

# silence

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AN INTERVIEW WITH  
JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN



# creative intuition

BY AMY SCHMIDT

Joseph Goldstein is mentor and inspiration to thousands of meditation practitioners, and has been leading retreats around the world since 1974. Author of *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom*, *The Experience of Insight*, and co-author of *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, he is the co-founder and guiding teacher of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Ma. Joseph is currently overseeing the creation and construction of The Forest Refuge project at IMS, which will provide individuals the opportunity to do long-term, personal retreats in silence and solitude. His latest book is *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism*, due out in June, 2002. (See [www.dharma.org/ims](http://www.dharma.org/ims) for retreat schedules and further information.)

**WHJ:** What did you learn about the creative process in designing the Forest Refuge?

**JOSEPH:** The first thing I learned is that it's possible for it to be mentored, because in working with the architects, I learned a lot about opening up to new ways of seeing things and understanding. To be working with somebody with a more developed artistic/creative vision opens up one's own creativity. It kind of takes us beyond our own limitations, our own little box of how we see things.

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Amy Schmidt, IMS resident teacher, is the author of *Knee Deep In Grace: The Extraordinary Life & Teachings of Dipa Ma*, Present Perfect Books, November 2000

The second thing I learned was that often when you come up against a problem—in design, for example—there are different ways of resolving it. One way is an interactive one, almost like brainstorming. But sometimes what would happen is that just out of the sitting space, when I would get my mind quiet, an idea or a resolution would come out of the silence. So I connected just with the intuitive aspect of creativity. You know, how sometimes you're really working a problem, and other times you just create a silent space and the solution appears.

And the third thing I learned was to trust my own sense of when something is right and when it's not right. Because there were many times in the process where different design solutions to a certain problem were proposed, even by the mentors, and one tendency in the mind was just to go along. But I always had a very visceral reaction to things that I felt weren't right—I really felt it like a contraction in my heart, and I couldn't ignore it because it was so strong. Sometimes we got into fights over it, but I was always glad I pushed, because at least from my perspective, what we would then come up with always seemed much more harmonious. And in that respect, even the people in the mentoring role learned that even though they were professionals and had a much better understanding of many things, they also had their own boxes, so it became a two-way dynamic.

**WHJ:** More specifically, what did you see about the relationship between the creative process and *dharma* practice?

**JOSEPH:** The big connection between them is my sense that the more silent we become, inwardly, the deeper the creative process is—those creative wellsprings really come out of silence, silence of mind. The deepest ones. And so the whole meditative process of quieting the mind opens up the whole realm of creativity, intuition, spontaneity. It gets underneath the personal, egoic level to that place of intuitive understanding and wisdom. It feels more “not-self.” And I think this is true not only in the artistic creative process, but in everything: in relationships, in teaching, in writing.

**WHJ:** So you found that to be the case in writing your new book?

**JOSEPH:** It was a very similar process. I had just finished writing *One Dharma*, and often I would just get stuck on a paragraph, where it wasn't clear how to order things or what the next step was. And I was writing this a lot on retreat, so I would be sitting and writing, sitting and writing. And it was amazing: everytime I came to a stuck place, I would just sit, and out of a sitting space it just flowed, the writing just came by itself. There was that sense of getting out of the way and letting it come through from that place of stillness. So creativity becomes non-personal, and feels much freer, and fuller and less neurotic—there's less ego in it. And it was the same thing in designing the Refuge.

**WHJ:** In terms of artists "getting out of the way" ...that is very similar to the notion of stepping aside from the "I" in meditation practice...are they the same?

**JOSEPH:** The sense of getting out of the way is the same. But in terms of what happens, there's a different intention in a creative process and in the meditative process. So although both involve quieting the mind and getting out of the way, I don't think it's the same process. The intention of the creative process is to create, to be expressive of something, or to bring something to fruition or completion. Whereas the intention in the meditative process is basically to see into the nature of things without grasping, without clinging.

**WHJ:** So does the creative process involve grasping?

**JOSEPH:** I don't think it necessarily involves grasping, but in one sense, it has more like a *samadhi*, or concentration flavor to it, in that you're keeping the mind focussed on a particular theme—like the building, or the book. So that would be like a concentration practice where you keep the mind on loving-kindness, or on compassion—there's a directed quality to it. Whereas in *vipassana* practice, if a creative idea comes, the intention is to simply see it as an empty idea arising and passing—you're not staying with it, you're not following it. So one's attitude toward what's arising is different.

**WHJ:** Although it sounds like it could be both, because there's an absorption quality in the creative process, but there was also the sitting, getting out of the way and letting something come through.

**JOSEPH:** Yes, there is that opening in the silence and suddenly a new idea comes through, but then there's some intention to remember it, expand it, to invest in it's elaboration. Whereas in *vipassana* it would really be quite different: it would just be equal to everything else, there would be no special interest in it. Whereas in the creative process I think there *is* a special interest in particular things.

**WHJ:** Given that, do you think that the creative process can lead to freedom or awakening?

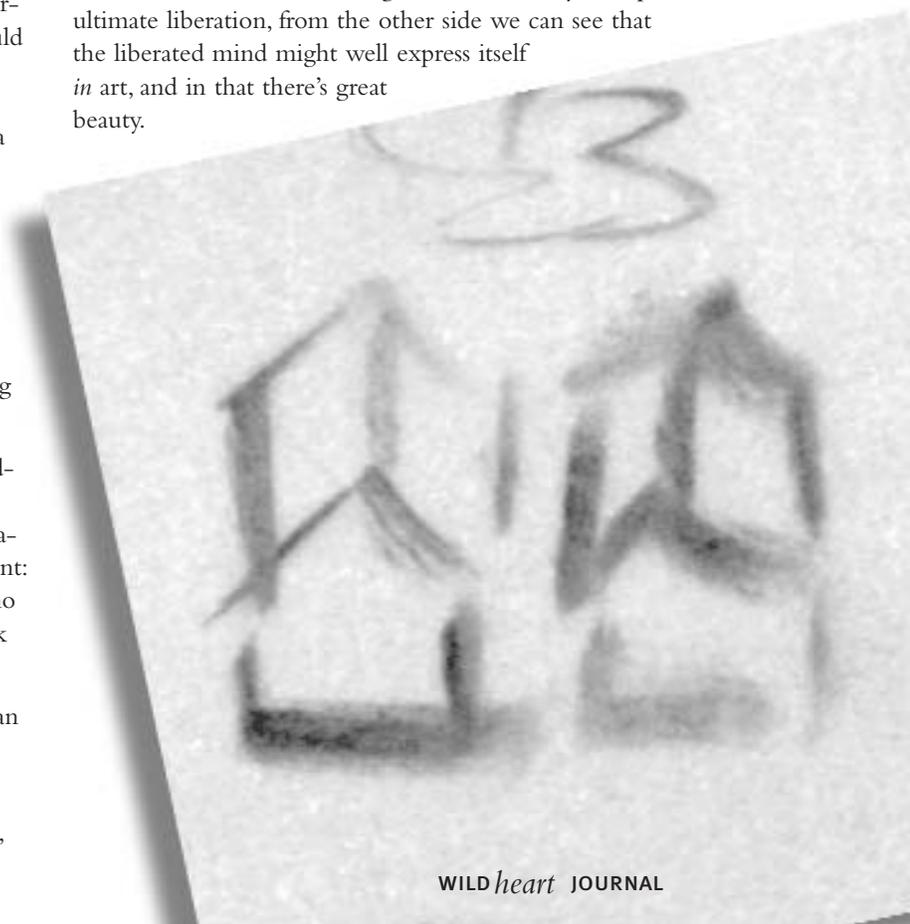
**JOSEPH:** I don't really see it. I would like to think that it can, and maybe it does in ways that I don't yet understand,

but I haven't yet seen how it really penetrates deeply into the empty, impermanent nature of the mind, body, or consciousness—I don't quite see it getting to that level. But that's only in my limited experience, so I wouldn't want to foreclose that possibility. But it hasn't been my experience and it's not obvious to me how it might happen. So I see areas of overlap between the creative process and the meditative one, like two intersecting circles—there's an area of overlap, and areas that are distinct.

**WHJ:** This is often a big debate among artists.

**JOSEPH:** To see it from another side...I don't know if the creative process by *itself* actually leads to awakening—I haven't experienced that or seen any particular evidence for it. On the other hand, though, I've seen artistic expressions of the awakened mind. As an example, some years ago I went to a museum exhibit of ancient scroll paintings of Japanese Zen masters. And it was amazing, because after seeing the exhibit, we went up through the other floors of the museum and saw more traditional Western painting. And this may be my Buddhist bias, but there was such a difference between the quality of the paintings of the Zen masters and even some of the great western artists, in terms of expressing the feeling or the essence of emptiness. It just felt like the paintings of the Zen masters came from a very ego-less place, whereas the feeling of many of the western artists was that it was more from an ego place. But it's hard to say what was my projection on it and what was a genuine feeling response.

So while artistic endeavor might not necessarily be a path to ultimate liberation, from the other side we can see that the liberated mind might well express itself *in* art, and in that there's great beauty.





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**WHJ:** Why didn't the Buddha ever mention creativity?

**JOSEPH:** Possibly because, as I just said, it's not really a path to freedom, or, and this is all just conjecture, because the language we use to describe different aspects of the mind is very culturally conditioned. Certain cultures place a lot of value on creativity, and it may be that that same energy, in another culture, would just be described in a completely different way. They might use very different language to describe it.

**WHJ:** Is there an art for the benefit of all beings?

**JOSEPH:** I think it's all in the motivation, not in the art per se. Many activities can be done with that motivation—it's a dedication of that energy within oneself that it be for the benefit of all, and then the activity flows from the motivation. I think that that's what infuses it—and that would be true of everything. It would be really interesting in the creative process to actually see what happens to that process if that aspiration or motivation is emphasized in the beginning. So that really becomes a practice, the setting of intention: "may whatever comes be for the benefit of all," and then just to see what the power of that intention is on the creative process.

**WHJ:** The editors were considering calling this issue the Broken Heart Journal...can you speak of the function of creativity and working with the collective broken heart during these particularly difficult times?

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**JOSEPH:** I think there are different levels on which you can examine that question. One is simply as a way of expressing what's deeply felt, as a way of opening to it and letting it out so it's not bottled up inside. In that sense, the creative process can be really therapeutic. In a way, that's kind of obvious—people have often used creative processes for that, as a way of expressing deeply held feelings and emotions and letting them out, which is also a chance to learn about them. Those feelings may not be conscious and the creative process can be a vehicle for bringing the unconscious to light, which is part of its therapeutic value, becoming aware of what's there.

In another way, what nurtures the creative process—coming to a place of silence and stillness, and allowing for creative intuition to happen—is the same process that's always needed: a letting go of strong attachments or clinging to position and view, a dropping down into a place of stillness that might see the whole situation in a larger context, a potentially healing context.

But to the degree that the mind is contracted in attachment to a single perspective, it makes it difficult to actually come to a more global view. So the same process that allows for creativity to happen also allows for the healing process to happen, both individually, in terms of opening up to all one's own different and sometimes conflicting emotions, but also opening to just completely other ways of holding the whole situation that we might not see or we might not be open to when we're holding to a very fixed position.

Often with conflicts, whether they're internal conflicts, or interpersonal conflicts, or cultural conflicts, the nature of conflict is that we hold things in very polarized ways. And just as stillness and quieting the mind often present creative resolutions in art, it's that same stillness that might present creative resolutions to conflict. It's dropping down into that place to see if there's another way of seeing all this without any particular agenda. And that's not easy to do—it's both important and challenging and sometimes a little scary, to go into a place of real openness, without a preconception one way or another.

Just consider the range of views in our current situation: “all the military action is really good,” “all of it's really bad,” depending on where you are on the political spectrum. But to let go of all of it and to drop in and see, okay, “what is the most skillful response in a situation like this?” and then to just sit in the question and see what the creative/intuitive process brings forth without preconception. We could really learn a lot, perhaps in unexpected ways, because we're not pre-programming our conclusion. We're just sitting in the openness. It's like holding a koan.

**WHJ:** Can you compare and distinguish between the power of the terrorist situation in the political arena, creating so much fear, with the inner terrorists that perpetually attack our psyches and peace of mind?

**JOSEPH:** In one sense it's the same thing. The terrorist attacks in the world or the terrorist attacks within our own



## So the same process that allows for creativity to happen also allows for the healing process to happen

minds are both manifestations of greed and hatred and delusion and ignorance and fear and pride and all of those unskillful factors of mind. The Buddha taught that all of them are real dangers, but generally we downplay that part of the message, that they're dangerous: "Oh yeah, they're kind of unskillful, but..." But I think the Buddha was pointing out that they really *are* dangerous, and we see that they are, as these very same forces in ourselves get played out in the world. There's an intimate connection.

It's amazing just to see in one's own meditation practice that every time you see a thought of ill-will, or hatred or fear, and you're sitting in a space of being mindful of it and watching it come and go and not acting on it, not even investing in it, you see the potential for freedom. It's right there. That's the great gift of the dharma. We don't have to be subject to these patterns of conditioning. But it clearly takes awareness and training. And that's what the Forest Refuge project is really about.

There are mini-terrorist attacks all the time between people. Of course not with the same deadly consequences, but with harmful enough consequences. Every time we're expressing some form of ill-will or hatred or greed, it's doing damage to ourselves, other people, to the environment. ❖