


## Going to Pieces

Mark Epstein




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- Harvard educated MD – Psychiatry  
Trained in the Freudian tradition

practicing psychiatrist in New York City


introduced to meditation and Buddhism in his 20's  
studied with many famous western teachers

- Quite disclosing in his writing  
his own personal search brought him to both paths  
his own experiences brought him to the integration




## Going to Pieces :Overview

- Blends Buddhist/ mindfulness ideas with psychology
- Attempts to balance two competing ways of experiencing  
Ego's need to 'do' and our inherent capacity to 'be'
- Letting go/ letting it be in the face of struggle offers freedom and a path to happiness
- Mindfulness is the pathway to 'letting it be'



## Set aside established notions

- Zen Story
- There is a smart and eager University professor who comes to an old Zen master for teachings. The Zen master offers him tea and upon acceptance, the Zen master pours tea into the cup until it overflows. The professor politely expresses his dismay at the overflowing cup and the Zen master keeps on pouring.
- Then he says 'a mind that is already full cannot take in anything new.' 'Like this cup, you are full of opinions and preconceptions'. 'To find happiness, you must first empty your cup'.



## Strong Contrast to Seligman

- **Seligman** (and most western psychological thinking)  
happiness comes from accumulation --- more self development  
find & exercise your strengths/ build gratitude/ find optimism  
  
it's a 'do' approach  
take charge... improve... grow...
- **Epstein** (drawing on the eastern thinking)  
happiness comes surrendering your ideas of perfection  
be a mess/ make mistakes/ be a goof/ and watch it all very carefully  
  
it's a 'be' approach  
watch and accept and let things be just as they are



## DO WE HAVE TO PICK ONE? UM, NO!

May we have the grace to accept with serenity  
the things that cannot be changed,

Courage to change the things  
which should be changed,

and the Wisdom to distinguish  
the one from the other

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## Back to Epstein

- At 16 polled all his classmates  
"are you bothered by an inner sense of emptiness or insufficiency"  
nearly 100% of his classmates responded "YES"
- Wanted to cure his own ennui/ sense of being disconnected/ emptiness
- Began the search ... how?



## Psychological Answers

- (self psychology) self esteem grows in proportion to how mirrored a person feels
- Therapeutic answer -- reflect back warmth & acceptance in therapy  
(very consistent with Siegal's ideas)
- Did this work?  
Patients became needy & demanding --- never enough of this  
interpreted inability to accept his inherent limits --- helped but still empty  
he was approaching their emptiness as a **problem to be fixed**
- What was the alternative?  
Accept that emptiness can't be eliminated  
focus instead on HOW emptiness is experienced - mindfulness

## Epstein's ah-ha

- Emptiness (and any troubling experience) has TWO components
  1. The emptiness itself
  2. Fear of the unpleasantness – and the inherent impulse to avoid it
- Component One --- can be mindfully observed
  - What does emptiness feel like in the body?
  - What do I feel like doing when I feel empty?
  - What thoughts go along with emptiness?
  - What other feelings link up to emptiness?
  - Is there any fullness in emptiness? What else is there?
- Component Two ---
  - Therapeutically attempt to reduce running from fear
  - Understand their transitory nature... won't last
  - Learning fear is natural and tolerable (developing courage)
  - Learning its OK (good???) to feel vulnerable, insecure, unsure at times



## Back to East/ West compared

- West:
  - need to be confident, controlled, coherent
  - do all the right stuff and you can attain this state
- East:
  - accept being open, vulnerable, insecure, frightened, uncertain
  - from this place wisdom & peace arises



## Taking a look at Ego

- The 'I' of the personality – the part of personality that interfaces with the world
- Ego strength is considered beneficial/ the goal of much psychological focus
- We individuate/ become self sufficient/ self determining/ in control
- In psychoanalytic tradition this is called – integration
- Donald Winnicott – famous psychoanalytic self psychologist
  - It is unhealthy to deny or fear the innate capacity of every human to become unintegrated, depersonalized, and feel as though the world is unreal
  - Unintegration involves the capacity to 'be'
  - The capacity to 'be' allows us to feel real
  - Created when parents allow a child to be him/herself without a sense of abandonment

## “We are poor indeed if we are only sane”

- In Eastern traditions
  - those moments when we have no idea ... are lost ... unsure
  - these are special moments for realization

why would this be true???



## Can we cultivate those moments?

- Becoming aware of the vast amount and sheer pointlessness of much of our moment by moment thinking
  - Thinking is a way to avoid/ distance from immediate EXPERIENCE
  - Trying to control outcomes
  - Two approaches:
    - manipulate/ distance when we like something but think it won't last (attachment)
    - devalue/ push away what something that isn't perfect (aversion)
  - Result: Isolating and not being touched by what is actually present
- Start to relax the mind
  - Cultivate a mind that can wholeheartedly embrace disappointment as much as it embraces beauty

## Mindfulness ala Epstein

- Develop perpetual curiosity/ Bare Attention
    - Careful noting of everything in mind-body as it unfolds
  - Observing functions of the mind take precedence over reactive ones
  - Keep a running commentary in the form of ongoing labeling
    - Learn to separate sensory experience from emotional reactions
  - THIS OFFERS FREEDOM FROM THEWAYS WE ISOLATE FROM EXPERIENCE
    - get sad/ distance when we like something but think it won't last
    - devalue/ push away what something that isn't perfect
- instead**
- touch the imperfection/ transience of the world without being oppressed by it

## Sheesh

- Pg. 72
- We justifiably complain of feeling unreal because we are busy keeping ourselves at arm's length from the biggest reality of all --- the transience of which we are a part
- And that we can control/ protect against negative outcomes

## Interesting Interplay

- We must loosen the influence of the ego in order to feel connection to others and to experience
- We must tighten the influence of the ego in order to accomplish daily tasks of living and focus on the goals of living
- We must loosen the influence of the ego to accept that our efforts and goals do not always come to fruition in the manner we wish
- We must tighten the influence of the ego in order to find a rudder and direction after life has slapped us with some disappointment

**Best view of ego:** expanding and contracting/ coalescing and dissolving/ separating and merging ...



## hmmmm

- Just as separation and connection make each other possible, so do the elements of being and doing.
- One is not primary, nor is one always preferable
- Yet we are deficient if we cannot go freely from one mode into the other



## Implications for Love/ Connection

- Can we translate the curiosity and tolerance of mindfulness into a self acceptance that allows greater intimacy with others?
- When we feel unworthy/ imperfect (and don't we all?) ... it is very difficult to be genuine with another person
- The capacity to be 'unintegrated'/ unsure/ imperfect --- creates a capacity to be less self-conscious/ guarded
- Mindfulness provides this capacity