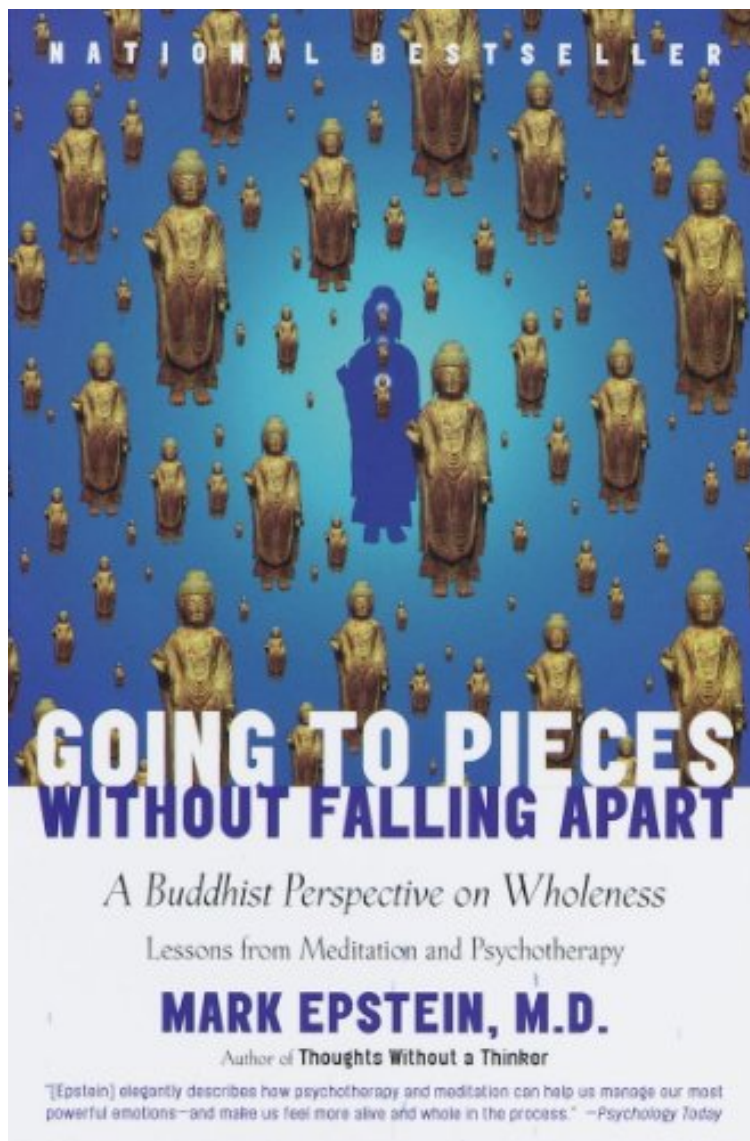


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Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart: A Buddhist Perspective on Wholeness



Par Mark Epstein
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFor decades, Western psychology has promised fulfillment through building and strengthening the ego. We are taught that the ideal is a strong, individuated self, constructed and reinforced over a lifetime. But Buddhist psychiatrist Mark Epstein has found a different way. Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart shows us that happiness doesn't come from any kind of acquisitiveness, be it material or psychological. Happiness comes from letting go. Weaving together the accumulated wisdom of his two worlds--Buddhism and Western psychotherapy--Epstein shows how "the happiness that we seek depends on

our ability to balance the ego's need to do with our inherent capacity to be." He encourages us to relax the ever-vigilant mind in order to experience the freedom that comes only from relinquishing control. Drawing on events in his own life and stories from his patients, *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart* teaches us that only by letting go can we start on the path to a more peaceful and spiritually satisfying

life. **Extrait Introduction** In the Zen tradition of Buddhism there is a story of a smart and eager university professor who comes to an old Zen master for teachings. The Zen master offers him tea and upon the man's acceptance he pours the tea into the cup until it overflows. As the professor politely expresses his dismay at the overflowing cup, the Zen master keeps on pouring. "A mind that is already full cannot take in anything new," the master explains. "Like this cup, you are full of opinions and preconceptions." In order to find happiness, he teaches his disciple, he must first empty his cup. The central premise of this book is that the Western psychological notion of what it means to have a self is flawed. We are all trained to approach life like the professor in the story, filling ourselves up the way the master filled the cup with tea. Afflicted, as we are, with a kind of psychological materialism, we are concerned primarily with beefing ourselves up. Self-development, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-expression, self-awareness, and self-control are our most sought after attributes. But Buddhism teaches us that happiness does not come from any kind of acquisitiveness, be it material or psychological. Happiness comes from letting go. In Buddhism, the impenetrable, separate, and individuated self is more of the problem than the solution. One of my first teachings about the limitations of the self came during my freshman year at Harvard. My first roommate there was a young man from the South named Steve who was the hardest worker I had ever seen. Steve spent every waking moment, and an increasing number of what should have been sleeping moments, studying for the five hardest courses that a freshman could take. As the semester wore on, Steve stopped bathing, going out for meals, and playing his guitar, while becoming increasingly obsessed with mastering every detail of economics, philosophy, and so on. He was intent on becoming the embodiment of what he imagined a successful Harvard freshman to be. On his way to his first final exam, Steve slipped on the concrete stairs of our dorm and slid down several flights, knocking himself out. When he awoke, he had amnesia for the entire semester: He could remember only the first week of school and going home for Christmas. His memory for that semester of work never came back. He took the rest of the year off and returned the following year, chastened, to begin anew. Steve went to pieces and fell apart. If he could have permitted himself more of the former, he might have escaped the intensity of the latter. Yet Steve's predicament typified all of ours that year. We all felt that we had to strive to consolidate our egos, to master our insecurities, and to become as "together" as the next person was. Steve merely went at it with more zeal than the rest of us could stomach.

Just as the full cup could not hold any more tea, so too Steve could not contain all of the knowledge, information, and psychological attributes that he was attempting to swallow. What he needed instead was some recognition of his capacity to relax the grip of his ego and to empty his mind. A few years after witnessing Steve's collapse, I heard the Dalai Lama speak for the first time on his first visit to the United States. "All beings are seeking happiness," he said. "It is the purpose of life." When I heard him say this, I remember scoffing at the idea. Something about it sounded so simplistic. But after I heard him say it eight or nine more times over the next few years, I started to pay attention to his actual meaning. He was addressing this idea of psychological materialism and the search for happiness through the acquisition of things, experiences, and beliefs. When we seek happiness through accumulation, either outside of ourselves--from other people, relationships, or material goods--or from our own self-development, we are missing the essential point. In either case we are trying to find completion. But according to Buddhism, such a strategy is doomed. Completion comes not from adding another piece to ourselves but from surrendering our ideas of perfection. My roommate's experience was a metaphor for the limitations of self-development. Cramming himself full of the imagined constituents of a self, Steve succeeded only in knocking himself out. He could never be the perfect person he was trying to be. Unless he, and we, learn the lessons that Harvard was not teaching that year (how to lose ourselves, surrender control, or go to pieces without disintegrating), we will never be happy. While psychotherapy has a long tradition of encouraging the development of a strong sense of self, Buddhism has an even longer tradition of teaching the value of collapsing that self. Part of my attraction to Buddhist meditation lies in this difference. Many of us come to therapy--and to psychological self-improvement in general--feeling that we are having trouble letting ourselves go: We are blocked creatively or emotionally, we have trouble falling asleep or having satisfying sex, or we suffer from feelings of isolation or alienation. Often we are afraid of falling apart, but the problem is that we have not learned how to give up control of ourselves. The traditional view of therapy as building up the self simply does not

do justice to what we actually seek from the therapeutic process. We are looking for a way to feel more real, but we do not realize that to feel more real we have to push ourselves further into the unknown. Buddhism has always made the self's ability to relax its boundaries the centerpiece of its teachings. It recognizes that the central issues of our lives, from falling in love to facing death, require an ability to surrender that often eludes us. Psychotherapy, through its analysis of childhood, has tended to turn us in a reflective direction, searching for the causes of unhappiness in an attempt to break free from the traumas of the past. Too often, though, it degenerates into finding someone to blame for our suffering. But within psychotherapy lies the potential for an approach that is compatible with Buddhist understanding, one in which the therapist, like the

Zen master, can aid in making space in the mind. People who know that I practice Buddhism as well as psychiatry are often surprised or disappointed to find that I do not promote some kind of hybrid "Buddhist" therapy. They want to know if I meditate together with my patients or if I teach them special techniques or spiritual disciplines. I tell them that this is mostly unnecessary. I like to quote the famous phrase of Sndor Ferenczi, the Hungarian psychoanalyst who was one of Freud's most intimate disciples. "The patient is not cured by free-associating," Ferenczi asserted, "he is cured when he can free-associate." Creating an environment in which a person can discover this inherent capacity seems to me to be healing in its own right.

As the British child psychotherapist Adam Phillips has written, "It is only when two people forget themselves, in each other's presence, that they can recognize each other." Psychotherapy, like meditation, hinges on showing us a new way to be with ourselves, and with others. Whether we learn this from meditation or therapy is not the important thing. What matters is that we learn it at all. I have divided this book into four parts, based on the nicknames that Tibetan Buddhists sometimes give to their spiritual practices. In the Tibetan tradition, the closest available comparison to the joy of meditation is the experience of simultaneously forgetting and discovering oneself that occurs in falling in love. Thus, the four levels of practice are often referred to as Looking, Smiling, Embracing, and Orgasm. There is a common happiness in each of these states--the joy of momentarily dropping the ego boundaries that prevent us from connecting with one another. I have taken these four states and used them to present the essence of what I have learned from meditation and psychotherapy over the past twenty-five years. In organizing the book in this way, I have woven together the accumulated wisdom of Buddhism and psychotherapy to show how the happiness that we seek depends on our ability to balance the ego's need to do with our inherent capacity to be. I have mixed the teachings of various schools of Buddhism with those of therapy to show how the two grand traditions can work together to enhance one another. Implicit and explicit throughout the text is the understanding that meditative wisdom does not have to be isolated from daily life. Our need to expand awareness beyond our isolated egos is as necessary in relationships as it is in meditation. When the Zen master kept pouring tea into the professor's cup, he was trying to shock him into a new way of seeing himself. He wanted him to tune into the empty space of his mind rather than identify only with its contents. In the same way I hope that the material in this book can provoke in the reader a new experience of the self. As my roommate Steve's experience taught me, there is a difference between accumulating knowledge and discovering wisdom. As my Buddhist teachers have shown me, wisdom emerges in the space around words as much as from language itself. *Revue de presse*"[Epstein] elegantly describes how psychotherapy and meditation can help us manage our most powerful emotions--and make us feel more alive and whole in the process."--*Psychology Today*"Exhilarating . . . brilliant and original. . . Important because it shows how work on the pains and pleasures of our own lives can be a means of transformation."--*New Age*"A daring and profound synthesis of intelligence about emotions East and West . . . establishes Mark Epstein as one of psychology's most dazzling thinkers."--Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*"Plato's Socrates once wondered whether he should be a politician or a physician--that is, whether he should try to serve the existing tastes and interests of his fellow citizens or continually work to improve their minds and souls. *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart* will appeal to physicians, therapists, and patients who, like Socrates, opt for the latter." --*New England Journal of Medicine*"A thought-provoking look at how to break free from psychological materialism."--*Utne Reader*