

Tricycle Talks
Episode #69 with Mark Epstein
“Therapy as Mutual Discovery”
January 12, 2022



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Psychotherapist Mark Epstein is often asked how he incorporates his Buddhist practice into his therapy sessions. His latest book offers an answer to that question. In *The Zen of Therapy: Uncovering a Hidden Kindness in Life*, Epstein documents dozens of therapy sessions over the course of a year, tracing Buddhist themes that arise. Weaving together psychoanalytic theory, Zen poetry, and the music of John Cage, Epstein presents a compelling model of therapy as spiritual friendship.

In today’s episode of *Tricycle Talks*, I sit down with Epstein to discuss Zen koans, the improvisational nature of therapy, and the art of listening.

James Shaheen: I’m here with Buddhist author and psychotherapist Mark Epstein. Hi, Mark. It’s great to be with you.

Mark Epstein: Hi James, it’s great to see you again.

James Shaheen: You’ve been a contributor to *Tricycle* since its beginning, and I think I met you when *Thoughts Without a Thinker* came out. I’ve read all your books, and I have to say, I think this book is the best.

Mark Epstein: Thank you.

James Shaheen: That’s not to say that the earlier books weren’t great.



Mark Epstein: I know, it's always a mixed compliment. This book is a little different. I didn't want to write another version of the same book again, and the way it turned out actually surprised me.

James Shaheen: How's it different? Can you talk a little bit about what you intended to do?

Mark Epstein: I wasn't sure what I intended to do. When the process of writing began, I wasn't sure that I had another book to write, but I had a writing time set aside. I've written all my books just one day a week because I'm mostly seeing patients. That one day a week rolled around, and I didn't know what to write. The question that people are always asking me that I'm always trying to avoid is, “How do you actually bring your Buddhist longings or your Buddhist experience into the real psychotherapy? Do you teach your patients to meditate? Are you asking them to be mindful? Do you sit quietly with them?” and I always answer, “No, I'm just being a therapist.” But I'm trying to be myself. So somehow, if Buddhism has influenced me, it should be coming through.

I've written a lot about translating Buddhist thought into the psychological language of the West with references to psychotherapy, but I decided for this next writing project that what I would try to do is pay attention to the details of the individual psychotherapy sessions that I was having and to try to write down, as literally as possible, what actually happened in one session a week where I thought that something of my Buddhist inclinations was contributing to the therapy, even in a small way. I set that agenda for myself, and I tried every week or so to write down one or two sessions where something opened up or something happened that had a Buddhist ring to it. I wrote down notes after the session, which I don't ordinarily do, and then over the weekend or on my writing day, I typed it up. I did that for a year, so I accumulated 50 or so of these randomly selected sessions with different patients. It was kind of a kaleidoscope or mosaic picture of a year of therapy, which happened to end just before the COVID-19 pandemic. I still didn't know what I was doing this for, but it was occupying my need to write, so I just left



it alone. I didn't read over any of the cases until the year was up, and then I started looking through it and showed it to my editor. I've had the same editor for the past couple of books, and I really trust her. I asked her, "Do you think there's anything here?" She said that she thought there was, but the only through line was really me, not the patients because they were all just incidental. She told me to go through each one and write a reflection or a commentary so that readers could see what was going on in my head while I was being the therapist. I liked that, and for the next year of writing, that's what I started to do.

James Shaheen: It becomes really apparent how deeply your psychotherapeutic practice is shaped by your Buddhist practice, which preceded your psychotherapeutic practice. There are so many ways in which that's true, but one of them that I was really struck by is this notion of being with a patient rather than doing anything. You quote one of your major influences, the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, talking about how he had to stop interpreting since he was getting in the way of the patient and the patient's process. Can you say something about being and doing and how to be with a patient without interpreting everything they do?

Mark Epstein: Winnicott says something like, "I realized that I was interpreting mostly to impress myself, but the patient could experience that interpretation as a kind of intrusion. Things finally started to open up for me as a therapist when I stopped interpreting so much and just let myself be there." That sounded very Buddhist to me. I was never very good at interpreting. There are good therapists who interpret much more intelligently than I do, and it can be helpful, but the concept in psychoanalysis about how and when to interpret centers around tact, which is, I think, another version of the Buddhist right speech. We all can see what's wrong with the people we're close to, but how often is it helpful to tell them what's wrong with them? Tact is very important in all of our relationships, including the psychotherapy one. I set up this polarity in the book between doing and being, which comes from Winnicott but is also a Buddhist idea. This is not to downgrade the value of doing but just to say that doing isn't everything and that



there's this other quality to life that has to do with being that's also an interpersonal experience. When I'm able to simply be myself with my patients, something of that quality of attention or awareness or empathy—in the book, I call it simple kindness—is transmissible. Sometimes, it can be absorbed by the patient, who might need that quality in their experience.

James Shaheen: Just being with the patient and the quality of listening that requires was really impressive to me. The patients were doing the work. You like to refer to the composer John Cage, and you have a Cageian approach to your interaction with your clients. It seems to me that in the therapeutic process, you create a kind of horizontal relationship where even though you're a very accomplished psychiatrist, you present yourself as a spiritual friend. When you give your patients that space, something comes out of them that's extraordinary. You quote Gary Snyder, who writes in a *Tricycle* article that “within a traditional Buddhist framework of ethical values and psychological insight, the mind essentially reveals itself.” How is it that the patient does the work, and taking that Gary Snyder quote, what is happening when the quality of being allows the patient that space for the mind to reveal itself?

Mark Epstein: I love that about the mind revealing itself. While I was deeply inspired by my Buddhist explorations, which did happen way before I even began my training to become a psychiatrist, that way of working is classic within the psychoanalytic tradition, even going back to Freud. In psychoanalysis, the patient is lying on the couch, not even looking at the therapist, so that the analyst is simply listening, and the patient is listening to themselves, listening to their own mind, listening to their own unconscious, as Freud talked about it. That was one of the parallels that I saw originally when I started my training. The analytic attitude and the method of free association or evenly suspended attention or free-floating attention seemed remarkably similar to the kind of mindful attention that we learn about in Buddhism. It was very reassuring to me that I could bring the Buddhist way of listening into the psychotherapeutic way of listening and start to use them interchangeably. Then I discovered John Cage, who was a musician deeply



influenced by Buddhist thought. He went to hear D. T. Suzuki teach at Columbia for years in the early 1950s. Cage said that he was already a musician, so he wasn't going to start meditating because any more sitting would be too much sitting and he had already decided to devote his life to music, so he decided to try to adapt what he learned from Suzuki to his music. He started to not screen out non-musical sounds from musical sounds but instead to hear all sounds as music. I found that deeply inspiring because it's such a Buddhist notion: not to screen out or push away the unpleasant and not to cling to the pleasant, but as a therapist, trying to help people dig down into themselves and be kinder and more accepting towards themselves. That idea of not pushing away the unpleasant emotions, feelings, and thoughts and not clinging to the pleasant is what seemed like the right thing to try to communicate. Sometimes when I'm teaching with Sharon Salzberg and Robert Thurman, Thurman will begin our teaching by doing an elaborate visualization where you imagine a wishing tree. You imagine yourself on a cliff, overlooking the water, with a big tree rising behind you with your ancestor figures who have inspired you sitting in the tree, and I always imagine these two grandfather figures, one of Winnicott, who you've already mentioned, and the other of John Cage, both beaming down that quality of listening or of being or of awareness that I try to remember in the office.

James Shaheen: That's really nice. When I was at Berkeley, John Cage was playing, and I went with a childhood friend. It was amazing because as all of these sounds began to erupt, many people started getting up and leaving. When I was reading your understanding of Cage, I realized that in the same way, we turn away from our thoughts and emotions. I was witnessing something there, and only at this point in my life do I realize that they were leaving in the same way I might turn away from a thought. When you talk about the meditative quality of mindfulness that you bring to your therapy sessions, I was thinking how that's a wonderful way of letting it all in, not turning away from or not moving toward, and the kind of equanimity that can develop. And yet it's so easy to say and so difficult to do, as difficult as it was for those people to listen to John

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Cage. We were younger, so we could listen to anything. But a lot of the older people started getting up and leaving.

Mark Epstein: Cage came to Naropa the first summer that I was there. I was 20 years old and learning about everything all at once, and Cage came and did a performance for the 1,000 people who were at Naropa studying Buddhism. People started getting up and leaving and, even worse, booing and making noise. It was a fiasco, and apparently Cage was upset. But the next day Trungpa Rinpoche, who was the Tibetan Lama who was running Naropa, called Cage into his office and asked him if he would join the faculty at Naropa. He understood just what you're describing.

James Shaheen: What is it, though, that doesn't allow us to let it all in?

Mark Epstein: What it is that doesn't let us let it all in is what the Buddha described in his first noble truth as the universal experience of what's difficult, or *dukkha*, generally translated as suffering—mistranslated, really. When you take that word *dukkha* apart, *kha* is face, and *du* means difficult. There's always something in life, even in a good life, that's difficult to face, so *dukkha* is that thing that's difficult to face. We naturally don't want to deal with the unpleasant, with the hurtful, in the Buddha's language, with old age, illness, death, separation, and loss. But even for people who get through most of their lives without having to face the unpleasant, there's still old age, illness and death. We have to train our minds to be able to do that difficult thing, which is what Cage was trying to show his audience.

James Shaheen: In your psychotherapeutic sessions, it seems that both you and the patient are training to allow that flow. You talk about the unobstructed flow of emotional energy, and it seems very clear to me why I would turn away from the unpleasant, the painful, and anything that reminds me of my mortality. But you also talk about how, counterintuitively, we're turning



away from joy and happiness. Can you say something about that? Why are we afraid of experiencing joy?

Mark Epstein: That is more mysterious. Why do people pull back from those kinds of feelings? I think there's a loss of ego or a loss of self or a loss of control that happens when there's bliss, when there's joy, even when there's some simple happiness. To fully experience it requires us to at least momentarily let go of all the defensive ego mechanisms that we're employing to hold ourselves together in this scary world that we find ourselves in. That's one reason. Another reason might be cognitively that those experiences challenge deeply held convictions that we have about ourselves as inadequate, ashamed, insufficient, unworthy, or unable to love. I remember one of my first meditation retreat experiences when I was just following the rules and watching my breath, and then suddenly, out of nowhere, I was filled with these sensations of love. I had no idea where they came from, and then they were sweeping through me. I've been chasing those feelings ever since. It's not like they happen every time I go on retreat, but it was very profound. I remember Ram Dass, who was one of my early influences, saying, "You're not who you think you are." I always love that because I thought I was only who I thought I was. The subtitle of the book is "Uncovering a Hidden Kindness in Life," and I was thinking a little bit about that experience of love, that lurking within all of us are these capacities for these kinds of experiences.

James Shaheen: As you were speaking, I thought of a student of Tibetan Buddhism who was with her teacher. They were driving through the Rockies, and everything around them was quite beautiful. She couldn't stop saying, "Oh my God, that's so beautiful," and her teacher finally turned to her and said, "Is it too much for you?" Because it's hard to be with something that powerful. It requires that you let go of who you think you are.



Mark Epstein: There's a famous story in Freud's writing in a little essay called "On Transience." It's one of my favorite things by Freud. He's hiking in the mountains in Switzerland where he used to go in the summer with an unnamed poet, who people say was Rilke. The poet couldn't open to the beauty that was around him, and Freud asked him, "What's wrong with you?" and tried to figure it out with his psychoanalytic mind. It was the same kind of thing where the beauty of the surround was too overwhelming. Freud ends the essay by asking, "Is a flower that blooms for only a single night any less beautiful?" I thought, wow, what could be more Buddhist than that?

James Shaheen: Absolutely. Though your personal background is in Vipassana, in this book, you turn to Zen poetry. You write, "To my way of thinking, therapy, like the poetry of medieval Japan, is an art form of our time and place, one that can reach new depths by way of a creative synthesis with Buddhist thought and practice." Can you say something about the connection there?

Mark Epstein: When I was writing the reflections on each of the psychotherapy cases, I started to see each session as a kind of haiku. I was focusing on one patient for one hour in one session in condensed form of these tiny little details, and I started looking at the tiny little details like in a haiku, like the frog jumping into the pond or the wind blowing or the butterfly wing. The tiny little details illuminated so much. If I hadn't written the sessions down, they would have passed me by. Then I started reading haikus, and the haikus themselves started to come alive for me because I would find one that seemed to really match the energy of the session. That was really fun for me. That was one of the most exciting, exhilarating aspects of the writing, finding the haiku that matched the session that I could use to say in a poetic way the Buddhist thing that was happening that I couldn't really say directly, or any more directly than the haiku was already saying. Then I started to explore what a koan really is. The literal translation of koan is a public case. I realized that these psychotherapy sessions that I'm taking out of the closet and putting in a

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book are like public cases too. It gave me another way of thinking about the whole project, which I ended up really enjoying.

James Shaheen: It’s really great to be able to read about the sessions, which would otherwise be unavailable to people. I just want our listeners to know that the patients themselves read them, and they’re OK with them. Although they’re pseudonyms, they’re true to the actual sessions. I love it that one person said, “Make sure you say that I look like Antonio Banderas.” So there’s a charm and an intimacy and a pathos and also a joy to these sessions that really comes through. And you draw from John Tarrant’s excellent work, *Bring Me the Rhinoceros: And Other Zen Koans That Will Save Your Life*. I love how koans figure into this.

Mark Epstein: I was unfamiliar with his work before this project. As editor of *Tricycle*, you probably know all of these characters more than I do. My friend Jonathan Cott knew all the Zen poetry, and I had been sitting with him a couple of years before. My wife, Arlene, did a big sculpture installation in Madison Square Park, and as part of that, she had a couple of actors, Dianne Wiest and Fiona Shaw, come to do these little performances at lunchtime. The performances were not advertised at all, but they did them every day for 45 minutes at lunchtime. The first day, there’d be about 10 people there, but by the end of the week, there were several hundred because the word got around. It was really exciting. I was sitting next to Jonathan at one of those events, and out of the blue, he quoted one of these Japanese poems, which was “Under cherry trees, there are no strangers,” which never would have made sense to me, except here we were. There were no cherry trees, but we were all focused on this one actor’s great work, and the feeling of community was so strong, so the haiku made total sense. When I started writing the book, I called up Jonathan and said, “Remember you quoted that haiku? Where can I find more?” He sent me the names of 10 books, and one of them was *Bring Me the Rhinoceros*. When I finally got to it, I thought it explained everything that I was trying to write about.



James Shaheen: The koans and haiku are really deployed to good use. I had read some of them before, but when I read them in the book in that context of a particular case, I thought, “Aha,” in the same way you did in Madison Square Park. You structure the book by season, with each season associated with a particular Buddhist tenet or philosophical point. I wanted to get to summer for a moment because you explore the Buddhist teaching on no self in relationship to psychoanalytic theories of self. In particular, you ask, “If inklings of no self are not necessarily signs and symptoms of developmental deficits but also windows into underlying truth, how are we to proceed?” I thought that was wonderful because this notion of no self is thought to be pathological in psychology, but what if somebody is intuiting a fundamental truth?

Mark Epstein: I remember when I first started writing what turned into that opening section, and I was trying to talk about how when I was growing up, I was always worried that my self wasn’t “self” enough. Where was I? I was preoccupied with that question from God knows when. You can’t help comparing yourself to the people you see around you, and the people you see around you look like they have bigger and better and more real selves than you feel like from the inside. I don’t know how universal that is, but it was certainly true for me. You could call it anxiety or insecurity. I remember when I was in college, the first therapist that I ever went to said, “Oh, this is just the Oedipus complex.” But I didn’t know what that meant at that point. So I was glad it had a name. But if this self that we’re brought up in the Western world to think should exist, if it really doesn’t exist in the way we imagined it, which is what the Dalai Lama always says—it’s not that there’s no self, because that’s ridiculous. You’re you, and I’m me, etc. But the self doesn’t exist in the way we imagined it. And that’s sort of analogous to Ram Dass telling me, “You’re not who you think you are.” Winnicott always said that most people can’t really get out of their childhoods without creating what he called a false self or a caretaker self that’s originating in the mind, trying to figure out how to take care of either the intrusive or the abandoning environment of family life. So all of those ideas were swirling around when I was writing this: What if the self doesn’t have to be what we think it should be? What if we were



correct in wondering about it even from a very young age then we have to push all that away in order to function? And then Buddhism comes along, or therapy comes along, and says, relax about all that and just see what's there. Try to find it as it really exists, not as you think it should.

James Shaheen: I often think of “Stop trying to figure out what you should be, see what comes up.” You mentioned something else about comparing mind when you were young and comparing your insides with people's outsides, which is always a mismatch. You talk about one patient who feels inadequate, and when he sees a particular friend who critiques his poetry unfavorably, he feels doubly inadequate and seems to want some sort of approval from this friend. He's plagued with comparing mind: How am I doing against others, and how is my work? You say to him, “Why don't you just be his friend? When you see him, just be his friend.” Can you talk a little bit about that? I thought that was an excellent answer to what so many of us feel so often: I'm not good enough. I don't compare well. But how about just being the friend and stop requiring or demanding that kind of approval?

Mark Epstein: I believe I told him that conceit, or comparing mind, is one of the last fetters. In Buddhism, there are 10 fetters, which are the last things to fall away as enlightenment approaches. The fetter of comparing mind, the way we measure ourselves against others, is still there even in very highly evolved meditators who have achieved all kinds of realizations about being and who have let go of anger and whatnot. This almost enlightened person is comparing their achievements to that almost enlightened person, thinking, “I'm a little more enlightened than you are.” If comparing mind is going on on that level, then it's certainly going on for those of us who are struggling in regular life. So for this patient who I was writing about, it was certainly going on and had been going on for a long time. Those loops were going in his mind as he was anticipating a trip with his friend, and so I was trying to cut through all of that. Instead of making it be about what he was feeling or what he wasn't getting from his friend, I was trying to turn it around so that he could put the good energy out there and just show the friend San



Francisco, which he knew well. Why not take the active role, which might go against some Buddhist inclinations to just lay back and then be, and lead with kindness as a way of counteracting that measuring, comparing tendency that we all have?

James Shaheen: Another thing I got out of that was that he wants a certain approval from this friend of his, and he doesn't want to feel inadequate, and he feels that if this friend finally acknowledges this poetry, somehow this will be better. But why doesn't he think about giving as a friend rather than expecting or wanting, which changes the whole experience?

Mark Epstein: Right, and Buddhist psychologies are so good about giving. I talk about this with another person in the book, how there's beggarly giving and then kingly giving, or giving with an expectation of getting something back and then just giving for the sake of giving. That makes a difference in your consciousness.

James Shaheen: In that same summer section, you quote your friend and former therapist, Michael Vincent Miller. He came to Buddhism after you did, and he says that Buddhism and psychotherapy “both aim for the restoration of innocence after experience.” Can you say something about what that means?

Mark Epstein: When he said that to me, we were at dinner, and I was talking a little bit about my work, and out of the blue, he said to me, “You know, Mark, what both Buddhism and psychotherapy aim for is restoration of innocence after experience.” I didn't even know what that meant, but I knew it felt so profound. It felt so true. Especially in the psychotherapy world, but really in all of our worlds, we're led to believe that experience is everything—that we're supposed to learn from experience, and that's what life is about. But then I think of the koan: what was your face before you were born? When Ram Dass first found out that I had become a psychiatrist, he said to me, teasing me a little bit, “Oh, Mark, are you a Buddhist psychiatrist



now?” I said, “I guess so,” And he said, “Do you see your patients as already free?” I think I do see them already free. It’s the idea that there’s a hidden kindness in life or that buddha nature is inherent to who we are. Experience layers us, and we do learn from it, but we also have to defend ourselves against experience and the ways we start to develop all these ideas about identity and who we are and who the other person is and so on. But the innocence that’s ours as a birthright gets covered over and lost. When we talk about the feeling of coming home when we find meditation or when we find ourselves in meditation or when we are finally feeling more at peace about ourselves, there’s some reconnection with that original innocence. I think that’s what Michael was getting at. We were talking about a couple of patients who had been messed with sexually early in life. When there’s sexual abuse early, one of the things that that does is take away the pleasurable discovery of sexuality, the excitement and the ownership of it. It pollutes it in a way that can be very hard to get away from later on. This was also about that.

James Shaheen: The restoration of innocence reminds me of Paul Ricoeur’s second naïveté and the faith of an adult versus the faith of a child. We do come back to the innocence changed, but the innocence is nonetheless there. We’re adults now, and it feels like a different experience. At least from Ricoeur’s point of view, we bring our critical mind to our experience or to the text, and we come through it either disillusioned or with a second naïveté. The narrative and the symbols once again have meaning, but it’s an even deeper meaning. I wonder if the innocence is qualitatively different from the innocence of a child. I imagine it is.

Mark Epstein: Oh, I think so. I think it’s more like the innocence that a parent feels with a new child, which is one of the places that I went in the book.

James Shaheen: You did, and I was going to ask about that next. Often, as Westerners, we think psychologically. I’ve often had difficulty reconciling this psychological orientation and my Buddhist practice, but you do a great job of not washing away those differences but seeing both.



For instance, you talk about the oceanic feeling and Freud’s take on that, and you don’t dismiss it. Can you share more about the oceanic feeling? It reminds me of the return to innocence.

Mark Epstein: I don’t know how much familiarity people have with what Freud meant by the oceanic feeling. He had a long correspondence with a French poet named Romain Rolland, who was a student of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and told Freud a lot about what happened to him in meditation. He really made Freud look at it. Freud said to him, “I can’t really find this experience you’re describing in my lifetime. Maybe I’m too Jewish. It’s too much for my Jewish mind.” He didn’t say it exactly like that. But that’s what he was saying. Freud wrote that the meditation experiences that he was hearing about reminded him of a young child at the breast and that they were seeking a restoration of the limitless narcissism of the infant at the breast. I think that that’s partially true. On meditation retreats, if we’re lucky enough, we have these blissful experiences. That’s one of the things that we keep coming back for. If you really look at what they are and also how addictive they can be and how people get trapped in seeking them, they have a lot of that blissful feeling of the infant at the breast, the restoration of limitless narcissism. That’s part of their power. I always see that as part of the concentration practices, the *samadhi* practices. They give you that holding environment for the mind that has an infinite quality. But I think it’s not solely the experience of the infant at the breast; it’s also the experience of the mother holding the infant. Much more in meditation, what we’re experiencing once we start to use the accumulated *samadhi* to investigate the nature of mind is that we’re becoming much more like John Cage, who’s hearing everything, and allowing everything the way a mother has to hear and hold a baby. It’s the maternal quality or the parental quality that is also oceanic. That was interesting and fun for me to try to figure out how to talk about.

James Shaheen: You mentioned John Cage again, and he is woven through the book. I was thinking of you sitting there, and at times, you’re very honest. You say, “The patient says this, and I was thinking, Well, what am I going to say?” You somehow or another come through.



You're working with the art of therapy. You are spontaneously responding. You yourself seem to want to experience an unblocked exchange with the patient, and so in a certain way you're performing an art very similar to Cage. It's a spontaneous, unblocked opening.

Mark Epstein: That's the improvisational nature of therapy. In my experience, that's one of the things that it requires. That might just be the way that I work, but I think it's proven, at least to me, to be an important capacity to bring to the encounter. It takes a kind of trust too—to trust my own mind without trying too hard to find, as we talked about at the beginning, the right interpretation, but to use what comes in a judicious way to engage and provoke and support a patient, depending on where they are.

James Shaheen: I imagine early on in your career as a Harvard Medical School–trained psychiatrist, you might have come to therapy thinking you needed to know answers or you needed to give your patients answers, maybe in the beginning of your career. But you really seem to have come to this place where it's OK if you don't know.

Mark Epstein: The thing about becoming a psychiatrist or a therapist via the medical route is that they don't really teach you anything about being a therapist. They teach you about diseases and dermatology, and then one day, you're the psychiatrist. It's not like you can go in with a surgeon and assist and watch how to do it. You just have to go with the patient into the room and be the therapist suddenly with hardly any education on how to do it. For me, that was good because I had to figure it out for myself. I had the Buddhist training in me already, so the best I could do was to try to deploy for the patient what I had learned how to deploy for my own mind. That set me on this path that we're talking about now. I've had good good therapy teachers since, but they were all very supportive of not knowing as the foundation of the relationship.

James Shaheen: That really comes through in the book.



Mark Epstein: It really comes through how much I don't know.

James Shaheen: No, that you're comfortable when you don't know and you can relax into that.

Mark Epstein: It's exciting to me. It's a mutual discovery. That's the thing about therapy. It's a mutual discovery. That's what it's all about.

James Shaheen: I'm going to ask you one last question on anger. People often judge themselves for their anger, and for many Buddhists, somehow or another, anger is not OK. What role can aggression play in awakening?

Mark Epstein: As you said, I structured the book around the four seasons, and with each season, I had an element of the Buddhist path. The first one was clinging, and then mindfulness and then insight. The fourth one was going to be compassion, and I had all these sessions that were purporting to lead to compassion. My editor read it over, and she said, “Mark, every one of these sessions is about anger and aggression,” which was true. So we had to reconfigure, so now the fourth one is aggression, and then the final chapter is about kindness. The reason for that was that in my way of thinking, and a lot of it comes out of Winnicott, a healthy relationship to anger—healthy from our psychotherapeutic point of view, perhaps also from a less fundamentalist Buddhist point of view—a healthy relationship with aggression is the fundamental requirement for the development of compassion. For a young child, anger isn't differentiated from desire or need. It's all fused into one thing. A baby just wants what it wants, and if it doesn't get it, it's pissed. Winnicott describes that as the ruthless attack of the infant, and he says that a good-enough parent, not a perfect parent, is able to tolerate that attack and not retaliate and not abandon. They're able to be there to coax the child into a soothing calming down, like “I'm here, it's OK, we'll feed you, we'll change you, it's alright, relax.” He equates



that to the therapist-patient relationship. A mother who's not able to tolerate the child's aggression or her own hatred that is evoked by the child's aggression is like a therapist who's unable to tolerate a patient's aggression or his or her own hatred or anger at being aggressed at. I equate that to a meditator who's not able to tolerate his or her own anger or frustration or shame or whatever else comes up. The mind of the meditator has to be like the mind of the therapist or the mind of the mother and be able to create a good enough holding environment so that the aggression can reveal itself but not destroy. What Winnicott says about the growing child is that it is that aggression that lets the child see that the mother or father is not perfect, that they're not there just to serve them, that they're not a narcissistic extension of the child. It's the anger and the resolution of the anger itself that lets the child see the parent as a separate person, and you can't develop compassion for another until you're able to see them as a separate subject in their own right, not just as an object that is there for you to control. I'm trying to paint that whole picture in the last part of the book.

James Shaheen: You talk about being able to tolerate these emotions that frighten us or threaten to overwhelm us, and you also talk about meditation and therapy as a way to sit with a sense of emptiness too. I'm not talking about Buddhist emptiness, just the sense that nothing's going on here. What can you say about that? I guess it's learning to be with ourselves.

Mark Epstein: It's learning to be with everything. The emptiness that you're talking about where there's nothing going on here—there's no such thing as that emptiness. There's always something going on. I ended the book by talking about how the point of the two worlds coming together is to help us all become partners with the capacities that constitute us so that everything's recruited into the journey to enlightenment, like in the tantric paintings. Anger, desire, envy, conceit, measuring—all of that has a function, and if we can detoxify it enough to use the energy that's there, then we become partners with those capacities.

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Episode #69 with Mark Epstein

“Therapy as Mutual Discovery”

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James Shaheen: Mark, thanks so much for joining us. It’s been a pleasure speaking with you. I could go on all day, and I’m sure we’ll speak again. For our listeners, make sure to pick up a copy of Mark’s book, *The Zen of Therapy: Uncovering a Hidden Kindness in Life*, a wonderful accomplishment. Thank you, Mark.

Mark Epstein: Thank you, James.

James Shaheen: You’ve been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Mark Epstein. We’d love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be and Sarah Fleming. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!