Mark Epstein, MD

Mark Epstein, MD, is a psychiatrist in private practice in New York City and lectures frequently about the value of Buddhist meditation in psychotherapy. In addition to *Open to Desire,* his previous books include *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart*, and *Going on Being*-over 250,000 copies sold combined. He is a contributing editor to Tricycle: The Buddhist Review and has written many articles for *Yoga Journal* and *O*: *The Oprah Magazine*.

The Promise of Buddhist Psychology
An Interview with Mark Epstein, MD

Interview by Matt Laughlin

UE (*UnifiedEnergetics*™): I really enjoyed hearing you at a talk you gave at Naropa's contemplative psychotherapy conference this summer. It seems a couple of unlikely teachers you met in Boulder one summer helped introduce you to the essence of meditation. How did that come to be?

ME (Mark Epstein): I came out to Boulder at the suggestion of a graduate student-teacher of mine at Harvard, Daniel Goleman, who has gone on to write a number of books, including *Emotional Intelligence*. He was there as a graduate student teaching a section of a psychophysiology course. He had just come back from India himself, and I could tell he knew something about this stuff in which I was beginning to get interested. He said look, go out to Boulder if you want to know more because friends of mine are teaching out there this summer and you'll be able to learn from the source, so to speak.

So I journeyed out there and signed up for all kinds of courses. I was learning various forms of Buddhist meditation and Buddhist psychology and philosophy; everything I could get my hands on. But I was in my school mode, basically, where I thought if I took good notes and studied well and asked good questions, I could learn what I needed to learn. Yet, what I really wanted was to learn how to meditate, or how to experience what meditation could reveal to me.

They had rented apartments at Naropa for the students who were visiting, and had given me a couple of roommates. These two young men, twins from Long Island whose parents owned a fruit and vegetable business, were already experts in naturopathy and herbal approaches to treating illnesses. It was the first time I saw the book *Back To Eden* because that was their bible. (Laughter) They were at Naropa but not going to many of the classes because they were turned off by the egos of a lot of teachers who were professing to have no ego. After a couple of weeks, instead of going to class they started making regular, early morning trips to Denver's wholesale fruit and vegetable market, and bringing back big crates of local produce.

Fruitlessly going from class to class, I remember coming back to my apartment increasingly frustrated by my failure to understand in a deep way what all

this Buddhist stuff was about. Finally, one of the twins looked at me, taking pity on me actually, (Laughter) and said, 'Mark, come over here, I want to teach you to juggle.' I thought to myself - juggle? But he threw me an orange or two, and started to show me how to throw. First one orange, then two, and after a couple of days, three, and so forth. I remember practicing diligently, because I wanted to prove to him that I could do it. And there suddenly came a moment where I was really juggling; my mind quieted down and I was just in the movements of the juggling, and I realized that this was what all the meditation language was trying to describe. I was no longer centered in my thinking mind and I was at peace.

UE There was another poignant memory you wrote about in your book, *Going on Being*, where you reunited with Ram Dass many years after first meeting him that summer in Boulder. As you talked about working with people in a healing context, in the practice of psychotherapy, he asked you something that struck you deeply.

ME People are always asking me what it means to be a so-called Buddhist psychiatrist, or a Buddhist psychotherapist; how is it really different? I feel like my life's work, if I could be so presumptuous, has really been to try to find out what that is, because I don't really know. I have had to discover through doing it and then kind of teasing it out later; what is it about what I'm doing that might have been influenced from the Buddhist side.

I had known Ram Dass for many years, but it was a year or two after he had his stroke when I had this conversation with him. He once had this kind of golden tongue, where he could tell beautiful stories that took you on a journey and then would reveal something to you at the end. He could hardly talk now, but even so, I had this magnificent exchange while visiting with him in Northern California. We were just sitting out on his porch watching the wind move the trees in the distance, and he would say, 'isn't this a lovely spot.' We were just chatting with long pauses. He was newly recovered and while it was hard for him to find the language, he was quite present.

At some point, he asked me that question you're referring to. First, he asked, 'look, do you consider yourself a Buddhist therapist?' and I, with some trepidation, said yes. And then he asked me something that I didn't quite understand at first; he said, 'well, do you see them as already free?' It kind of struck me by surprise. Once I got his meaning, I had this beautiful feeling in my chest; a kind of opening. Because he really captured something that I hadn't articulated for myself, but I think is true. In essence, in the Buddhist way of thinking, this was the realization that we are already free.

Buddhanature is present in everybody, but it's covered over by all of the accumulated grime of our childhood and our conditioning, and our own attempts to secure a cohesive, solid self. He really just got to the essence of it, which is when you approach somebody from a Buddhist perspective; you're approaching them as if their Buddhanature is intact. All that has to be done is to kind of clear away the obscurations so it can emerge. In essence, that's the role of the therapist; to try to aid in clearing away those obscurations.

UE You often write or speak of psychotherapy as analogous to meditation. Would you speak more to that?

ME Well, my big discovery about that came while training as a psychiatrist. It might be a little different in the medical world than for therapists who are trained in other streams, but when training as a psychiatrist you don't really get very much hands-on training in *how* to be a therapist. You're first exposed

to a lot of the pathology. You learn in your studies what all the different kinds of mental illness might be, and then you go to the hospital where the patients are being treated. You learn the various drug treatments and the various kinds of interventions. But what little training in how to do therapy is very academic and not really experiential.

When it comes time to be the therapist, they follow the medical model, which is 'see one, do one, teach one'. So, there came a time where I was kind of thrust into the room and it was my turn to 'do' the therapist. I had very little to go on about how to do that other than my own experiences in therapy and my own experiences with meditation. I remember thinking to myself, well, if I could give this person the same kind of meditative attention that I'd learned to give my own mind, maybe it would be psychotherapeutic.

That's what I tried to do and it seemed, from what I could tell, to work. There is a method of deploying attention that is specifically cultivated and taught and transmitted in the east, in the Buddhist world. I think Freud knew this and his followers also rediscovered this, you could say, only they had a little more trouble articulating how to do it or hand it down. If you read Freud's instructions for physicians practicing psychoanalysis, he sounds like a Buddhist teacher. Sometimes when I've given talks, I've read these passages from Freud, read passages from Buddhist teachers, and then asked people to tell who's who, and it's impossible to tell.

UE I recall you noting something about Freud's writing that the process of attention in psychotherapy is akin to maintaining an unfettered mind.

ME Yes; giving impartial attention to everything there is to observe and not bothering about whether you're keeping anything in mind.

UE Would you speak to how awareness itself is intrinsically curative?

ME Well, that's the great promise of Buddhist psychology. It needs to be investigated by each person individually, but that's the great promise. Permit the contents of the mind to come into awareness without pushing away what is unpleasant or holding on too tightly to what you like. This is especially relevant with the conflicted material, the difficult emotions, the stuff that you're ashamed of or would rather not admit to happening. The idea is that if you train yourself to allow that material to float up into awareness, it becomes self-liberating.

If you can bring it into the light of awareness, the method of liberation is that you can understand what is called the emptiness of phenomena. That reveals itself to you if you learn how to be with it in this non-judgmental way; in seeing its emptiness, it loses power over you. This is true with the very difficult kinds of feelings that have tortured people or plagued them since they were very young. If you can learn to see it with an eye towards understanding its intrinsic emptiness, it doesn't necessarily go away, but it loses its power.

UE What have been some of your greatest challenges in doing this kind of work with people?

ME In doing this kind of work, I initially had this notion that I think came out of my early exploration of the spiritual side of things, including that work with Ram Dass and various Buddhist teachers in my early twenties in Boulder. I had the notion that even with deeply troubled individuals who were in need of psychotherapy, if I could just basically love them purely enough, that alone would be enough. That motivation was certainly helpful and the knowledge that there was an underlying capacity to love that could touch people was also very important. But what I found was that this notion overlooked how important it was to deal with hatred and anger and rage. I realized I was lacking an effective means of taking on those kinds of very intense and very apparently real feelings, which can be the strongest emotional force in people who need help.

I wasn't instinctively skillful with people who were very troubled in that way. I just wanted to love them until they weren't angry, and that didn't work. Or rather, that effort and energy got all entwined with what they were trying to work through, and perverted it in a kind of way. I really needed supervision and good teaching to learn how to deal with very intense negative feelings from a therapeutic standpoint, which involved basically learning how to confront those feelings without being trapped by them. The best teaching I ended up getting as a psychotherapist was around those issues. I think that's continued to be an ongoing challenge because that is the most difficult kind of work.

UE Do you find that a Buddhist orientation, applied skillfully, is actually helpful with that?

ME What I find is that a psychoanalytic orientation applied skillfully is the most helpful with that. A lot of alternative practitioners come to see me for what they hope will be supervision; I try to discourage them because I don't do supervision though I am willing to work with them personally. In the alternative

community, this particular challenge around skillfully working with these issues seems to be very common. It is the most difficult, not just for me, but for a lot of people whose primary orientation comes from this more holistic and loving kind of approach.

They often get tripped up in just this way, because they haven't been taught how to structure things for their patient or client in a very measured and controlled way that really helps people who are struggling with those issues. They have little training around how to set very firm boundaries, how to be very clear about what is and isn't acceptable, how to be willing to end the treatment if people act out too much around those kinds of feelings. I think deep down the Buddhist approach is the right approach. The fundamental strategy of being nonjudgmental and not letting oneself take things personally and not being caught by the pleasant or the unpleasant is very helpful. But in regards to the actual method of structuring and confronting, the psychoanalysts are actually very together and skillful with that.

The more traditional psychotherapy, psychoanalytically oriented professionals have much to offer. They really understand primitive anger and how it persists in adults, how it can insinuate itself into otherwise good relationships and destroy them. They really understand the destructive potential that we all have, and have figured out some good ways of taking that down over time. The premise is aligned with Buddhism, which holds that when people are being destructive like that, it's not making them happy, and if you can skillfully point out to them how they are making themselves very unhappy doing so, then there is a way in. But it is so easy to get judgmental of the behavior or of them personally, and then they may feel criticized or angrier. So to do this skillfully is a challenge.

UE It seems as though a therapist well advanced in Buddhist practice, someone very unlikely to take things personally, and aligned with the client's best interests, may cultivate this psychoanalytic capacity you speak of. Does that make sense?

ME Yes, that does make sense. And I think that the two approaches work very nicely together in that way you're pointing to. Because in order to have what you're calling the psychoanalytic capacity, in a certain way, you have to not care if you're hurting someone's feelings. You have to be willing to tell the truth about how you feel with them and how they're destroying their inner world or the people most precious to them. You have to be willing to point that out, not exactly in a cold way but in an honest way. In a detached enough way that someone can hear you and still feel the love that is there, but also be brought up short. I think maybe some of the Japanese Masters are good at that. (Laughter) It's more that kind of energy.

UE Yeah, that's the kind of energy your description brought to mind. (Laughter)

ME There's this beautiful documentary about Leonard Cohen, who has had a twenty-year relationship with a very old, very severe, but very beautiful Zen Master in the mountains outside of Los Angeles. The movie is not really about the Zen aspect of Leonard Cohen's life, but it does have a little piece in which it talks about this relationship very beautifully. The documentary talks about how this guy doesn't really care who Leonard thought he was, therefore they could have a real relationship. But it is described much better than that. (Laughter) There is something about what a psychoanalyst can do that resembles that.

UE Are you working on another book?

ME I am working on a book that is actually a collection of articles that I've written over the past, God knows, twenty-five or thirty years. It is basically going to chart my thinking as I'm moving toward describing Buddhist psychotherapy. It's going to be put out by Yale University Press, probably a little less than a year from now.

UE How is it to go back and read something you wrote twenty years ago and resist an inclination to edit it?

ME It is amazing, really, because it's like, who

wrote this? And there are actually all kinds of good ideas in it that I totally have forgotten. (Laughter) I think, let's just go back and start over. (Laughter)

UE Regarding your most recent book, *Open to Desire*, I recall you wrote about a seemingly simple statement by the Dalai Lama that made you pause and really come to appreciate the wisdom in it. To paraphrase, his statement was that 'all beings are seeking happiness; it is the purpose of life'. In the context of your book about working with desire, it reminded me of the Socratic dictum, that all humankind seeks what is the greatest good, only we are not always capable of discerning what that is. Both seem to point to the intrinsic innocence in our desire.

ME And therefore, there is nothing to be ashamed of in the desiring. *Open to Desire* is a book I wrote in part as a result of having been involved in the alternative community, or the Buddhist community, or the people-seeking-spiritual-something-or-other-community. (Laughter) What I have found so often, and I think this is a misunderstanding, is that many people tend to demonize that quality of desire in themselves; thinking that Buddhism was teaching that desire itself was the source of suffering, instead of clinging or craving, which to my mind is actually different from desire.

So, I wanted to write about how desire itself was something that could be part of the path, and something that if you learned to pay attention to in the same way that Buddhism teaches you to pay attention to everything, it could be a vehicle of awakening in and of itself. As a psychotherapist, I wanted to go into some of the more hidden material in Buddhism that talks directly about erotic experience as experiences that can reveal aspects of what the awakened mind feels like. In Buddhism, such experiences may be viewed as a metaphor for that which points towards enlightenment, such as the joyful feelings that happen during sex.

UE Would you speak of the more difficult qualities of desire or wantingness?

ME One of the things that tends to happen under the spell of desire is that we objectify that which we're desiring. We make it into more of an object than it really is, so it assumes a kind of permanence, or promises maybe more than it can actually deliver, and then we end up being disappointed. It is our own desire that leaves us feeling still wanting, and we need something to blame when we end up feeling disappointed. So, we blame either the disappointing person whom we've turned into an object, or we blame ourselves for desiring in the first place, rather than understanding that desiring can never be totally fulfilled. It always leaves you wanting because that is its nature. But that doesn't have to be such a problem if we can learn to see it like it is, and then partake of desire without expecting too much from it.

The other important thing about desire is that it's really only through desire that we understand what we think of as the 'self.' The self is informed by desire, that's how we get to know ourselves; by permitting ourselves to desire that which we desire. On the Buddhist path, what's most important is to try to get a handle on who we think we are; to try and let the self appear just as it is, so that we can understand its intrinsic emptiness. But if we're busy pushing desire away, then we never really get to know ourselves, and then we can never really understand who we're not. Then we're just stuck, being a kind of false person, denying being a real person.

UE It seems such a contextualization brings a sense of compassion or acceptance to our humanity.

ME If there is any compassion coming through, I do think it has to do with that. There are a lot of people who are genuinely seeking something that ends up taking them out of who they really are, distracted by desire rather than seeking what it may reveal. And there can be a kind of discomfort with the basic fabric of what it means to be human, and that just creates a split, which really has to be healed somewhere. To my mind, it's better to be humble about who we are than pretending to be something that we are not.

UE It seems as though you are reframing this human propensity that we all have to vilify or attack an aspect of ourselves as a doorway to walk through to discover who we actually are.

ME That's exactly right, exactly what I'm trying to do. Whatever that thing is that we're attempting to vilify, it doesn't have to be desire, it could be some kind of anger or hurt. Whatever that is, that is usually where the self is actually crystallized, so it's only by opening your awareness to just that quality you would prefer not to look at that you can find that crystallized self, which has to be found in order for selflessness to be understood and realized.

UE You refer to your experience of raising a family in your writings, and have written that meditation in one sense can be viewed as a form of re-parenting. Would you speak to what you mean by that?

ME Sure. Because I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Buddhism in my early twenties, I had a whole long period where I was going off on retreat a couple of times a year. I was so grateful for that, because I felt like in the retreat environment I could really discover what meditation could teach me about my mind, and let me go really deeply into the meditative experience. Then I met Arlene and got married and we started to have a family; I turned around and eleven years had gone by and I hadn't gone on retreat. Yet, I didn't feel I had lost my connection to what I had learned on those retreats. So, eleven years later I went back and did another retreat, as the kids were old enough for me to leave for a short period. I discovered that the whole experience was still there for me, which was so reassuring.

I had done my first retreats with a good friend of mine, Jon Kabat-Zinn, who some of your readers will know from his work with the mindfulness-based stress reduction programs. He said something to me that was always helpful when things got difficult. He had kids before I did, and described having kids as like being on a ten-year retreat, or a twenty-year retreat!

(Laughter) I always quoted that when it got rough. Because the thing about having a family is that you're not on your own schedule, you're on somebody else's schedule, much like a retreat schedule. You just have to put down your own agenda; it's secondary.

If you're fighting with what's going on - being woken in the middle of the night, cleaning up vomit or your children hating you (Laughter) - it makes it a million times more difficult. But if you're just there with everything just as it is, it opens up this amazing world. I really felt like I had learned something from my retreat experiences that made being a parent easier. And what that revealed is how everyday life, ordinary life, is the bedrock of spiritual practice.

I started reading Winnicott, a psychoanalyst who was really writing about this view all the time, I think. He writes about what it means to be a good enough mother or parent, and he's talking about not taking it personally when your child hates you, not abandoning or retaliating in the face of difficulty, but just staying present enough that the child doesn't experience you as horrible. (Laughter) For me, the work of Winnicott brought all of this together. He was like a great poet of what it means to first be a parent, and then to be a therapist.

In regards to how meditation can be a kind of re-parenting, I think that one of the things that is revealed on a retreat, when you're spending a lot of time watching your own mind, is those little ways that we're all self-critical or that we're all abandoning. We see how we are replicating, in a way, the kind of mistakes that our parents made with us, in how we deal with our own difficulty. Our own material comes up that we have difficult feelings about and we will tend to be either critical of it or quickly turn away

from it, just as perhaps our own parents did when we acted in ways that they didn't approve of. When you see those patterns over and over again, you can start to reshape them once you have gained some control over your mind. So, I think there is a way to talk about or think about meditation as a kind of re-parenting.

UE Where is your work taking you today? What is most inspiring?

ME Most of what my work has been and continues to be is day-to-day therapy practice in New York. Working with my clients or patients is still what is inspiring me most. In terms of where my own thinking has gone, my own teaching and so on, I've really been enjoying collaborating and teaching with a couple of colleagues and friends, Sharon Salzberg and Bob Thurman. A couple of times a year, I'll teach a one-, two-, three- or four-day workshop with them. The workshops attract not only therapists, but other people interested in the dharma, including artists and writers. I always learn from Bob and Sharon, because I'm coming more from a therapeutic side and they're coming from a dharma teacher's view in Sharon's case, and a professor of religion in Thurman's case. There is a very nice dialogue and rapport that arises. That's been fun.

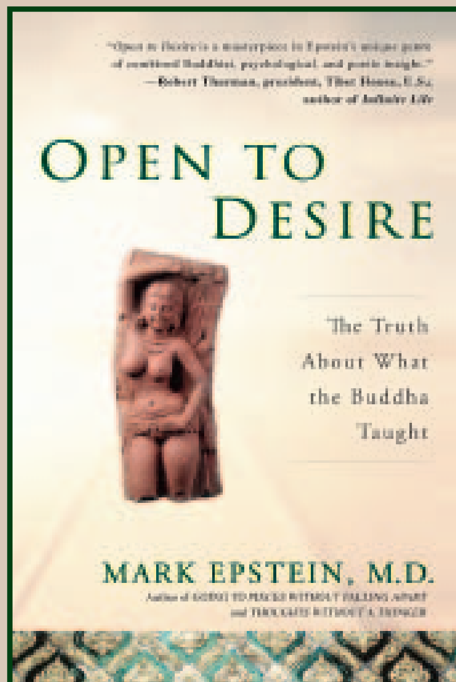
I have also written some articles about the process of making art, the process of doing meditation and the process of doing psychotherapy, and what it is that links all of those creative activities. I think that's leading more into thinking about what one might call the art of psychotherapy. There is so much emphasis these days on quantifying and organizing, almost in a workbook kind of way, what it is that makes therapy therapeutic. People are, for good reason, trying to operationalize therapy and trying to prove how it works scientifically. But I'm more interested in keeping the art of it alive, especially how a meditation practice might make someone a little more skillful in this art. If I have any more writing left to do, it will be around that.

UE And you're children are how old?

ME Sixteen and nineteen.

UE You're approaching the end of your twenty-year retreat!

ME Yeah, so maybe I'll go on another kind of retreat, of a different nature. (Laughter)



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