Dr. Gerald Epstein, a medical doctor and a psychiatrist in private practice in New York City and an assistant clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York City, teaches the Western spiritual medical tradition. He is the director of a school for this work, teaching it to health professionals. He is the author of *Healing Visualizations: Creating Health Through Imagery* and *Waking Dream Therapy*. In the late summer of 1993, he spoke with author Heidi Rain about the Western tradition and his work.

*Why do you think it is that people seem to know so much about Eastern spiritual traditions and so very little about Western?* 

Judaism, Christianity and Islam have suppressed the spiritual strand. When these three traditions took over many long centuries ago, they did so in a way to attain power—to maintain and achieve power. They had to keep suppressing the tradition that speaks to a person’s individual freedom without the need for an intermediary to find his or her way to the Source. In order to maintain power over their people, they made it so that you had to go through the intermediary of the church and its officials rather than have your direct communication with God, which is a Western concept. This Western conception about one God—in which you can make direct contact with that God—would not have required an intermediary who had the function of escorting you there, or giving you special dispensation so that you can reach God.

*Is that why people turn to Eastern religions?* 

Yes. There’s a great spiritual yearning in people. Spiritual reality means in effect that you are making a turn toward the invisible reality, accepting its truth in physical reality, and that you’re wanting to find your way to freedom.

*What do you mean by freedom?* 

Freedom means truth and liberation from the enslavement that characterizes our relationship to this world. And what characterizes our relationship to this world is our enslavement to the great institutions that dominate the scene and determine for us what’s good, what’s bad, what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s normal, what’s abnormal . . .

*It doesn’t sound like you’re just speaking of the church then.*
No. There are other institutions as well. You have the military institution, the governmental institution, the medical arts institution, the institutions of science, theology, and, in recent decades, you have the big business institutions. You have essentially six major institutions and these six have really been the dominating forces in our lives throughout the five millennia (5000 years) that have constituted recorded history. So in this 5000-year epic, we have these major institutions that have sought to gain control and domination over other human beings. The name of the game on the earth has been dominance and submission, or dominance-subjugation. The erroneous notion is that for the individuals in the dominating group, to be free, it would require the enslavement of others. That the enslavement of others—another country, for example—allows you to be free.

That sounds like radical thinking. I understand that you are a medical doctor.

Well that's what I do by trade. I ply what I've done for a living and I've reestablished a link that has been there through millennia about a way to practice a medicine based on this tradition of truth and freedom and of finding your own authority and not being dependent on these great institutions. You use your actual illness, whether it be emotional or physical or both, as your way toward your freedom.

I always heard about Western spiritual tradition having to do with a body-mind split.

Oh, no, no, it's quite the opposite. The spiritual tradition has always been of the body-mind unity, and that they were indissolubly linked, that they were mirror reflections of each other. The split came in the middle of the 17th century with the rise of rational science and medicine, with the conventional medicine we now have, and the science that grew up as a secular response to the church's domination through all the centuries.

**What do you believe causes illness?**

There are three tendencies of the mind that create all physical and mental illness and give rise to all of the disturbances that we experience as human beings.

**And what are those?**

Those tendencies are doubt, expectation, and denial—an acronym of which I made called DED, what makes us dead. So the seed cause of all illness in the world is doubt; the origin of that is in the Garden of Eden. Eve is told with Adam, as long as they listen to the first voice, the one voice. As long as they don't eat the fruit, as long as they don't learn about the physical world, the world of duality, of object and subject. They're fine until the serpent whispers in Eve's ear, and says, "You can become God, you can have control over events, you can be omniscient, omnipresent, know the future and become immortal. All you have to do is learn about the knowledge of the physical world and you can become God."

Eve is falling into this existential quandary because she is hearing this one voice which says, "Follow me and you live," and the voice of the serpent which is the second voice, and the second voice is always the voice of doubt because doubt means two, if you look up the root of the word doubt.

And of course, as the archetypal story goes, she bites and she goes for the apple and they're hurtled into the world of disease, death, unhappiness, misery, torture, suffering and pain. And so the doubt was the seed cause. To resolve the doubt she went for the experience—to eat the apple—rather than turning back to the one voice, i.e., to turn to spirit. And that starts the whole engine of decay.

**And what's the expectation part?**

Always thinking into the future: what could be, should be, ought to be, must be, is going to be, will be, if/then—

**What about denial?**

We are always denying qualities of ourselves and seeing them reflected in the disturbing events that come into our lives. But what we do when these disturbing events and people come into our lives, rather than seeing them as reflections of qualities within us, we immediately blame them, feel alienated from them, want to build defenses against them; or feel victimized by them. So we never realize that what comes into our existence is really a product of our own denial, what qualities of ourselves that we refuse to look at.

That's really interesting. I don't know a lot about it even though I had a Jewish background.

That's because the tradition that has been passed on to us has sought not to emphasize or teach spiritual points. I think the original fear was that because the Jews were subject to such persecution when they were exiled from the Holy Land, they did not want to appear as threatening entities in foreign lands. So they sought not to teach this kind of education overtly. And I think eventually what this led to was the suppression of it altogether, and to assimilate more into the cultures in which the Jews found themselves.
Is the Kabala part of what was lost?
Of course. It was held to be esoteric—
you're not supposed to study it. Women
are not to learn it at all. You're not
supposed to dabble in it. It's dangerous.
All sorts of myths and superstitions arose
around it. It would have been much to the
Jews' benefit and service to have con-
veyed this kind of thinking into the world
because it's what the world is lacking. Be
that as it may, the huge percentage of
Americans who find themselves in Ori-
ental traditions are Jews—because they
have not had the training in their own
traditions, while the Oriental traditions
made it very much a part of the fabric
of their educational system. You grow up
in India, you learn the Bhagavad-Gita, you
were taught that. Before Mao in China,
you learned about Taoism. In Japan, you
learn about Shinto and about Zen Bud-
dhism. And in Tibet, of course, it was a
land in which everybody learned the Bud-
dhist tradition.

How have you incorporated the West-
ern teachings into your work?

I have a private practice in New York.
I do intensive weekend training seminars
for all health professionals, showing them
how to integrate imagery into their clini-
cal practice. I do have a New York State
Regents-chartered school/postgraduate
training center. We practically apply all
this understanding to our therapeutics.
This frees people to heal their physical
and emotional and social disturbances.
And the healing takes place very quickly.
It's an educative work, giving people a
training center. We practically apply all
this to a place where they could seek
spiritual fulfillment.

Meditation was never conceived of as a
therapeutics. Meditation
was always created for
people who had gone
through their daily life
problems and had now
been able to move beyond
that to a place where
true language of the inner life, of
spiritual fulfillment.

And therefore we concentrate without ef-
fort. And the arrow unerringly goes into
the bull's-eye. Because he's not inter-
ested in a realm that doesn't exist from
our point of view—a realm called the
future. So for us the future is an illusion.
And therefore we concentrate without
effort. We focus on the presence of the
present.

The paradigm of the Zen masters in
Zen and the Art of Archery, where he lines
himself up, gets his body perfectly set,
pulls the bow and arrow back with perfect
tension and aims it, right? And the mo-
ment he shoots the arrow, he shuts his
eyes. That's concentration without
effort. And the arrow unerringly goes into
the bull's-eye. Because he's not inter-
est in the outcome, only in the process.
That's concentration without effort. And
without that, forget healing. There is no
healing without that principle.

And so what about when people are
healed other ways?

October/November 1993
When you say other ways, what do you mean?  
Without necessarily being unconcerned about the future.
I haven't seen that.
How would you see it as different?
Healing is a coming into wholeness. So you can get cured; you know, if you have a sore throat you can take an antibiotic, and if it happens to work, you are cured of that sore throat. But you never were asked by any physician, “What’s the context of that soreness? What’s the life situation in which that soreness is existing? What’s its correlation, what’s its analogy to your everyday life, to your emotional life? What are you sore about?”
And how do we differentiate the one voice from the chatter, the mind chatter that we always have: this one says this thing, that one says that thing... How do we get down to that one voice, how do we know that it’s the one voice and not just another authoritarian --
Because it always speaks in the present tense. Or it speaks in the imperative voice. And the second voice always speaks in the future or the past tense.  
“If you don’t, then --”
Yes, if you don’t then—the if-then voice. Or “I want to take this trip, but if I go on this trip, then...” All that chatter is in the future tense. So you have to become a witness to yourself. You have to become an observer of how you’re operating; then you can take appropriate action.
Do you think meditation helps in this process?
Well, meditation was never conceived of as a therapeutics. Meditation was always created for people who had gone through their daily life problems and had now been able to move beyond that to a place where they could seek spiritual fulfillment.
Is there any one technique you would share with people for taking and using the image in everyday life?
Yes, let’s say for pain—which most people experience on a physical level, or by their equivalents on an emotional level—like anxiety, worry, fear, anger, and so on. Whenever bothered, the first thing to do is ask yourself: What image would describe what I’m experiencing? What image would relate to what I’m going through now? What does this whatever—I’m-going-through look like? And if you ask yourself any one of these kinds of questions, that image will come.
Okay, and then what do you do with that image?
Correct it. Make it what’s called in Judaism a tikkun. You make a tikkun, a correction. And so, for example, if you’re feeling anxious—do you feel, do you get anxious at times?
I’m very anxious. My computer just crashed.
Okay, so I say to you, what does that anxiety look like? What image would you see associated with it?
(Pause) A lot of ragged gray mountains.
Okay. So just breathe out slowly and correct this image. Change it, knowing that as you correct it, the anxiety is disappearing.
Some green is coming in.
Yes. So let the green grow on the mountainside.
Slowly.
Slowly. Yes, you see the sprouts starting to come through. As the sprouts are coming through slowly, tell me how you feel?
My shoulders are coming down.
Yes. So there’s a physical equivalent, your physical analogy to the anxiety begins to change. It is a mind-body unity. What happens on the emotional level is happening on the physical level. What’s happening physically is happening emotionally. Simultaneously.
The light’s coming over the hill.
The light’s coming up over the hill, you begin to see light. So this is a work of light. Light and life.
And I’m not supposed to think, wondering, how am I going to get this computer fixed, is it going to be fixed?
No, because that’s the second voice chattering away. Because you’re talking future talk. What you’re doing now is creating a space, because now the anxiety is disappearing. And in that space when the anxiety’s disappeared, you’ll have an insight or an intuition about what to do. It’ll come to you. Without your having to engage in rational thought.

There are three tendencies of the mind that create all physical and mental illness and give rise to all of the disturbances that we experience as human beings.

Body Mind & Spirit
There's a level of trust, there's a level of letting go that sounds like you're talking about—

It's called faith, the practice of faith. People say, if you're not born with faith, you can't develop it. That's not true. You can practice it. This is a way of practicing it. And one of the ways of practicing faith is through tikkan, making a correction. A very simple way that everybody can do.

And tikkan is "to correct"?

It's a correction. You're correcting the error. To be in error is to miss the mark. The imaging, the tikkan, comes through will. The three tendencies—doubt, expectation and denial—have their three remedies. They're called voluntary will, imagination and memory. And the acronym for that is VIM. The three functions of the mind: will, imagination and memory.

I get the will and imagination, but how does memory play into this?

Remembering God. Remembering your relationship always to the invisible reality. And not putting your stock in just the visible world, not believing the visible world holds the answers and keys to your existence, and freedom, and truth. And that's what the serpent would have you believe. It's turning your attention to the invisible reality that says the truth of life is in the absolute moral correctness of the world.

Absolute moral correctness of things as they are?

As they are, that's right. And the restoration of ourselves to life is to remember ourselves, is to put ourselves together again because to remember means to put yourself together, to remember.

What about redemption?

To redeem ourselves, to live, to redeem the moral errors that we make. And eventually by doing so, you overcome death. That's resurrection. It's the restoration of the dead souls to life and the overcoming of death in this life.

Are there a lot of parallels with the Eastern? I keep hearing this, whether it's reincarnation or the chance to live again.

Well, reincarnation is the wheel of birth and death. And we're talking about overcoming that wheel of birth and death to overcome death in this life. And the Western spiritual tradition has that as its central point. And that is the central point of all the major Western traditions that exist now—Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

Well, we can go on forever here (laughs) but...(laughs)

This is wonderful. Thanks so much for your time.

My pleasure.