

“You Felt Some Tension In Your Jaw”

I once witnessed a particularly good example of add-ons when I was teaching a retreat with my colleague Joseph Goldstein. We were sitting drinking tea when a student in some distress came in and said, “I just had this terrible experience.” Joseph asked “What happened?” And the man said, “I was meditating and I felt all this tension in my jaw and I realized what an incredibly uptight person I am, and always have been and always will be.”

“You mean you felt some tension in your jaw,” Joseph said. And the man said, “Yes. And I’ve never been able to get close to anyone, and I’m going to be alone for the rest of my life.”

“You mean you felt tension in your jaw,” Joseph said. I watched the man continue barreling down this path for some time, all because of a sore jaw, until finally Joseph said to him, “You’re having a painful experience. Why are you adding a horrible self-image to it?”

I’m sure you know how the man with the sore jaw felt. We’ve all had times when we’ve declared ourselves total losers or envisioned a bad end based on a fleeting sensation or thought. A typical trip down that path goes like this: I bend down to tie my shoe, and somehow I pull a muscle in my back. *This is the beginning of the end*, I think. *Now everything will start to go*. (Joseph would say, “You mean you hurt your back.”)

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