

# Joseph Goldstein – Insight Hour – Ep. 48 – The Sixth Sense of Thought

## **Chapter 1: Introduction – Seeing vs. Thinking**

Welcome to the Joseph Goldstein Insight Hour. This podcast is an expression of our shared interest in self-discovery. Join Joseph as he shares his deep knowledge of the path of mindfulness.

If you are interested in supporting this podcast, please go to [beherenownetwork.com slash joseph](http://beherenownetwork.com/slash/joseph). This morning I mentioned how the visual field is probably the predominant sense field in which we live and often are not mindful of the fact that we're seeing. But really there's a sense field that's even more predominant probably than seeing and which I want to talk about this afternoon because it plays such an amazingly critical role in our lives and our relationships.

And that is the whole realm of thought. Now in the Buddhist scheme of things, the mind is considered the sixth sense. So it's really just like another sense field, but instead of an external sense object like sounds or sights or smells, the object of this sense sphere is thought.

## **Chapter 2: The Experience of Being Lost in Thought**

Thought is the object of mind. There is so much to say about thought because for the most part they run our lives. One of the most extraordinary things to first learn about thought, and there are many, many things to explore, but one is to realize how much of the time we're lost in thought.

Probably if you go up to somebody on the street who's never meditated and you say, are you lost in your thoughts? Oh no, not too much. But anybody who's ever meditated knows that probably a good part of the time we're lost in thought and carried away. We hop on these trains of association.

We don't even know that we've hopped on the train. We don't know where the train is going. And then sometime later, and it could be short time, it could be a minute or two, it could be five minutes, it could be half an hour.

Sometimes we mull things over for days. We're just lost in these trains of thought, not knowing that we're thinking. We are lost in that mind world.

It's almost as if, like when we go to the movies and we get totally absorbed in the story. And of course the point of going to the movies is to do just that. We do want to get lost.

## **Chapter 3: The Movie of the Mind**

And in that time we forget that we're just watching a movie. Nothing is really happening. Nobody's getting chased and nobody's falling in love and nobody's getting killed.

It's just pixels of light on the screen. But it's so realistic that we get caught up in the story with all the attendant emotions. And you know that feeling when you come out of a movie theater and it's almost like a little reality shift.

Oh yeah, that was just a movie. Well this is happening to us throughout our day countless times. We are getting caught up and lost in the movies of our minds with all the attendant and sometimes very strong emotions involved in it, forgetting that it is just a thought.

#### **Chapter 4: Becoming Mindful of Thought**

Munindraji, my first teacher, he had a really wonderful line. He said, the thought of your mother is not your mother. It's a thought.

But we forget that. We are having these thoughts and we take it to be the thing itself or the person itself rather than simply a thought in the mind. And so we're living, to a very large extent, we're living in these mind-created worlds that are not actually happening other than happening as a thought.

#### **Chapter 5: The Power of Wakefulness**

That's really what's happening. And I know you've all had this experience countless times. But it's particularly striking to me, for example, when I'm just outside going for a walk.

And it may be a beautiful day and beautiful surroundings. Going for a walk and then the mind will get caught up in some train of thought, train of association. And it may be three steps, five steps, ten steps, depending.

Where I will not be in the experience of where I am at all. I will be in that mind-created world. And then something will snap in the mind.

Oh, yeah, I'm just here. And the contrast between those two experiences is so dramatic. It's so clear that the mind had been lost to the reality of what was actually there and lost in the thought.

#### **Chapter 6: Awareness, Not Suppression**

So it's incredibly important, not only for meditation, but for our lives that we begin to practice becoming aware that we're thinking. So what's really important here is understanding that the idea is not necessarily to stop thinking. There may come times when the concentration deepens and we may go through periods of time where thoughts are a lot less or even the mind is free of thought for a while.

But that's not really the idea that can happen. The idea in practice, especially in insight of Vipassana practice, is that when a thought arises, we become aware as close to the beginning that we're thinking. So thought becomes simply another object of meditation like a sound.

#### **Chapter 7: Embracing the Moment of Awakening**

We don't try to stop sounds happening. A sound comes and we're just aware of hearing, and it goes, and there's no problem. If we can be aware of thought in just that same way, a thought arises, we're aware that we're thinking, thinking, thinking, disappears, it's no problem, no matter what the thought is.

So a few things to really pay attention to as we do the sitting with an emphasis on being aware of thoughts. One thing that I found particularly helpful, so we'll be sitting and being in the body, feeling the body, feeling the body breathing, sound, sensations, everything we did this morning. And then thoughts will arise and often carry us away for some longer or shorter period of time.

### **Chapter 8: Investigating Thought Itself**

The tendency is, as soon as we become aware that we're thinking, to jump back to the body or the breath or, oh, I shouldn't be thinking, coming back. I think it's much more helpful to actually take a moment in that very moment of waking up from being lost in the thought. That moment is very revealing.

That's an important moment because we've just gone, you could say, from being asleep to being awake or from delusion to wisdom. We've been lost, and then we're not lost. So that very moment of transition is showing us experientially and immediately what the awake, aware mind is like.

### **Chapter 9: The Nature of a Thought**

Because we've just gone from being unaware to aware. So if we highlight that moment, if we take a moment to, you could say, maybe say reflect on it or just acknowledge it. Oh, this is wakefulness.

This is what wakefulness means. And it becomes so clear in contrast to the moment before when we weren't, when we were lost. So in the many, many times that you'll be lost and then awakened, and the good news here is, which people often miss, for as many times as you get lost in thought, that many times do you awaken.

### **Chapter 10: Freedom through Mindfulness**

But mostly people focus on the having been lost and then a judgment, oh, I'm lost again. I can't meditate. This is whatever.

Instead of, oh, I'm awake again. This is awakening. So I'm closer to freedom.

Reframe or give emphasis to that moment of waking up, and that will happen as many times as you've been lost. So that gives an uplift to the meditation rather than a self-judgmental, critical attitude for having been lost. So highlighting that moment.

### **Chapter 11: Thoughts as Conditioned Phenomena**

Don't jump over it. Really take a moment to see what that's like to contrast the difference so you're really getting it. Okay, this is wakefulness.

That was delusion. So it becomes very real for us what these terms mean. The second thing which I found extremely fascinating with regard to thought is when there is a thought train going on and there's enough mindfulness to know that it's happening, like we're not totally lost in it, but for some reason there's a strong energy for it.

You've probably had that experience sometimes when the thoughts are going, you kind of know you're thinking, but you're still on the train. A question that I have found extremely profound and beneficial is to

ask the question, what is a thought? Not what is the thought saying, but what is a thought as a phenomenon? Because it is extremely mysterious. These thoughts are arising.

### **Chapter 12: The Transparency of Thoughts**

We have thousands of them, maybe tens of thousands a day. So it's a common experience for almost everybody, and yet almost nobody really asks the question, well, what is a thought? What is it as a phenomenon? And when we ask the question as a thought train is happening, it's fascinating because when we really look, well, what is a thought? We see that it's almost nothing. It's just like a little energy blip in the mind.

It's so insubstantial. There's not much there. And yet, when we are unaware of that we're thinking, these thoughts have so much power.

### **Chapter 13: Making Choices, Cultivating Wisdom**

They are like these little dictators in the mind. They are. I mean, the thoughts go here, go there, do this, do that, get married, get divorced.

They're running our lives. Thoughts are running our lives, and often in a very uncritical way. The thoughts are conditioned by the various circumstances of our lives.

We have the kinds of thoughts we do because of certain kinds of conditioning. If we're not aware that we're thinking, all that's happening is we're playing out the patterns of our conditioning. There's very little space for choice or freedom there.

### **Chapter 14: Closing Reflections and Practice Guidance**

We're just acting out the thought patterns. And all of this is so remarkable because when we are aware enough to even just poke at it a little bit and ask, oh, what is a thought? What is this dictator in the mind? There's nothing there. Hardly anything there.

And so it really opens up a place of tremendous freedom and then tremendous possibility as we notice different patterns of thoughts. When we really understand their essential emptiness, transparency, and we have a little bit of mindfulness, there's the possibility of making choices. Is this thought worth cultivating? Is this thought helpful? Is this thought not helpful? Is this thought just causing a lot of suffering and confusion? When we understand that they're not fixed, that they're not solid, they're not in some essential way who we are, they're just this conditioned phenomena, quite empty of substance, but very, very seductive.

That's the problem. They slip into the mind. They're not as impactful as a sound or a sensation.

So they slip in and we hardly know they're there. They're very sneaky. So the thoughts sneak in, take over the mind.

We're lost in them. We act out whatever they're saying and then we find ourselves in all kinds of situations, sometimes helpful, sometimes or frequently not helpful, all because we haven't trained ourselves to really watch our minds, watch out for the thoughts arising. And again, it doesn't mean that they stop coming.

It means that we're aware that they've arisen. There's no reason of thinking. Just a thought.

So to get a sense of how powerful this practice can be, it really can transform our lives because we are empowering ourselves to make choices about which thoughts are worth cultivating and which thoughts are worth letting go of. Without mindfulness, without attentiveness to this, we're just, as I say, we're just playing out whatever particular patterns of conditioning may be present. The key element in working with thoughts in this way for myself, and this is an element that really has helped me so much in my practice in all aspects, but particularly with thoughts, is interest.

It's just taking interest in this phenomenon because it is interesting. Something that should be so empty when we're aware of it and have so much power when we're not aware of it, to me that's a very interesting situation. So it can lend energy to really paying attention, being very aware, practicing the awareness of thought.

## **Chapter 15: Practicing with Thoughts and Meditation Instruction**

Needless to say, we miss them many, many times. We'll get lost over and over again. But again, pay attention.

Even if we get lost, pay attention to that moment when we do wake up from being lost and highlight what that quality of awareness is like because that will reinforce the possibility of being aware of thought sooner. The more we connect with what the quality of awareness is actually like. So this is a huge field of practice and understanding and a huge source of potential happiness in our lives.

So I think that's probably enough on this for now. But why don't we practice it for a little bit? So again, we can start in the same way as we practiced this morning. As a way of settling in, there is a body.

Just settling into that in an open, relaxed way. And in that space created by there is a body, simply being open to what your experience is. The experience of the sensations of the body breathing.

The experience of other sensations. Really noticing whether they're pleasant or unpleasant and your reactions to them. But set a strong intention to be aware of thoughts or images.

Everything I said also applies to pictures or images in the mind. It's the same process. Have a strong intention to really be alert for, keep the radar out for the arising of thought or image.

And you might notice when in the thought process you do become aware. Is it at the beginning? Is it in the middle? Is it after it's already over? And then if there is a train of thought that's going on and you're a little bit aware, you might just ask that probing question, well, what is a thought? And look directly at it. So you're really seeing the very nature of thought.

Not the content. The thought as a phenomenon. So we'll sit for about 15 minutes.

Enjoy the exploration. As soon as you become aware of a thought or image, it might be helpful to make a soft mental note of acknowledgement. Just thinking, seeing.

Just as a way to reinforce the awareness of it.

### **Chapter 16: Q&A – Who Am I Without My Thoughts?**

Do you have any questions about working with thoughts in the meditation or understanding how to work with them in one's life?

Hi. Thank you so much for this exploration.

My question is, who am I if I'm not my thoughts? That's one. And when do thoughts disguise themselves as intuition or having a hunch? And is there a difference between the two?

I think a better frame for the question for who am I. One that I think gives a little, a better handle for the investigation is what am I, because the who already with, there's already an implication in the who that there is a who that I am. And you just have to find it. We don't tend to do that with the what.

With the what, it's more that question more frames it in terms of exploration. Well, what's here? What's here in experience that might be me? So I think just that difference of frame will help. As you make that exploration, and all of Vipassana Insight Meditation is really the exploration of that question, we begin to see that, contrary to expectations, there is really no one behind this process, this changing mind-body process, to whom the process belongs.

So really, the answer to that question is not a substantial either what or who. Rather, what we're calling I or calling self is a changing process. It's a flow.

It's a flow of experience. We tend to think that the flow is happening to someone, and that's who I am. What begins to reveal itself in the course of practice is that there is no one behind the process to whom it's happening, that what we're calling self is the process.

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## **Chapter 17: Intuition vs. Thought**

**What was the second question? So the second question is, does sometimes intuition or having a hunch disguise itself? Is that a thought camouflaged? Sure. To say that the thought is insubstantial and has no real substance is not to say that they have no meaning.**

Thoughts carry a lot of meaning. Sometimes they're true, sometimes they're not true. Sometimes they're imbued with wisdom and understanding.

Sometimes they're just the reflection of delusion. So intuition can very much come as a thought, not always. Sometimes it's a feeling, but it can often come as a particular thought in the mind.

And it's worth, the more we're paying attention to our thoughts, you know, and to the quality of them in the mind, we begin to get a feel for the different kinds of thoughts that are arising. We begin to get a feel for what's an intuitive understanding, what's just repeating old neurotic patterns. When I was in India, the practice goes back years ago, very often I would have this intuition of when it was about to rain and I should take the laundry and listen to that thought.

And it almost always, so there are more important intuitions than that. But it did show that possibility. And sometimes in meditation, you know, insight itself is intuitive.

It's like, so we can be sitting and just doing what we've been doing, you know, in the body and feeling the breath and sensations and noticing different thoughts. And all of a sudden, just from the quality of paying attention, very intuitively, there can be a new understanding of something, you know. And that understanding is really an intuitive.

It's not something we thought out. It just came out of the matrix of our attention. And then it's there.

And then something really, sometimes very profound is understood. So intuition definitely is a kind of thought. It can be a kind of thought that's really helpful.

Generally, for most people, the ratio of useless thoughts to intuitions, usually for most people, it's not 50-50. Maybe for some unusual people it is.

## **Chapter 18: Working with Boredom and Attention**

I want to ask you, first of all, thank you for being here.

I want to ask you about interest and boredom you talked about. This exercise, the practice is very profound, like when I heard about it. But when I start doing it, one of my challenges is I get bored with going back and examining every thought.

And it's not only in this practice, it's like in the vipassana, the breath exercise. I get bored with the exercise. So how can, what is your advice to face that challenge, tackle it? Thank you.

Many advices. First, the first is to understand what boredom is. Because most people, I think, have the idea that the boredom resides in the object.

The breath is boring. Or this walking. You know, people doing walking meditation, just back and forth and back and forth and back and forth.

It's so boring. But really, boredom has nothing to do with the object. And Fritz Perls, who was the founder of Gestalt Psychology, he had such a good definition of boredom.

He said, boredom is lack of attention. It's not the object. Boredom has to do with the quality of attention we're bringing to the object.

So instead of seeing boredom as a problem, you can see boredom as feedback. So you could actually welcome, when you're bored, you can be thankful because that's telling you, oh, the quality of my attention right now has fallen away from the object. Right? It's kind of, the attention is half-hearted.

And because the attention is half-hearted, it's boring. And then as an experiment, with whatever you're doing, whether it's the breath, whether it's walking, whether it's attention to some external situation, see what happens. If in recognizing that, you intentionally bring your mind in close to whatever the object is, to the breath, or to a step, my experience, and of many others, as soon as the attention gets very close to the object, the boredom disappears.

And that's why you can see people doing this walking meditation on retreat. They could be walking for half an hour, 45 minutes an hour, just lifting, moving, placing, from the outside, the most boring thing in the world. But when the attention is close, it is the most compelling thing in the world.

So that's one piece is to examine what boredom is telling you, and then to see if you can actually bring the attention in close.

## **Chapter 19: Energy, Misinterpretation, and Shifting Awareness**

But what if you don't realize that you're bored, only after like half an hour, you realize, oh, this is very boring. Well, I hope I'm not alone.

No, I would, I, this, this, this is an interesting case. Because I would say if you don't realize you're bored till after half an hour, that you are not bored for that half hour. You know, maybe the last two minutes you were bored, and then you're projecting it on, because if you were bored for that half hour, you would know it much earlier.

You know, I think that in some way you were there in doing it. And then it could very well be that after half an hour or so, your energy gets lower. You know, it's that, but it's not so much boredom as a low energy.

And then you're interpreting that low energy, oh, this was so boring, instead of saying, no, I was there for that time, and now, now all of a sudden it's tiresome or burdensome. Well, that's quite normal. We do have energy, you know, swings and ups and downs.

And it might be at that time, I mean, there are lots of ways to work with energy, but maybe that's the time to get up from the sitting, you know, and do some walking, or change the activity, just as a way of raising the energy. You have to be careful, you have to be, the mind is very tricky, you know, and meditation really reveals that. We often misinterpret different feelings, you know, and that sounds to me like what's happening, that you're calling perhaps some minutes of low energy, you're calling that boredom, and then extrapolating it back over all that time.

I'm going to talk more about misinterpreting emotions in the next part. Thank you very much. Yeah, but really, when you do become aware that you're bored, even if it's, you know, if it's earlier than half an hour, really play with that sense of, and this is a great skill in meditation, we actually have the ability, I don't know how to say, to change the quality of our attention.

That sometimes our attention is just in a half-hearted, as I said, a casual way, so that then it gets boring, which we're not fully there, but it's possible to slide the, you know, to actually bring the mind in close. Let me feel this closely, and by doing that, I think you would notice a change. Thank you.

## **Chapter 20: Walking Meditation – Mind-Created Worlds**

Yeah, okay, why don't we take maybe 20 minutes for another walking exercise. I want to suggest two things in this walking. First, just give emphasis to the practice you did in the sitting.

As you're doing the walking, however you're doing it, really keep an eye out for the arising of thoughts, and just notice, and you'll see very clearly in the walking how you'll be walking, and as I said, five steps later, you realize you haven't been there. You've been lost in some mind-created world, and I have found it really interesting to remind myself at that time that it's not just having been forgetful, that it actually was the creation of a mind-created world. So, that concept I get more familiar with, because a good part of our life's experience are simply mind-created worlds and not what's actually happening.

You can see this hugely, and when you're doing the walking, pay attention to this aspect. A good many of our mind-created worlds are about past and future. Whatever we're thinking about the past is not happening now, and whatever we're thinking about the future is not happening now, other than as a thought, and it's fine to have these thoughts of past and future if we know that we're thinking, but to be lost in them and to not know is simply to be lost in a mind-created world, where we're not attentive to where we actually are.

Keep an eye out for that, because they will certainly arise, as well as perhaps the feeling of boredom. Oh, five minutes. Oh, I have 15 more minutes to go.

See what happens when you, if you feel that, bring the mind in closer to whatever it is you're feeling, the step, the movement, seeing, a sound. There's a lot to discover.