

# “Don’t Believe Everything You Think”

by Joseph Nguyen

## Reading Notes and Discussion Questions

*Matt Henegar, January 2024*

**I. Things vs Feelings; Information vs Insight; Words vs Truth (Introduction)** - Joseph seems confident that we won’t be the same people after reading his book. He also believes that we can find abundant joy and peace, regardless of who we are or where we’ve been. We can improve our professional lives, our relationships, rid ourselves of destructive patterns, etc. ... if we are able to identify and manage what he describes as the “root cause of suffering”, which he will ultimately conclude is ... thinking or maybe over-thinking. Seems a tall order and yet he doesn’t seem arrogant about it; just confident. We shall see...

1. Things vs Feelings. Joseph believes that our desire for things (like the accumulation of wealth, the achievement of status or recognition), is really just the byproduct of our desire for feelings of love, joy, peace and fulfillment. Do you agree? What is your experience in this regard? Have you at times in your life found that you are still unfulfilled even after accomplishing important goals and milestones?

2. Information vs Insight (or Wisdom). He also believes that we already understand what we need. He distinguishes by pointing out a distinction between information and insight. “Insight or wisdom can only be found within.” Do you believe this about yourself? Do believe all the answers already lie deep within your soul? Has that been the case from the beginning? If not, when did they make their way inside of us?

3. Words vs Truth. Joseph believes that his words (and really all words) are not truth, but that they can point us to truth. We need to look beyond the words ... for the feelings and emotions that can’t be expressed entirely in words. Those feelings will confirm what we already know to be truth and will set us free to experience the boundless love, joy, peace and fulfillment that he describes above. The truth is simple, according to Joseph, and it can’t be broken down into smaller constituents. Thus if you want to find truth you need to search for simplicity. What do you think he means? What are some examples of a truth that can’t be broken down into smaller constituents? Do you agree with Joseph here?

**II. The Root Cause of Suffering (Chapters 1 and 2)** - Joseph believes that suffering is optional. Pain is unavoidable in life, but it is up to us to determine whether and the extent to which we will suffer as a result of the experience of pain. He describes two arrows flying our way when we experience pain ... one being the initial experience of the circumstance itself (e.g., being struck by a physical arrow) and the second being our experience of the suffering that follows it (e.g., our emotional reaction to it). We can't control the first arrow, but we can control the second, according to Joseph.

1. Do you agree? What about Thich Nhat Hanh's belief that people "prefer suffering that is familiar" to their own fear of the unknown? What are some examples of that in your own life or the lives of those you know?

2. What did you think of the "two arrows" example? Is it really that easy to end suffering by not reacting to the first "arrow"? Joseph thinks part of our struggle here (and in fact his own struggle) stems from the fact that we live primarily in a world of thought and not in a world of reality. And that it is in the world of thought that suffering exists and becomes most acute. Do you agree? What is your experience in that regard?

3. Have you, like Joseph, struggled through a myriad of self-help gurus, coaches and books, but without any real results in terms of overcoming your own suffering?

4. Joseph begins Chapter 2 with this quote: "One who looks around him is intelligent, one who looks within him is wise" - Matshona Dhliwayo. What was your reaction to it? What is the difference between intelligence and wisdom? What about the difference between information and insight? Which do you think we have more of in the modern world and in what ways is information crowding out wisdom and insight in our age of instant data?

5. How do we move from a "perception" of reality and into reality itself? Joseph uses the coffee shop example ... one person blissfully enjoying their coffee, while the other is miserable, stressed and struggling to figure out their life's meaning and purpose. What was your takeaway here? What happens if instead of ruminating about the meaning of life, we join in the enjoyment of the aroma and the flavor of the coffee in that moment in which we are experiencing it?

6. Do you think suffering can be alleviated if we move from a world of thought and into a world of reality. According to Joseph, the meaning or thinking we give to an event determines how we ultimately feel about it. How do we go about that... moving from our "perception" of reality and into reality itself? "Reality is the event that happened, with no meaning, thinking or interpretation of it."

7. Did it make you sad to think that the rest of the world could be having a completely different experience of the world (due to anxiety over your job, for example) while your loved ones around you would be having entirely different and much happier experience of it? Is it fair to think we should be happy campers rather than worrying about our jobs? Or should those around us be obligated to share in our suffering or burden? What would Jesus say about that? What about Paul and the idea of conforming to Jesus' death? Does the problem of over-thinking at times stem from our understanding (or maybe misunderstanding) of the Gospel and of Paul?

8. Do you agree that the root cause of suffering is our own thinking? Joseph would agree with you that our perception of reality is in fact very real, but we suffer when we believe that our thinking is an inevitable and unchangeable reality, as opposed to understanding how our reality is created. And this understanding may help us to change our experience of life. According to Joseph, the moment we stop thinking is the moment we can eradicate our suffering. What about the example of the monk and his struggles with interruptions that kept impacting his meditations? Do you have an empty boat that bumps up against you in the middle of a lake at times? Is it other people/circumstances or your own reactions that make you angry/frustrated?

**III. Why We Think; Thoughts vs Thinking (Chapters 3 and 4)** - Joseph believes that suffering is optional. Pain is unavoidable in life, but it is up to us to determine whether and the extent to which we will suffer as a result of the experience of pain. He describes two arrows flying our way when we experience pain ... one being the initial experience of the circumstance itself (e.g., being struck by a physical arrow) and the second being our experience of the suffering that follows it (e.g., our emotional reaction to it). We can't control the first arrow, but we can control the second, according to Joseph.

1. Do you agree? What about Thich Nhat Hanh's belief that people "prefer suffering that is familiar" to their own fear of the unknown? What are some examples of that in your own life or the lives of those you know?

2. What is your experience of suffering? Do you "think and think and think" so much that it creates the dynamic of suffering like Jonathan Safran Foer? Do you agree with Joseph that conflict and suffering are derived from innocent misunderstanding... from a belief that things are a threat when maybe they aren't?

3. What is the difference between thoughts and thinking? Joseph starts with the primary distinction that thoughts are something we don't control and are nouns or things, whereas thinking is the action we take with our mind in response to thoughts. What do you "think" about that?

4. How did you react to his example about how much money we want to make next year? Did you go on a "wild rollercoaster" after being asked to think about making five times the amount of money you initially considered? According to Joseph, thoughts are the "energetic raw materials from which we make the world" and it's when we begin thinking about them that we begin to experience negative emotions.

5. What do you think of Joseph's tool for figuring out whether we are thinking. He says thoughts are "inherently infinite, expansive and energetically positive"... when they are from the Divine they lead to positive emotions, feeling lighter and alive. Thinking about our thoughts lead to our feeling "heavy, restricted and limited" ... and are necessary for survival, but are most of the time not necessary and only lead to suffering.

**IV. Thoughts and Emotions;** Accepting Our Reality (Chapters 5 and 6) - Joseph believes that emotions are helpful, but only in the context of survival. And that we can't resolve emotions simply by "thinking positively"... and that in our happiest moments, we don't have deep thoughts about the experience itself, but merely a feeling of being grateful in the moment. In other words, we can't think our way to joy, love and peace.

1. What did you think about Joseph's examples from nature in positing that our natural state is happiness (e.g., babies)? Is he correct that happy times correspond with minimal thinking; whereas anxious times correspondence with excessive thinking? Did you do the exercises that Joseph suggested here... recalling our happiest and most anxious times?

2. What about his notion that it's not the content of our thinking that causes suffering, but the fact that we are having thoughts at all that causes suffering? Assume for purposes of this question that he is not speaking in absolutes... obviously there has to be some amount of thinking in order for us to even be aware that we are happy. As you think about this question, try to imagine the difference between observation (like looking at and smelling a beautiful field of flowers) and analysis (like trying to figure out what caused one of those flowers to become wilted or destroyed).

3. What do you think of Joseph's definition of "Universal Mind" ... that an acorn knows to grow into a tree, how the planets know to stay in orbit, and how our bodies know how to heal themselves? Is he really just talking about God here, even if he doesn't necessarily believe in God (as Joseph pointed out words "point to truth" but are not "truth" unto themselves)? What is your experience in this regard? Do you think that thoughts are what blocks the flow of Universal Mind? If so, is it possible that our thinking (or over-thinking) can sometimes result in separation or distance from God?

4. According to Joseph (and Sydney Banks), "Universal Consciousness" is the collective consciousness of all things and allows us to be aware of our surroundings. I would add that it also allows us also to ponder our existence... the why, the how and the what's next after we no longer exist in human form. He then goes on to describe "Universal Thought". These concepts are the building blocks for the rest of the book. What are your views on these core principles of human awareness? In what ways have different aspects of this "tripod" (if you will) of human awareness and experience been used or abused at times to create chaos or discord in politics, in churches, in families, etc?

5. How did you react to the DVD metaphor? The DVD contains information, TV and player are like consciousness (bringing the information to our awareness) and that electricity is like the invisible "Universal Mind"?

6. What did you think about the notion that all things are connected by Universal Mind and that when things appear separated or disintegrated that it is merely an illusion of our thinking? Are there spiritual concepts that are similar to this in Paul's writings? What about the teachings of Jesus?

**V. How to Thrive in a Word of Non-thinking (Chapters 7, 8 and 9)** - This segment of the book begins with the Zen parable ... of the samurai warrior who is wanting to understand the difference between Heaven and Hell.

1. What did you think of the samurai's experience of heaven and hell? Do you think this is similar to the ways in which the biblical authors try to describe these two places? Are Heaven and Hell actual places (as religious traditions have taught) or states of being (as the Zen master seems to contemplate).

2. Joseph acknowledges that it's not possible to stop thinking, but that if we can reduce the time we spend thinking each day, we can eventually we can live more peaceful and integrated lives. He goes on to describe a process of allowing thoughts to flow through us while minimizing the thinking that instinctively follow. Do you agree? What happens when you become aware of your thinking or overthinking? Have you had experiences in therapy where you allow thoughts to pass without judging them or analyzing them in the way that Joseph is describing? What would Jesus say about it and how does this compare to the lily's of the field? Do you think Joseph has read the Gospels?

3. What did you think about the metaphor of the murky water and letting it settle rather than boiling or filtering it? How do we stop stirring up the dirt? Do you find this indicator helpful? Did it make it easier to know that a state of non-thinking is not something we should expect to achieve all of the time and that we just need to "return home" by using principles of non-thinking?

4. "Anxiety is thought without control; flow is control without thought". Have you experienced anxiety? What about a total state of flow? What did they look like? When do you generally do your best work? Does this help you to contextualize how to exist in a state of non-thinking? What about "mushin" ... being free of thoughts of anger, fear and ego? Does this help you to understand what Joseph is talking about?

5. So how do we set and achieve goals in a state of non-thinking? Joseph thinks it can help to distinguish between goals of inspiration and goals of desperation. Do you agree? What are some examples of each in your experience? What about the difference between "means" and "ends" goals? Do you generally live your life and set your goals from a perspective of abundance or scarcity (creating because we want to vs. creating because we think we need to)? Which ones typically work out best for you? Do you believe in "divine inspiration"? How does that fit with these other concepts?

**VI. Unconditional Love, Joy and Peace (Chapters 10 and 11)** - Joseph believes the greatest power human beings can achieve is unconditional love. He talks about how love comes from an “infinite source” to which we are all connected, but that we can’t necessarily develop a logical framework for specific reasons why we love or conditions upon which our love will remain. And, importantly, the thing that gets in the way of our love is our own thinking.

1. Do you agree that unconditional creation/love is always innovative, unique, new, captivating, bold, different, revolutionary, etc? In what ways is this approach similar to the approach Paul took in Chapter 3 of Colossians? How can Joseph’s approach change the way we approach scriptures like that?

2. How do we balance the competing ideas Jason talked about in his sermon on Colossians Chapter 3 (i.e., “I do; therefore I am” vs. looking at Jesus as merely another deity vs. the idea of being embodied by God and Jesus in the here and now)? Is the idea of intimacy with God (or “unconditional love”) still radical and revolutionary today (as it was in Paul’s time)? In what ways? Jason said, in talking about the list of the old ways of living, “[t]his list is meant for self-reflection; not for the judgment of others”. What are your thoughts about that? Can you see how Joseph views his own lists not as “do’s and don’ts” or “how-to’s” but more as indicators of where you are on journey toward truth, wholeness and unconditional love? Do you think that is what Paul meant in Colossians Chapter 3?

3. What about creation from abundance as compared to scarcity or fear? Do you agree that creation from abundance stems from a state of non-thinking? What do you think Joseph means by that?

4. How do we return to our “natural state of peace”? How is that concept similar to what Paul was talking about? What about flow and momentum? And creating from inspiration as opposed to desperation?

**VII. How do We Distinguish Good from Bad, Know What to Do or Follow Our Intuition (Chapters 12, 13 and 14)**

1. Do you agree with Joseph that nothing is either good or bad ... that we just need to look for truth? Does are belief in right and wrong impact what we believe about truth? Or that universal truth resides only where all have to conclude the same on whether something is right or wrong?
2. Assuming that we aren't supposed to think, how do we get to the point of knowing what to do? Do you think the notion of trying to reconcile outside sources with our gut feeling or intuition can throw us off? What are some examples?
3. What about the notion that society will not agree with our intuition until it is mainstream?
4. Do you agree that we always already know what to do but that our thinking gets in the way of it? What about the example of exercise? What about self interest?
5. Have you experienced a state of flow? What does it feel like? Does it help you understand what Joseph means by non-thinking? What do you think of Joseph's description of the way that God uses the name "I Am" to describe who God is ... as opposed to "I was" or "I will be"? Do you agree that you can only know truth in each moment?
6. What about the notion that we don't need to know everything? Can you see areas where the opposite of this has led to destructive tendencies in churches? What is the difference between knowing "truth" and the "how"?

### **VIII. Miracles, Obstacles and Now What (Chapters 15, 16 and 17)**

1. Do you agree that miracles are antithetical to predictability? How does that look? How does fear get in the way of our intuition and thus the possibility of miracles? How do we create space for miracles? Did you resonate with the story of the zen master and the scholar's cup overflowing with tea?
2. How do we create space in our minds to allow us to access universal truth? Do you think this is a state we need to be in at all times? Or is this a tool we can use in the rhythm of our lives? What about Einstein and his violin?
3. What about Joseph's 3 steps? (1) becoming aware that our thinking is the root cause of our negative emotions, (2) creating space and surrendering the "how" and (3) become aware of feelings of love, peace and joy.
4. Is it true that when we stop seeing things and problems they stop BEING problems? What about having faith in the unknown or the things we can't control? How is this fundamentally different than the paradigm taught by most religions?
5. Does the beginning truly happen when we think we are at the ending? Do you agree that you are a different person now from when you started reading this book? Is that true with every book? Is that true with every moment? In what ways does that reality help affirm the truth that Joseph was trying to teach us through the course of this book?

"Everything we could possibly want and need is already inside us. We are already all of the joy, love, peace and fulfillment we have ever wanted."