychologist, and she doesn’t understand that everybody is their minds! She seems misinformed. Everybody knows that our minds are who we are.” I secretly love this look, because while people think I’m nuts for making this statement, I’m really, really sure about this.

So I continue: “The mind causes painful, unnecessary, and meaningless suffering. The mind is very tricky and should be regarded with a good deal of healthy suspicion. It often takes us off our path. Ok, if it’s working on a concrete problem – planning, organizing, learning – that’s fine. But mostly it isn’t doing that – it’s trying to control our internal experiences, which it cannot do. Much of the time it gives us false messages. It creates distortions, makes us nervous wrecks, and takes us out of the present moment. It shouldn’t always be trusted.”

Here comes the next look: a little more interested, though struggling to be patient. So I keep going: “I think we all secretly hate being slaves to our minds. The mind is sometimes like a bully that taunts us or drags us around like a ragdoll.” Suddenly, a look of recognition emerges, because many people are all too familiar with the feeling of being enslaved by their minds.

I then see the wheels turning as their minds start thinking: “Maybe I can ditch this thing, the mind. Maybe I can beat it into submission so it will finally leave me alone for good. Is there a way to do that? How can I make it stop? How can I make it totally quiet all of the time? How can I think myself out of it when I want to? How can I put myself in the desired state I want to be in? How can I control the thought? How can I suppress the thought?” And so on.

Here comes *my* look – and it’s a look of compassion, because I have to explain that really, you can’t out-think the mind. I answer, “If you use control, you’re using the mind to battle with the mind. What will happen is that you end up feeling like you are caught in a great big net. You’ll struggle and you’ll fight, and then you’ll lose. You can’t out-think your mind, because it’s still the mind.”

I then see a look of disappointment, and maybe even despair. But this look can be encouraging, because it is often an indication that there might be a willingness to try something new. I then explain, “It doesn’t work the way you think. You don’t get to have any control over the mind. The mind keeps producing stuff, like a running commentary. There is going to be constant noise. But there is a better way to approach the mind, even though I’m reluctant to say that this is the way to ‘control’ it. Here’s what I’m recommending:

“Become really, really good at watching your mind. The part that’s looking is You. Feel yourself looking. That’s the only way to get a break from your mind. In that moment, you will know that you are not your mind, because, quite frankly, something else is looking. The You that is not your mind is the part that is observing. Rather than being yanked around by your thoughts, you will begin feel more space. Notice that there is a gap in there, a small distance between You and your thoughts. You will soon be grateful for this.”

I have to add here that the meditation gurus sometimes don’t say enough about *attitude*. Attitude is key. So I would like to emphasize, “In order to do this well, you need to cultivate a certain approach to observing. You only have a few options, but you can choose which one to be in: You can be curious, skeptical (but not rejecting), attentive, watchful, discerning (but not judgmental), incredibly interested, engaged, willing, neutral, detached, or compassionate. But not much else. No labels of good or bad. No judging. No analyzing. No evaluating. No ranking, rating, or making things better or worse. If you’re not quite sure what gear to be in, shift into neutral. Just *observe*.”

Now I start to see the most genuine look, and it’s the look I was hoping for. “I want you to look at your mind sincerely, without an agenda. Just look at what is happening in the present moment. Be with what you see. And know that your thoughts can be accurate, they can be distorted, and they can be everything in-between. But all the while, know that You are here, and You are real.

Feeling Your Authentic Presence:

I would like to make introductions at this point, to help you make contact with the real You, the You that is not your mind.

- ◆ Repeat your name silently, inside your head. Imagine filling up the room with your whole presence, as if you are entitled to take up the entire space you are in.
- ◆ Know that you have a past, but you are not your past. You have a body, but you are not your body. You have symptoms, but you are not your symptoms. You have thoughts, but you are not your thoughts. You have a mind, but you are not your mind.
- ◆ You are the presence that interacts with the world as it rushes towards you from the other direction.
- ◆ You are the inner adult that was in the child when you were younger; and as a generous exchange, you are also the child who resides within your adult. Both parts are You – constant, ever-present, and aware.
- ◆ Find yourself in the present moment. You are the one that has been moving through time, traveling inside the time capsule of your life, looking out from behind your face and perceiving, watching, noticing, and choosing. You were in the Now when you got here. And then you moved along with time. It was Now. And Now. And Now. And here You are, in the Now again. You are traveling in the Now. Now is fluid; it moves. And you're moving with it, in every moment.
- ◆ You are the one that feels *moved* in special moments. You are there when you find yourself absorbed in the middle of a project you are connected to. When things “call to you.” Or when things “speak to you.” You are present when you are touched, inspired, or drawn to things like music, art, food, nature, surroundings, or certain people. (And when you are bored, when you have adopted someone else’s truth, when you are trying to control, or when you are cut off from your body or your feelings, you will not recognize yourself).
- ◆ You are the one who plays. If you need me to say more about this, you’re not playing!

Observe your reaction to all of this. (This is a good look.)

What Does All This Have to Do With Anxiety?

The mind causes suffering by doing two things: 1) it takes us into the future or the past, and 2) it judges things (even our own internal states), as being either good or bad. In contrast, by noticing instead of judging, and by staying present in the moment, you will be less anxious. Let go of your obsession with the future. Anxiety lives in the future, but You exist in the Now. Come back to the present moment, again and again. From this place, you can let go of the mind's superstitious worry. When I say that we shouldn't always trust the mind, it's because the mind is giving you an illusion of false protection. The mind is tricking you into believing that worry will ward off the dreaded event. But the dreaded event doesn't exist in the Now, and probably not even in the future. And worrying never protected anybody. Face it – nothing that we are anxious about ever ends up happening just as we imagined it. Yes, bad things happen, but not in the same way that we think they will. “So,” you ask, “what if something bad were to happen right now? Or sometime soon? Or later down the road? What then?”

You Will Be There:

“You will be there, to help yourself at every given moment. You are here Now, and You will be there, when the moment occurs – *if* it ever does. This is the most reassuring news you can imagine. You are the constant awareness that knows what to do. You are moving through time. You will have all the new information *in that moment*, to help you decide how to respond. The future may be unknown, but the constant is always You. You can be trusted.” And here I add: “I trust You. If there was an emergency right now, with the two of us in the room, I will trust the two of us to know just how to respond. Am I right to trust you?” And I always hear, “Yes, I can be trusted.”

This is a beautiful look. It's soft, serious, and quiet. It's much lighter, and very relieved. A few minutes ago, you felt scared and insecure, and yet I am saying to you here that You are the person I trust the most. Why am I trusting you? Because You are here, in this moment, and you recognize Yourself. That makes You very trustworthy.

So, please, just have a look. Just observe. Just look.