

THE EZRA KLEIN SHOW

Why Does My Mind Keep Thinking That?

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By Ezra Klein

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I’ve had a meditation practice for about 15 years now. I have a bit of a highly tuned nervous system, and I went into it thinking it would calm me down. And it has done that.

But over time, and in the periods when the practice is a bit deeper, when I have a little bit more grit under its tires, the thing it really seems to do is alienate me from my own mind.

I watch what is playing on the projector of my psyche, and I think: Why? Why did I — or some part of me — load up that particular film and, at least in the way my mind works, do so again and again and again and again?

There are people who have been thinking about and exploring the strange way the mind performs for a very long time. One of them, Mark Epstein, is someone whose work I’ve long been interested in.

Epstein is a Buddhist and a psychotherapist. His first book, published in 1995, was called “Thoughts Without a Thinker.” His 2022 book is “The Zen of Therapy.”

Now a lot of people go to therapy. The fact that today it might have all these dimensions of mindfulness and awareness in it would seem normal and natural. But some people built that bridge, and Epstein was one of them.

I’ve thought for a while that it would be interesting to ask him, after his decades of therapeutic practice and intense meditation, what he has learned about the mind. How does he think about how the mind works?

What is the relationship you have to your own thoughts when you realize you’re not the one controlling them?

Ezra Klein: Mark Epstein, welcome to the show.

Mark Epstein: What a pleasure.

So tell me, after all these years of practice: What do you think a thought is?

My meditation teacher, Joseph Goldstein — I was on a retreat with him last year — said: A thought is just a little something more than nothing. So I really liked that. I thought: Oh, that’s coming out of 60 years of his meditation experience.

So I’ve been repeating that to myself: “a little more than nothing.”

Your first book had one of my favorite titles for a book: “Thoughts Without a Thinker.” And I think that’s the part of this that I want to get at — that strange sense that thoughts just happen.

Why do they happen?

Well, the person is in a predicament in that they find themselves in a body with a mind, having to make sense out of being in the world. And conscious, internal, subjective thought seems to come along with that realization.

So thoughts are, in some way, what we would call the ego trying to figure out: Oh, my God, what do I do in this predicament?

The ego mediates between inner and outer and between lower and higher. That's the function of the ego. And thoughts, in this way of thinking, would be an extension of the ego, a tool of the ego.

I would prefer it if they felt like a tool well used. The thing that I find very alienating, when my meditation practice is a bit deeper and I'm a bit more aware, is the recognition that I'm constantly thinking about things that, if I really were trying to figure out how to live in this world in a productive way, I would not be thinking about all the time.

The tendency of thoughts to get stuck, for them to attract the negative imaginings of the future — it's very strange when you begin being attentive to not just that they're arising but that there are certain patterns that you would not choose. You're not sure then who chose them or how they're being chosen, and it doesn't feel like you have a lot of control over that process.

It can be a mistake, from the Buddhist point of view, to see thoughts always as the problem. A lot of people who get interested in meditation start to value the empty mind, the mind with no thought, as if that's some kind of great achievement.

One of the first Buddhist texts that made a big impression on me when I was still in college talked about the untrained mind as being the problem. A disciplined mind, they said, was the road to nirvana, the road to enlightenment.

The point of spiritual practice, of meditation, of psychotherapy, isn't to make you more stupid. It's to make you more aware or more conscious so that you actually have choices about the way you live your life.

You started that answer by saying that it can be a common mistake to fetishize the empty mind. Why?

There's something very appealing about stumbling into an experience of: Oh, the mind is something more than just the thinker of thoughts. It's actually very peaceful to have that experience of the empty mind. And we're all looking for

something different than what our everyday experience is, so it's easy to get attached to what feels like a brief transcendental experience or a drug experience and then to go chasing that.

So it's not about getting rid of thoughts or devaluing thoughts. It's about cultivating thoughts that are useful.

One of my most profound experiences on a silent meditation retreat was about five days into the retreat. My mind was analyzing what the food was going to be for breakfast. And it was like: OK, the food is fine — it's yogurt and oatmeal and peanuts and raisins. But where's the bread? What we really need is a piece of toast. That was preoccupying me.

On about the fifth day, bread appeared. And I put it in the toaster and made a plate with butter and jam and sat down and took my first mindful bite: very focused, no thinking, just the taste of the toast — so delicious.

And then, my mind wandered. The next thing I knew, I looked down and I was like: Who ate my toast? It had disappeared. And where my mind went immediately was: Who did this to me? You know, searching for someone to blame.

I think that's the kind of insight, actually, that precipitates out of a deep meditation experience where we see that so much of our mental activity is trying to protect ourselves or trying to find someone to blame for whatever it is that happens that we're uncomfortable with.

So much of thinking is from a self-centered place like that, and with enough meditation practice, we start to wade through a lot of that [expletive].

In a way, this podcast's genesis is that I was in a used bookstore in the East Village, and I came across "Thoughts Without a Thinker." It came out, what, in the 1980s?

Nineteen ninety-five.

Ninety-five. OK. I'd always meant to read it. Then, when I did read it — it's very Freudian.

Yes.

And so I want to start bringing in the other side of your work here. I think now a lot of us look at Freudian work, Freudian theory, and think: Man, it is strange people got excited about that.

But Freud is a big influence on that first book. What do you still find valuable about the way Freud understood, or what he did, for psychotherapy or understandings of the subconscious? And what do you look at with a bit of: Well, we all got carried away?

Well, I don't think we all got carried away, but a whole generation got carried away.

Freud has been a big influence on all of my books. The whole way we think about the mind, about the self, the unconscious, the instincts — that's all Freud. The 20th-century, 21st-century conception of the mind, whether we agree with everything that Freud said about sexuality and whatnot, is all Freud.

Freud, in a way, was a meditator. He was snorting cocaine and using that heightened awareness to observe his own dreams, his own mind —

[Chuckles.] Wait, I'm sorry — really?

You know all this! Come on.

I do not know all this!

Yes.

My Freudian knowledge is paper thin.

Oh, Freud. There's a rich —

So what you're proposing here is that the correct way to understand the mind is to take a bunch of cocaine and then observe? [Laughs.]

I'm not proposing that at all, but many people are doing that, and it leads them into meditation.

But no, Freud's whole thing — at the beginning of his career, after he was studying fish, he got into cocaine.

A classic progression. [Laughs.]

[Laughs.] It can come out of many different directions.

In his book “The Interpretation of Dreams,” which was published around 1900, he engaged in one of the first self-analyses and began to really chart his dreams, examine his dreams and interpret his dreams.

His whole method of free association and evenly suspended attention — the purpose of which was to get the rational mind, the thinking mind, the judging mind out of the way, so that you could go deeper into your own personal experience — that led him into the discovery of what he called the unconscious.

The unconscious is where all our secrets are stored and the aspects of ourselves that come up in our dreams and in our fantasies. Like, what is that? And where's that coming from? Freud called it the unconscious.

Then he proceeded to develop a method of probing the unconscious through psychotherapy, which was a revolution. He promised too much — the same way that psychedelics are currently promising too much or Prozac promised too much or meditation promises too much. Because people want something that will cure everything, and psychoanalysis couldn't do that.

When I read things that are heavily influenced by Freud now — I'll read the stories he's telling, the ideas he's spinning out: You talk in your book about his taking a walk with some friends and just ending up, as they seem a little bit dissatisfied, spinning out a very profound and intense theory about their relationship to the passage of time.

It's a beautiful little paper called “On Transience,” and Freud ends it by saying: Is a flower that blooms for only a single night any less beautiful because of the short duration of its life?

When I read that story in your book — and I've read other Freudian stories — what I think immediately is: Well, how does he know?

I feel like now there is a tendency to prize forms of knowing that can be validated in some external way. Whereas Freud always seemed to be a very insightful storyteller.

But you either bought into the story — or you didn't.

Oh, totally. Same with meditation.

Tell me about that.

Well, there's a big effort now to document the scientific benefits, to prove in the lab that when you're meditating, something is really happening in the brain.

I started out in my career working for a cardiologist at Harvard Medical School, Herbert Benson, who did physiological measurements of transcendental meditators showing that their blood pressure could be lowered and their heartbeat slowed and their carbon dioxide output diminished. So I understand the value of: Oh, this is a real thing. Science tells us it's a real thing.

But my experience of going on my first couple of silent meditation retreats — a week or 10 days of not talking, not making eye contact and just looking at my own internal experience — that's what showed me that meditation was a real thing, experientially. Like: Oh, my mind is capable of more than just my usual thoughts. There's a whole, vast, both interior and external, experience that I have never allowed myself that is opening up.

Science, if it were going to try to document that, might be able to measure my heartbeat, but it couldn't get close to the poetics of the experience.

If science can't find it, how would you describe what it is that science can't find?

Love.

In meditation?

Yes, in meditation. The great revelation that can come out of meditation is: Oh, you start to experience yourself as a loving being.

Why do you think that is?

I don't know. I think because we are fundamentally loving beings. That's our true nature.

I've always been a little bit — I don't want to say turned off — but the idea that the good nature is underneath, that we're just trying to pull off all the crust and the crud and the stories — is that what you're getting at?

I have little kids. Sometimes they're really loving and great, but sometimes they're slightly tyrannical.

Totally tyrannical. By the time they're little kids, it's already happening.

So it's just when we're babies that our good nature is there? [Chuckles.]

What is that thing underneath? And do you actually believe it is underneath? Or do you believe it is a thing we are shaping? And then it feels like it was always there in sufficiently advanced meditation or moments of awakening.

I had a conversation once with Ram Dass — you know, Richard Alpert, blah, blah — I'll let you explain. [Chuckles.]

Yes, Ram Dass — a great, eventually Hindu-influenced mystic, also a crucial figure in the psychedelic revolution, alongside Timothy Leary. One of the most fascinating lives of the 20th century.

Started out as a psychology professor at Harvard.

Yes.

I met him when he was already in his Ram Dass incarnation, but I was just at Harvard. I was in my early 20s. And then I went to medical school, became a psychiatrist, didn't see him for 20 years. He had a bad stroke, could hardly talk. I

went to visit him, and he always sort of joked with me. He was, like: Oh, are you a Buddhist psychiatrist now? I was like: I guess so.

He said — and he had trouble making the words because he'd had a stroke: Do you see them — meaning my patients — do you see them as already free?

And it took me up short. Like: Do I see them as already free? I had to say yes. That's what I had gotten from the meditation side of things.

But the mind is capable of something so beyond what we normally think of our minds as doing, that the shorthand for that would be love.

Are you talking about something we would understand as the mind, or something more like what we would understand as like the shards of a soul?

From the Buddhist side, they use the same word to talk about mind and heart. Put that together, and I think you get a soul. So if there's any purpose behind our incarnations as humans, the purpose would be to come in contact with that greater potential of the mind. And that's what all this work is about, is uncovering, to let it shine through.

Well, this gets to a symmetry that you point out between how Freud advised the therapist to show up and how Buddhist meditation advises meditators to show up — which is with this unusual spirit of nonjudgment.

Yes: Suspend judgment and give impartial attention to everything there is to observe. That's Freud, sounding like a Buddhist teacher.

So tell me what is valuable about that orientation.

What that mental, emotional, even spiritual state permits is an openness to the other. So when I'm being a therapist, I'm just really curious and really trying to make room for — if you were my patient — whatever it is that's happening truthfully for you in this moment. That's what I'm encouraging.

Hopefully there's no hint of judgment. I think that's something that Freud was very clear about: Suspend judgment and give impartial attention to everything there is to observe.

That makes space for someone, and it's very unusual that we engage in that kind of way with each other.

And how about from the meditative standpoint? I think most people who initially get into meditation get into it from a highly judgmental place of their own emotional experience.

Yes.

That's very true for me. I would like to not feel the way I am feeling all the time — anxious, spun-up, pulled along by the current of my own thoughts — and I had been told this can help.

Sometimes it does. But sometimes it does the opposite and makes you more aware of actually how stirred up you are.

Then you start telling this to more experienced meditators and they say: Oh, right, yes, this was missold to you. This is about being aware of what's going on, not about attaining this much more equanimous state that you were showing up instrumentally to grab hold of.

Yes. It's not just about being aware of what's going on, it's about changing the way you relate to what's going on.

Coming into meditation, all I could see was my own judgmental mind: I'm judging myself, I'm judging the other people there, we're not even talking, I'm not even looking at them, I've got an opinion about everything — that's what's occupying my mind.

With meditation, just be mindful, see what's there, see what you're feeling, see what your mind is doing. Gradually, you see those go-to conditioned responses to one's world — that doesn't have to be the last word in how you relate.

And it doesn't feel good — that's the main thing. You start to feel: Oh, this doesn't feel good. And there's an alternative: I don't have to be judging.

Well, you say that. That's not my experience of it. I often will hear meditation teachers and, for that matter, therapists say something like this: The implication is that how I feel about things, what emerges into my mind, is under my control.

I understand that I can be less reactive to what I'm thinking or what I'm feeling, but the feelings are still there. They just then feel like they're bouncing around inside of me.

Yes. The feelings are still there — I think that's the common experience. The wish is that they're just going to go away and you're going to become a different person.

But the much more common experience is that you just are who you are. The reactions are still there. But as a one-time teacher of mine used to say: At one point they were these big monsters, and the monsters became like little shmoos in the mind.

So you're trying to cultivate equanimity. The Buddha talked about gain and loss, pleasure and pain, sorrow and so on, as the great winds that blow through us. It's trying to get your mind into a place, like on the top of a great mountain or under a big tree, where all the ebbs and flows, all the fluctuations, are part of what the mind can tolerate.

How much is this emerging from the — I don't know how to describe it — the lack of identification with what we normally think of as the self? You have a line:

The more you examine your experience, the more mysterious, and elusive, the self becomes.

This is an enriching, if also a sobering and humbling, realization.

And it's a bit where I started, but this feeling: Oh, I might be feeling this way, but I'm not choosing it, and I don't necessarily have to follow it — it's both valuable, and it's very strange. It's very self-alienating.

Ten, 15 years into having a meditation practice, I'm much less certain of why the things happening in my head are happening than I was before, when I didn't question them. And I just assumed that what was going on in my head was the outcome of some cohesive process and self and set of intentions that were: I was thinking about this, and that's what I should be thinking about.

Well, I think it's a really nice thing to be less certain. That little bit of freedom that I was talking about before? That's associated with being a little less certain about everything, certainly about the self.

In Buddhist psychology, one of the main principles is selflessness. It has taken me a long time to get my head around self, selflessness, ego, egolessness.

But the principle that helped me the most is that in order to understand selflessness, you first have to actually find within yourself, you have to locate within yourself, the self that doesn't exist.

And that helped you understand it? [Laughs.]

That helped me understand it. Yes. Because when I looked down at my toast that wasn't there — Who ate my toast? — that was really me, upset. Like: No toast, what happened? Who can I blame?

They say in Buddhist psychology that the best time to find the self that doesn't exist is when someone who you love hurts your feelings, accuses you of doing something that you really didn't do. And this thing in you seizes up, like: How could you think that about me? I didn't do that! That "me" or that "I" — we're all conceited like that.

When those situations happen and you feel really gripped by that sense of injustice, from the Buddhist point of view, you can turn your mind and look at that feeling. And there's the self. There's the self that doesn't exist. That feeling of "me" is just a little bit more than nothing.

As Joseph said, at the beginning of our conversation: It's just a feeling that, under the power of self-observation, starts to break up.

I'm married. I've had experiences of feeling upset with my partner.

No!

I've had it with my friends. I've had it with myself. I'm constantly pissed off at myself. And if there's ever a time when the self feels strong and stable, it is when it is under threat.

I don't know how stable it feels when the self feels strong and indignant and angry.

So what about looking inward opens your patience?

Sometimes when I'm in that mode, the thing that I just hear is the endless recitation of why I'm right in my own head.

Exactly.

And I'm not sure it's helpful —

It's not helpful.

[Chuckles.] But it's definitely something I can locate. [Laughs.]

Yes, exactly. That's my point. So that the self is actually intrinsically relational.

The self wants to be in relationship to the other, but that feeling of "She hurt me," that feeling of righteous indignation, pushes your self into an isolated, defensive, rigid, self-important, judgmental place. That's not a happy place. As right as you feel about it, it's not a happy place.

So what's my role as a therapist? One, to support the feeling, because I'm sure you're right.

Always.

And second, your marriage is important, and your relationship is important, and you care about whoever it is who hurt you.

But at what point are you seeing that the self does not exist?

I understand the part of your sentence where you located the self. I don't understand yet the part of your sentence where you located the self that does not exist.

Everything appears more real than it really is. We see the world as: This is all totally real.

But it's not. It's much more evanescent. It's much more impermanent. It's much less stable than we want it to be.

Like the final words of the Diamond Sutra: This is how you should experience: this fleeting world — a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom and a dream.

What I'm after: When you come in and you're putting yourself in that place — that fixed, certain, hurt, angry place — I'm trying to loosen that up for you. I'm trying to loosen up that identification with being you — the angry you, the hurt you, the judgmental you, the you that you know. Because — and this is Freud's contribution — there's so much about you that you don't know.

You had a line I thought was interesting where you said:

Traditional therapy unpacks in order to make sense. Meditation asks us to stop making sense so that we can find where happiness truly abides. Therapy examines the accumulated self, the only one that is shaped by all the defenses we've used to get through life.

Meditation asks us to divest ourselves of those very defenses.

Tell me a bit about that tension. You're setting them up as almost, not quite opposite ways of knowing, but one mode is very cerebral and takes the stories very seriously, and the other mode is, in some ways, trying to get you to loosen your grip and be very skeptical of the stories your mind tells.

Yes. I was trying to channel David Byrne there with “stop making sense.”

Taking the story — one's own personal story — seriously is superimportant. And there's a real tendency among people who don't have a psychotherapeutic interest but are coming strictly from the meditative point of view to diminish the importance of everything we've learned from a hundred years of psychotherapy: Early childhood experience, emotional pain, even traumatic events — those are all just phenomena to be observed. Don't make too big a deal.

I think that's a mistake. I think we need to take ourselves seriously and understand ourselves as best we can, and then begin to loosen the attachments that we all have to the various events that have formed us.

From the spiritual side, freedom from identity is the goal. And we can see what happens in the world when people are unable to free themselves from their identity. It's a big cause of conflict and pain. But those identities are superimportant to be able to make sense of, too. So that's one of the ways that I see these two worlds really helping each other.

When I tend to exit therapy, it's often because I notice that it now feels like it is reinforcing stories I don't want to tell.

Mm-hmm.

It is a space where I come in, and it feels like there's a pull to say whatever I'm upset about that week, and I leave feeling more upset and somehow more entrenched in my upsetness. There's one part of me — maybe the meditative part of me, I'll identify it as — that wants nothing more than to loosen the stories I tell about myself.

And then going into this place where I tend to keep telling them — even if only to examine them — over time it becomes very hard to say: Well, am I getting better? Or am I getting worse? Or am I getting more concretized in this one narrative?

And I've definitely watched people get stuck in therapy. They're probably there for much too long, and it almost becomes a place of ego, with somebody to just listen to you and reflect back at you.

How do you think about when talk therapy is helpful and when it can become harmful?

Well, I'm not sure the length of time that somebody stays in therapy is the right measure.

When therapy is good, one thing it can be good for is that it's a real relationship. And it can, at its best, be a surprising relationship that continues to provoke and enliven and nourish. So I wouldn't judge it necessarily by the length of time.

It's very tempting as a therapist to just sit back and be supportive of the person in their struggle. I'm sure I fall into that sometimes.

But I'm also very aware of being provocative in some kind of way. I'm always looking for how to undermine the narrative and coax somebody into a perspective that they might not have had, if not for the conversation that we are having.

A lot of the patients who have given me any feedback about what they've gotten out of being in therapy with me, they all tend to say: Oh, you always surprised me, and that's why I kept coming back. Because I always thought you would say one thing, but you said another thing.

That feedback makes me feel like: Oh, maybe I'm actually doing something helpful.

I'm about to sound like a big skeptic of therapy, and I'm not. I've been in therapy with many different therapists and have gained hugely through those relationships.

But one thing I wonder about is: We have a society right now that is much more therapeutic than it has been at any other point in history — much more influenced by therapy, there are more therapists, people go to it more often, it's more destigmatized. And you might think having spread this treatment so far that you would see this huge reduction in the things that therapy most obviously treats: depression, anxiety, other kinds of disorders you might find in the D.S.M.

And we seem to not be seeing that. We seem to be seeing a more therapeutically informed society where this has almost become more of people's self-definition, particularly among young people, where sometimes people's anxiety is almost an identity.

How do you think about that tension? I mean, you know from your own work that therapy can do great good. And yet somehow we have had a much larger societal dose of therapy, during a much more comfortable time to be a human being than 100 years ago in this country, and we don't seem to be doing great.

There's a lot of truth in what you're saying. We had a series of conferences a couple of decades ago about Buddhism and psychoanalysis, bringing R.D. Laing and Ram Dass and people like that together.

One of the conclusions that came out of those conferences was that one of the things that psychoanalysis or psychotherapy and Buddhism or meditation — one of the things they really share are that they're two methods that don't work.

[Laughs.]

Because what people want from them is beyond what either of them can do.

So to try to answer your question: Neuroscience, science, psychopharmacology — we really don't understand the mind or the brain or any of the major psychiatric disorders — bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, O.C.D., even post-traumatic stress. There's a lot of talk about the neurophysiological correlates, and there's a lot of work to be done, but the genetics of it — we don't understand anything. So in terms of treatments, even the drug treatments, are very crude.

Then there's a whole class of people, since the advent of Prozac and the S.S.R.I.s and so on, who are hoping that this medication or that medication will free them in some way from thoughts or feelings that have been plaguing them. Sometimes those medicines really help.

I have an ear for when they might, and what I usually find is that either they're going to help — or they do nothing. So it shouldn't be a surprise that people aren't just magically better.

Plus being a person is really difficult. Having a marriage is difficult. Having children is difficult. Having parents is difficult. Being in this world politically is difficult. Even when the country is at peace, it's difficult.

So psychotherapy is like a miracle in our culture — that two people could come together in a room with no purpose other than to talk about what's happening between them or in each of their lives. So there's a kind of comfort in it — which might really be what it's good for.

It's a relationship where you can be yourself. And how many of those do we really have?

It's true that it is hard to be a person, and it's also true that we don't understand much about people and the mind or the brain or these disorders. And it's also true that both therapy and, in a different way, meditation are very alert to stories.

Something I have wondered over the years is to what degree the therapeutic stories we are telling are contagious. The more we become, as a society, alert and validating of the experience of anxiety, the more people begin to notice their anxiety. Noticing it makes you more sensitive to the fact that you're anxious, and it begins to build from there. I have felt that has happened to me at times.

Or trauma is something we didn't talk about nearly as much 30 years ago as we do today. Now my grandparents' generation, my great-grandparents' generation — they had far more trauma in their lives, when I think about what happened to them, what they escaped from, what they dealt with.

And if you talked to them — and I did when I was younger — they did not describe themselves as traumatized. That was not their self-definition. And some of them — I mean, I'm Jewish — had gone through terrible things.

And today, trauma is omnipresent. You've written a whole book on trauma. You describe in your book on this that trauma is a kind of omnipresent feature of everyday life.

How do you think about that, this rise of people believing that their trauma is definitional to them? Despite the fact that I don't think one could really defend the proposition that people who grew up in the '90s and 2000s, or the '80s and the '90s, are net-net going through more things we would objectively describe as traumatic than the people who grew up in the '20s, '30s, '40s?

Well, I think, first of all, the pendulum has swung about trauma — like you were saying. So coming out of World War I, even coming out of World War II, the norm was not to talk about it. The men who came back from war and from the trenches or from the planes or wherever — the norm was not to talk about it.

That worked for some people and didn't work for other people and led to a lot of alcoholism and secrets and acting out in ways that people didn't understand. And the therapeutic culture that we're a part of came around and began to see what the downside was of that way of coping.

The intrinsic tendency of the ego, of the self, the intrinsic defense mechanism is to look away. The Buddha used the word “dukkha” to describe suffering — life is tinged with a sense of unsatisfactoriness or suffering.

The actual word “dukkha” can be broken apart and translated as “hard to face.” And the problem with that is that we never put words on it. When trauma — either a little trauma of second grade being difficult or a big trauma of losing a child or a partner or a piece of your body or whatever — my sense of what can be therapeutic in those conditions is to help a person who has been through something like that begin to articulate what the experience really was.

And once it's articulated, it can either become a thing that gets overarticulated, like you were saying, where it becomes the defining narrative. Or it can take its place in a person's history so that they have the understanding, and they can begin to file it

away in a conscious place, rather than it being stored in some kind of unconscious place where it leaps out in the shadows and wrecks their life.

So the over-articulation of the anxiety that one could say is a normal part of being a human is just as much a problem as the suppression or repression. Because once you're overidentified with any aspect of your experience, then you're falling into the trap of conceit or of self, and that becomes a limiting factor.

It's making me think about the swings of the pendulum in terms of infants and parents and the infants' sleep. When we had kids, it was all about Ferber, and you had to Ferberize your child and let them cry, and then the pendulum swung and it's like: Sleep in the same bed. There are problems on either side.

Let me try a thought on you and see what you think of it. In the people I have known who have gone through profoundly terrible things, things people should not have to go through, the people I've known who, it seems, have emerged the healthiest — in some cases, I feel like they're much healthier than I am with my more gentle existence — are the people who have eventually turned the work they were doing inward into work they're doing outward.

Something about what they went through and the way they processed it became a way they began to interact with others, and they made meaning out of it. It became part of the way they give their own gifts into the world. And it has deepened their own sensitivity and empathy and the set of tools that they use to help others.

The people I've known who have struggled more, I feel like they've gotten trapped on the internal part. It has become not just a story about them but a story that has kept them trapped inside themselves. And it has become a way they don't have to engage as much with other people and other people's experiences, because theirs has remained so overwhelming.

There's something about being able to turn the internal experience into something external that seems important. But my sample size here is limited.

I think you're totally correct. The common tendency, when some horrible thing happens that we feel should never happen to anyone — but those kinds of things are going to happen to everyone because we all face old age, illness, death, separation from the loved, etc. — but when it happens in an obvious, extreme way, the common psychological tendency is to feel like: I'm the only one who this is happening to.

They call it a sense of singularity. And that is very imprisoning. It's totally normal. Like the floods at the camp in Texas — that should never be happening. All these parents are losing their kids, and each one is going to feel like the singularity of that experience, like: No one is going to be able to relate to this.

There are a couple of great Buddha stories, where the Buddha comes upon a woman whose child has died, who won't put down her dead baby. And everyone — the villagers — are scared of her. She's acting like a crazy person. She says: Is there anyone who can help me? And they point her toward the Buddha.

And the Buddha says: I've got medicine for you. All I need is a mustard seed from anywhere, from a family in the village where no one has lost a husband or a wife or a parent or a child. Just bring me the mustard seed.

And she goes and talks to everyone, and she can't find anyone who hasn't experienced this kind of loss.

One of the great benefits of working in a psychotherapeutic way with an event like that is that sometimes you start to feel like, even though this horrible thing has happened to me, this is a window into all the horrible things that are happening everywhere to everyone.

I don't have the quote from you in front of me, but in the book about trauma, you write something that is like: Trauma is a terrible experience that is not relationally held.

Yes. What makes it a terrible experience is that it's not relationally held. The need is for the holding in the aftermath of something like that.

Tell me about the relational dimension of it, though.

We're relational beings. That's the great revelation. We think we're isolated individuals, locked inside our heads with our thoughts, in competition with everybody else, but we're not.

From the beginning, from infancy, we're relational beings. We know ourselves through the reflection, the mirroring of the parent. We are constantly in relationship to our world. We're not separate from the world — we are of the world, and we are of each other. So we need each other to make sense out of our experience.

Needing each other — it's such an interesting dimension of being human. In the classic origin story of the Buddha, he goes out and sees old age, goes out and sees sickness, sees death, sees loss.

It's not just that it will happen to you — it will happen to everybody. And it makes being in a relationship with anybody very frightening.

All the way down to the small bits of it, which is — far before you face any of that — just the knowledge that, on the one hand, you need people terribly, and on the other, you won't always get what you want from them.

The nature of other people is they cannot fully give you what you want because they're someone else. And there's always going to be that gap between the two of you.

Yes.

You have a book about desire, which is a very important concept in Buddhism. It's sort of all about this. Can you give me a little bit of that thesis?

The book about desire was written to try to defend desire from the Buddhists who kept saying, when they talk about the Four Noble Truths: The first truth is suffering, the second truth is the cause of suffering, and the cause of suffering is desire.

So all these people I knew who were Buddhists were running around denying their desire, or in deep conflict about their own desires, especially their erotic desires.

But my understanding of the Buddha's teaching was not that he was saying that the cause of suffering was desire but that the cause of suffering was clinging or craving or ignorance. And the clinging or craving or ignorance had to do with trying to get more from one's desire than desire was able to yield, which is what you were paraphrasing there.

Desire often, if not always, leaves a gap — and Freud wrote about this very beautifully — the gap between what's imagined, what's desired and what's actually possible. Freud called that the reality principle, and the pleasure principle runs into the reality principle. The Buddha talked about the same thing.

In the book about desire, you have this quote that I found very moving: “Love is a revelation of the other person's freedom.” Tell me what that means to you.

That's the best quote in the book. The wish, the inclination of erotic desire, is to fully possess, or become one with, the loved object, person, body — however you want to say it. The revelation is that the other person's subjectivity can never be totally known. No matter the desire, no matter the love, there's a separation there which can't be breached.

Love means you allow that, and you actually experience it, first as a disappointment and then as a release.

Tell me what you mean when you say “experience it as a release.” What does it mean, not just to have the revelation of the other person's freedom but to actually respect another person's freedom?

Love that allows the other person's freedom means that you can let them go away with the faith and the understanding that they will return. So that permission and that faith are an essential part of love.

You talk about there always being a residual of loneliness in all relationships. And you say: “In the revelation of another person’s freedom is a window into a state of nonclinging.” You go on: “While desire yearns for completion, and seeks it most commonly in love, it can find the freedom it is looking for only by not clinging.”

What does that mean?

The space between — the liminal space, the space of disappointment, the space where you’re thrown back on yourself — is a spiritual place. It’s a very important place to explore. It takes you deep into the self in an unscripted and potentially nourishing way.

In that book, I quoted the poet Anne Carson, who has a beautiful book called “Eros the Bittersweet,” where she quotes Sappho. Carson is a scholar of ancient Greek, and she says the Greek word for “bittersweet” is actually “sweetbitter,” that it’s turned around in English. The sweetness comes first, but then, because there’s always a little bit of a letdown, that’s where the bitterness is.

The Buddha, in his teachings, was actually saying that gap is interesting. And that, if instead of turning away or getting angry or getting frustrated or trying to squeeze more out of the object of desire, if instead we can settle our minds into that gap with less judgment, there’s an important lesson there that will help us with old age, illness, death and any other tragedies that are going to befall us.

You have a lovely image — I think it comes from the teacher Stephen Batchelor in that book. He talks about this difference between holding a coin in a clenched fist and holding it with an open palm. I found that to be a very resonant visual for me.

How do you understand that difference? Because nobody is saying — you’re not saying — that people can or should get rid of desire or that the suffering will go away, or any of it really, but that there’s some difference between clenching things and still holding them but there being some space around it.

What creates space?

For me, one of the prime motivations of desire is the need of the self to come in contact with its own mutability. It's the need of the self to merge temporarily with the other, to loosen its boundaries. So the clenching that can come with desire is basically holding on too tight, as we say in psychoanalytic language, to "the object of our desire" — even though it's a person, not an object. Which tends to alienate the other or push them away or actually get in the way of the experience of the other.

Holding the other with an open hand allows space around both of you so that there's room for the inevitable moving away.

But pull out of the metaphor of the holding — let's literalize that. We all have things that we want, we desire. And then when they don't happen — or they happen, but not the way we were hoping they would happen — we get upset: I wanted this night to go this way, I wanted this trip to not get canceled, I wanted this promotion to happen — whatever it might be.

And I understand that the clenched fist is a kind of anger: I wanted this thing, and I didn't get it. Or I didn't get it in the way I wanted to get it, and now I'm upset, and I'm trying to change it. Or I'm angry at people for it, or I'm angry at myself.

What is the actual experience of being open-palmed about it? Because I try sometimes. [Laughs.] And I almost feel like what I end up doing is white-knuckling through my own emotional response. It's like: I know that I'm trying to be open-palmed, and so I'm just going to sit here and endure it.

This is a good metaphor, because we all understand what it means to open and close a fist. But emotionally, internally, what are you talking about?

Emotionally, internally, what I'm saying is all of those feelings are going to come — the frustrated ones that you're talking about — but they don't have to hold you tight. Because the spaciousness that comes from opening up the palm is what allows you to move into the new reality.

But how do you do it?

Just by opening the palm.

OK. But there's no palm in this. We're not actually holding things. [Laughs.]

[Laughs.] The palm is in your mind.

My experience of emotions having a hold on me, to get very specific about it, is: I'm upset about something, and I can't stop thinking about it. It just plays and replays and replays and replays. And every time I catch myself, I'm like: Oh, there's a thought again.

But it just keeps happening. It feels like a storm inside me. Like energy. And I can let it out — yell at somebody, yell at myself — and I don't. I'm actually pretty good at controlling that kind of thing usually. But it's still there.

I don't know what it would mean in that moment to open my palm. I don't feel like I have control.

Yes. I'm not saying that we actually have control over our emotional responses to things. If something is making you angry, you're going to get angry before your thinking mind can tell you not to.

I think it's trickier than that. It's that once the difficult emotion is aroused, we don't have to completely indulge it. There's always a moment when self-awareness kicks in. And it's at that moment — when self-awareness kicks in — that we have a choice.

So, really, you could try visualizing opening your palm — literally. What some cognitive-behavioral people might have you do is actually try to think those thoughts consciously more, rather than: Ugh, I can't stop them, and they keep coming.

So you could play with it in various ways. The idea is to begin to play with the reactions, rather than feeling besieged by them. And you might have to try five different things.

Is that something that you feel over your life, over your practice, over your therapy, you've gotten much better at? What is the difference between how Mark Epstein handles an upsetting situation today versus when you were in college?

There's not much difference.

All this work you've done, all this meditation, and you'd say you're in the same place?

When I'm upset about something, I'm upset in much the same way. Hopefully, it doesn't go on as long.

So what was all this for then?

Well, something to do!

[Laughs.] Come on — either you don't believe what you're telling me, or this undermines the book somewhat.

I don't think so. I think it's all in the attitude that one has toward one's experience.

Well, but that might be the difference.

That is the difference.

So what is the difference between the attitude you would have had when you were 20 and the attitude you would have now?

Oh, I have much more of a sense of humor about myself, at least in the immediate aftermath of whatever it is that has been so upsetting. I mean, I definitely get upset about what I get upset about, and the people who are close to me have to live with that.

So you've not become nonreactive? You've not —

Oh, no. I don't think that's a possibility.

So what is the possibility here? If you do a lifetime of this work and it goes well, what have you achieved at the end of it, aside from that it was interesting? And I agree that meditating is interesting.

Yes. Oh, what have you achieved? Peace of mind.

But it doesn't sound like you have peace of mind. It sounds like you're stormy.

No, I have peace of mind. Definitely.

Match those up for me.

Within the storminess, I'm not trying not to be stormy.

So people are dealing with your being stormy. They have to handle that you have the temper you always had and the upset you always had.

What part of you has peace of mind during that? Or is it just later that you are better at returning to something more equanimous?

Well, it's not a part of me that has peace of mind. Either I have it, or I don't have it. Because there's only one of me — if there is one of me.

[Chuckles.]

But I have confidence in the people who are around me that they know me and cannot be destroyed by me. So that's very reassuring. I have permission from the environment that I'm not so bad that I'm going to destroy. So that's very helpful as a container. And I know that the frustrated, violent, angry, sad reactions are just reactions and not really who I am.

There's always a part of me that's looking at it like: If I were going to write something, how would I portray this?

So the peace of mind is a subtle de-identification with the experience you're having?

Yes, absolutely.

And what does that do for you?

It makes me less afraid.

Of what?

Of myself.

And you used to be more afraid of yourself?

I don't know if I was consciously aware of that, but I was anxious.

And so that has created a — you do not find those experiences as —

It has created a buffer.

“Buffer” is an interesting word. In the periods when my meditation is going well — which is not always — the thing I have is a buffer. It's very slim, but it's just like a little bit of separation. And it's very valuable. And it's very hard to maintain. But it is just a couple of milliseconds between me and my reactions.

The thing that comes with that is a kind of humor, which is very helpful when dealing with oneself, since we tend to take ourselves so seriously.

So I think that's the other way to answer your question — like: What has changed? I think I have a little more of a sense of humor about myself or about situations, as terrible as they can be.

Doesn't Joseph Goldstein have a line that's something like: Enlightenment is lightening up? And I'm not saying that you're enlightened, but you're getting at something like that, which is that there's a lightening up here.

I think in terms of, What does all this really do? — I think that the lightening up is probably as good a way of talking about it as any.

I had a friend — he's deceased now — a psychotherapist named Jack Engler. He was already into the meditation stuff. Took all the psychological testing — the Rorschach tests, projective tests — went to India. Gave all those tests to a control group — beginning meditators, advanced meditators and meditation teachers —

and what he found was, even in the most advanced meditators, there was no diminution of internal conflict. There was just a greater willingness to acknowledge the conflict.

He was a little disappointed. But I think that plays into what I'm saying. Like, you're still you. No matter what you're doing, you're still you. But maybe there's a little change.

Do you feel that there's a difference in what your mind or your awareness attaches to?

And here's what I mean by that: Even in my own experience, if I get a really good night of sleep and my kids are being challenging, my ability to look at that challenge with humor, or even be with them in it, is extremely different than if I got a bad night of sleep. And that is holding what they're doing completely constant.

And then there are people I know who have much deeper meditative practices and other kinds of practices than I do. And I'll sometimes be with them and I'll notice that their mind will incline toward the things they like in a situation, in almost the same way mine will incline toward the things that dissatisfy me in a situation.

And I wonder sometimes if the point of this path, of this work, is to try to change what is attracting you, change what you're noticing, change what you're fixating on: the beauty of the moment rather than the edginess of it.

Do you feel that is true? Is that a viable thing to hope for? Is that too much?

I liked what you were saying about when you get a good night's sleep, your way of relating to the kids is different, because I think what meditation is trying to give us is the equivalent of a good night's sleep.

It doesn't guarantee a good night's sleep, but the attitude that you found in yourself when dealing with the kids — that's how we're training ourselves to be with our own minds in meditation. It's very analogous.

That thing that you're describing, of benevolently looking to the good, supporting that, recognizing but not judging too critically what you don't like — all of that is beneficial for the mind.

Always our final question: What are three books you would recommend to the audience?

A new book called “John & Paul: A Love Story in Songs,” by Ian Leslie. Do you know that book?

I've heard of it, yes.

About the Beatles, about: You think you know the Beatles, but you don't know the Beatles.

It did seem to me we needed another book about the Beatles. [Laughs.]

Who thought! But it's so good.

I've heard this actually from other Beatles lovers.

Not just from a Beatles person. In terms of the mutability of the self and the creative act and love — it has everything. It's fantastic.

Donald Hall, the poet: “Essays After Eighty.” Donald Hall was, like, a straighter poet than the Beat poets but of the same time period. He was married for many years to Jane Kenyon, who was younger, and everyone said to her: What? Why are you with this old guy? He's going to die.

But then she died, and so he was alone. He stopped writing poetry, but he kept writing essays from his farmhouse in New Hampshire. And the essays are incredible — about having lived a whole life, some of them about being 80 and some of them reflecting back to when he was young. It just gives a sense of someone who has a cohesive life and a wonderful voice. Totally inspiring.

And the third book is a novel called “Kairos” by Jenny Erpenbeck, who's a German writer, so it's translated. And it's a wonderful novel about the breakup of Berlin, the wall falling in Berlin. It's a love story about a 19-year-old girl and a 50-year-old man

that is incredibly compelling.

Mark Epstein, thank you very much.

Thank you, Ezra. Great to be here.

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