



Paul Epstein asks patients to live with their questions.

HEALING

The Journey of Naturopath Paul Epstein VS.

CURING

By ROBERT HIRSCHFIELD

Dr.

● Paul Epstein's father, a soldier in World War II, was assigned the grisly task of collecting and sorting the bodies of dead American soldiers in Europe. The wound to his mind resulted in two nervous breakdowns, shock treatments, and an unhealed heart. When Epstein was 26 and employed as a New York City social worker, his father suffered a mild heart attack, his second, and underwent preventive bypass surgery. His father died during the operation and Epstein says the pain broke him open and opened him — providing him with his guiding insight: "They didn't just bypass the blocked artery. What they bypassed was the truth of his life."

Photography by JIM SALZANO

Epstein, now 58, is a naturopathic physician, a teacher of yoga, and a Buddhist teacher in the Vipassana tradition. Patients troop through his doors in Westport, Connecticut, seeking relief from arthritis or lupus or diabetes, and he prescribes treatments that may be herbal, dietary, or homeopathic. But his real work is to guide patients to dive within, to grasp how bodily ailments are related to mental and spiritual disarray, to the stories they believe about themselves.

Says Epstein, “They ask, ‘I have pain, can you fix me?’ ‘I have Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, what can I do?’ ‘I have Fibromyalgia, what’s your answer for me?’ The question I ask myself is: What is the truth of his or her life that’s been bypassed?”

Epstein says he wants to cure, but not as much as he wants to heal. The difference between healing and curing, as he sees it, lies in the place of intention. “In curing, we are trying to get somewhere. In curing, we are looking for answers. In curing, our efforts are specifically designed to make something happen. In healing, we live questions instead of answers. In healing, we hang out in the unknown. In healing, we trust the emergence of whatever will be, we trust the insight will come.

“The lesson I learned is never to be afraid to take people into the heart of their pain, because at the heart of their pain is the healing, and at the heart of the healing is the pain.”

S&H WEEKEND WORKSHOP

THE HEALING JOURNEY

Join Dr. Paul Epstein and members of the S&H community for an experiential weekend to discover how mindful inquiry can be integrated in the process of healing body, mind, heart, and spirit. Explore how biography becomes biology and how healing happens when we embark on a journey to our true and authentic self. Workshop topics include:

- Illness and pain as opportunities — how to listen to their meaning and message
- Discomfort as a vehicle for awakening
- What healing is and how it happens
- Integrating the healing journey and spiritual path

Live questions and see with new eyes. No experience necessary. Wear comfortable clothes and bring your open heart! For details and to register, call workshop series coordinator Miriam’s Well at 845-246-5805 or visit SpiritualityHealth.com/workshops.

WORKSHOP DATES

June 29–July 1 Miriam’s Well, Saugerties, New York
August 24–26 The Crossings, Austin, Texas
September 28–30 Sleeping Lady Lodge, Leavenworth, Washington
October 26–28 Mount Madonna Center, Watsonville, California

FINDING HIS DREAM PATIENT

A man came to Epstein, anxious and neurotic, with an array of symptoms, from allergies to asthma to phobias. “A naturopathic physician’s dream patient.” Except that he wouldn’t change his diet, as Epstein suggested, or take the homeopathic remedy that Epstein prescribed (one of his phobias), or talk about the spiritual, biographical, mind–body issues essential to Epstein’s treatment. “I was frustrated,” Epstein admits. “I didn’t want to feel impotent. I had this codependent desire to help him.”

Epstein’s dismay at not having the answer kept him from living the question. Epstein defines living the question as navigating without an answer, exploring the harbor of the unknown.

“Why was I so attached to needing to have the answer? That was my question. Where was the healing for me?”

Epstein was on the verge of recommending his patient to another doctor when an insight took hold: Why not just surrender? Stop trying so hard. Find the middle ground. Just be present. Love him. Accept him unconditionally. Live in the moment.

And as Epstein let go of his attachment, the patient let go of his resistance. He began to change his diet, talk about his past, take the homeopathic remedy Epstein had prescribed. He began to break open.

WHY BECOME A NATUROPATH?

The lure of mainstream medicine did not entirely elude Epstein. His first stab at pre-med was in the late-sixties at Stony Brook.

“Sex, drugs and rock ’n’ roll got in the way.” He laughs. “I wasn’t ready to study that hard.”

His second stab was at Hunter where he got straight A’s, but he never made it to conventional medical school. A panel of medical school interviewers asked him why he wanted to be a doctor. “I said, because I am interested in healing. I said, because I am interested in the mind, and in emotions. I could see they hadn’t a clue as to who I was. There was this amazing disconnect. I realized this wasn’t the kind of doctor I wanted to be.”

In 1980, Epstein and his restless spirit arrived at the National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Portland, Oregon. He also found a Vipassana meditation teacher named Joseph Goldstein who applied the teachings of the Buddha to the heart-wounds of his questioners. Epstein’s question was about how he could come to a deeper understanding of his patients — beyond their diagnosis.

“Buddhism made sense to me,” he now explains. “It is precision wisdom that’s also accessible. It requires you look inside and see for yourself what the truth is. Even if I am teaching, don’t accept my teachings. What is crucial is insight. You will come to that by yourself or not.”

MOTHERS AND OTHER TEACHERS

Epstein will refer in his talks to the “healing soup” of a patient, and what is needed for the success of that soup. It is the Jewish dharma aspect of this doctor–teacher, whose tenacious, hard-charging, life-seizing mother, Evelyn Epstein, was the maker of a superb, mysterious chicken soup.

“I tried to reproduce my mother’s chicken soup because I loved it and it meant a lot to me. My sister and I both had the



“I was frustrated... I came up against my own edge. I didn’t want to feel impotent.”

recipe, but we still couldn’t do it. My mother knew when to put this in, and when to put that in, and the touch of salt, and the love, everything. Whatever it took, she got it. Just as whatever we need for our healing, we’ve got it. But often, we would rather have the doctor, the healer, give us the answer.”

Epstein discovered this in himself at a Sam Keen retreat. He had a question for Keen that would not wait. “I kept raising my hand, and he kept ignoring me.” Later, Epstein went up to Keen and said, “I feel you have invalidated me.” Keen responded, “No one can invalidate you.” He told Epstein to explore all the times in his life he felt invalidated. Epstein turned inward. Picked apart the word invalidated, and plucked from it “invalid.”

“I realized that I felt like an invalid. A feeling that was rooted in my childhood. The feeling that I am not a complete person, that I am not good enough. Finally, I was able to touch it.”

Epstein walks the same path as his patients. “Sometimes the people I work with are more ready to be liberated than I am. Sometimes they have more courage than I do. When I see them move through the process, a piece of me gets healed too.” **S&H**

Robert Hirschfield has written for *Tricycle*, *Shambhala Sun*, *Ode Magazine*, *The National Catholic Reporter*, and other publications. He is dedicated to writing about today’s prophetic voices in world issues.

WORKING WITH PAIN AND DIFFICULTY

STEP 1

Sit in a quiet space, turn your awareness within. Tune in to the rhythms of your breath, gently scanning and relaxing the mind, opening the heart.

STEP 2

Ask questions, letting your inner wisdom respond:

- If my symptom, issue, or pain has a meaning, what might that be?
- How have I been with this pain? What has been my relationship to it? How have I treated it?
- Have I suffered because of my reaction to it?
- Is it asking me to let go of something? Can I accept the things I cannot change? Is there an opportunity and a lesson in this situation? Where is the healing?
- Can I be spacious and receptive to what arises without resistance and aversion?
- How do things show up in my body as sensations?
- How do they show up in my mind as thoughts?
- How do they show up in my heart as feelings?
- Is it all okay? Can I let everything be without fighting or struggling? Can I be with the truth with acceptance? Can I allow pain to simply happen? To just let it be there as it is and relax around it?

STEP 3

Imagine opening your heart to receive and welcome your wounded parts and the burdens they carry. Let them in, open to them. Welcome them into your heart, embrace them with mercy and awareness.

STEP 4

Breathe into and through the pain, body, mind, heart, and soul, as if this is the place the breath enters and leaves. Gently and slowly repeat the following phrases, or use your own meaningful phrases.

- I care about my pain.
- I welcome you into my heart of compassion.
- I accept you just as you are with unconditional friendliness.
- May I have the courage to be free from fear.
- May I be peaceful with what is happening.
- May I be free from suffering.

—PAUL EPSTEIN, N.D. (DRPAULEPSTEIN.COM)