

How to Answer Questions about Jews Attracted to non-Jewish Spirituality”
By Rosie Rosenzweig,
Resident Scholar in Women’s Studies at Brandeis University

Rosie Rosenzweig, resident scholar in women’s studies at Brandeis University, is the author of *A Jewish Mother in Shangri-La (1998)*, the story of meeting her Buddhist son’s Asian gurus. She is currently researching Jewish women authors who have been influenced by Buddhism and who are charismatic teachers of spirituality in Buddhist and Jewish Renewal. Her interpretations of biblical women appear in such collections as *Reading Between the Lines* and *All the Women Followed Her*. She has been interviewing artists and hosting a yearly panel at Brandeis in the creative process. She is the founder of a poetry festival in Sudbury, Massachusetts, and her poetry has appeared in a variety of publications.

Perhaps you’ve heard the story of the Jewish Mother and the Guru? If so please just call out the punch line when the time comes. A Jewish woman has traveled all the way to a monastery in Nepal to seek an audience with a world-renowned guru. After days of pleading with the monks there, the woman is finally permitted to enter the guru’s sanctuary, but she is only allowed to speak no more than four words. These words are (pause) “Moishe,” she cries, “Come home already!”
Or Sheldon.
OR in my case, BEN!

The hurt at the heart of that joke is a result of the fact that Jews are drawn to Buddhist practices in greatly disproportionate numbers. This group is colloquially known as “Jew-Bu’s.” (Or JuBus). There are Christbus and Unibus as well. An English writer describes this phenomenon:

“The first trickle of Jews began to convert to Buddhism about 50 years ago. The beat poet Allen Ginsberg was among them, and wrote, 'Born in this world/ you got to suffer/ everything changes/ you got no soul.' By the 1970s, there were enough Jewish Buddhists for Ginsberg's guru, Chogyon Trungpa, to talk about forming the “Oy Vey school of Meditation.” Now Jewish Buddhists - or JuBus - are the largest group of converts in the West, with all the hallmarks of an established movement. Armfuls of literature pay tribute to their conversion experiences: *The Jew in the Lotus*, *One God Clapping* and *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist!*”¹

A majority of the new American Buddhist Teachers are Jews. Prominent teachers include: Sylvia Boorstein, a practicing Jew and Psychotherapist who co-founded Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Northern California; Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg who founded the Insight Meditation Society, Barre, Massachusetts; Lama Surya Das who was born Jeffrey Miller of Long Island; Pema Chödrön, who was born Deirdre Blomfield-Brown, is a fully ordained Vajrayana Buddhist nun and popular writer; Ayya Kemma, a holocaust survivor who helped to revive the monastic order for women; Thubten Chödrön, who helped organize the first international Nun’s conference; Alan Lew, Rabbi and writer; Daniel Goleman, psychiatrist, former NY Times writer, and author; and Ram Dass, born Richard Alpert, writer (also a Hindu).

Other well known figures are: Norman Fischer, writer; Jake Gyllenhaal, actor; Goldie Hawn, actress; Steven Seagal, actor (who has a Jewish father); Adam Yauch aka MCA,

¹ *You don't look Buddhist,* **The Spectator**, Jul 12, 2003 by Mary Wakefield in London.

member the Beastie Boys; Leonard Cohen, poet, singer-songwriter, and novelist; Orlando bloom, actor in *Lord of the Rings*.² Furthermore, a majority of the board of directors of a leading Buddhist magazine, *Tricycle: A Buddhist Review*, are ethnic Jews. Half of the 10 Buddhist abbots to take charge of the Zen Center of San Francisco over the last 40 years were of Jewish ancestry. The editors of my own publisher, *Shambhala Publications*, chose my book to give to their own Jewish mothers.

Buddhism has an easy access with no formal requirements for entry, like learning Hebrew, or a belief in God. It advocates a way out of suffering with morality and discipline; its vision is that of an interconnected universe and a life of compassion and wisdom. Buddhism is known for adapting to the cultures. Founded by Gautama Siddhartha in India in the 6th century BCE it spread to China, Japan, Korea, Tibet and Vietnam. According to California writer Louis Sahagun, "It arrived in the United States in the late 19th century, and was popularized in the 1950s and '60s by the likes of Buddhist missionary D. T. Suzuki, author Alan Watts and JuBu beat poet Allen Ginsberg. Now, American Buddhist centers long bound by a tradition of remaining politically neutral are adding priorities that reflect those of their large numbers of often liberal, educated and politically active Jewish members: family life, civil rights and programs to feed, house and educate the poor. Zen Judaism has spawned a genre of JuBu jokes, such as: If there is no self, whose arthritis is this?"³

One local orthodox rabbi recently asked this author for help in calming the distress of an orthodox Jewish mother whose son to become ordained as a Zen Priest. The rabbi asked: "Is there really *Avodah Zarah* (idol worship) in Buddhism?" This is the heart of the conflict and the distress of many Jewish mothers, myself included. I told him that devotees really bow down before statues, but the focus of the idol is neither the idol, nor the bowing down; the idol is a meditation focus and represents an admirable quality embodied in each idol --- something like one of the 13 attributes that we intone on the High Holidays. However, the uneducated do mistake the idol for the god. The young man was probably, like many Buddhist practitioners, disillusioned with some of their perceived rigidities in their religion of origin.

I maintain that we are going through another *haskalah*, another search for the enlightened mind.

When Library patrons ask questions about non-Jewish Spirituality, sometimes you have to be a bit of a Colombo, a detective to know how to answer them. Is it a Jewish mother distressed at a child practicing another path? Is it about an interfaith relationship? Is it an academic researching? Is it someone trying to pursue meditation? The answer depends on the questioner.

Let's go through the bibliography in the handouts:

² Wikkepaedia.

³ Louis Sahagun, *LA Times Staff Writer* " At One With Dual Devotion: `JuBus' blend the communal rituals of Judaism with the quiet solitude of Buddhism. Most adherents are at peace with the paradox." May 2, 2006)

History of JuBus:

Historically all the Aryeh Kaplan books were a response to popularization of Hindu and Buddhist Meditation. These were written as a result of a meeting the Lubavitcher Rebbe called in the sixties to get books published on the Jewish meditative and mystical tradition to counter the popularity of meditation and Buddhism/Hinduism. Perle Besserman, not on this list, wrote many books for my publisher, and slowly became Zen teacher as well today. Rabbi Kaplan, who died young, remained a staunch orthodox practitioner until the day he died.

Roger Kamenetz. *The Jew in the Lotus*, (HarperCollins, NY 1994).

This describes a trip by a group of Jewish leaders who are invited to Dharamsala by the Dalai Lama to discuss how the Jewish experience of spiritual survival in exile might be helpful to Tibetans. Yitz Greenberg, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, and even our own Moshe Waldoks attended. Some outlined the Jewish mystical tradition; others advocated Seders and summer camps, which may be in affect in Dharamsala now.

Rosie Rosenzweig. *A Jewish Mother in Shangri-La* (Boston: Shambhala Publications), The story of meetings with this Jewish Mother and her Buddhist son's Asian gurus. They changed my consciousness and caused me to become a Jewish Meditation Teacher.

Sylvia Boorstein. *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist*

Dr. Boorstein finds that Buddhism enhances her Jewish practices. And attempts to resolve the conflicts. She holds "dual citizenship."

Rodger Kamenetz. *Stalking Elijah: Adventures with Today's Jewish Mystical Masters*. Books like this are a result of the Buddhist influence; writers turned back to their own Jewish tradition to elaborate on the mystical traditions and practitioners. This is a series of interviews with people like Jonathon Omer-Man, Zalman Schachter and others.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz and David Gottlieb. *Letters to a Buddhist Jew*. Targum Press. (Southfield, MI 2005)

This begins with the plight of a Zen practitioner, Gottlieb, whose practice drives his observant wife crazy. Rabbi Tatz finds the contradictions in the Buddhist practice and continually quotes from common and esoteric Jewish Sources.

Alan Lew, *One God Clapping: The Spiritual Path of a Zen Rabbi*.

Rabbi Lew still runs a Zen center beside the synagogue where he was once rabbi.

THE JEWISH RENEWAL MOVEMENT FOCUSES ON MEDITATION AND MYSTICISM:

Nan Fink Gefen, PhD. *Discovering Jewish Meditation: Instruction & Guidance for Learning an Ancient Spiritual Practice.* (Jewish Lights)

This is basic and simple introduction to three categories of Jewish Meditation.

Avram Davis. Editor. *Meditation from the Heart of Judaism* Contributors share their practices, techniques, and faith including: Sylvia Boorstein • Alan Brill • Andrea Cohen-Keiner • David Cooper • Avram Davis • Nan Fink • Steve Fisdell • Shefa Gold • Lynn Gottlieb • Edward Hoffman • Lawrence Kushner • Alan Lew • Shaul Magid • Daniel C. Matt • Jonathan Omer-Man • Mindy Ribner • Susie Schneider • Rami M. Shapiro • Shohama Wiener • Sheila Peltz Weinberg • Laibl Wolf • David Zeller

These contributors represent a wide range of Jewish practitioners including chant, study, Kabbalah meditations, etc.

Steven A. Rapp. *ALEPH-BET YOGA: Embodying the Hebrew Letters for Physical and Spiritual Well-Being*

The ancient practice of hatha yoga with the shapes and mystical meanings of the Hebrew letters are illustrated.

THE WORLD OF PRACTICAL KABBALLAH

Estelle Frankel. *Sacred Therapy: Jewish Spiritual Teachings on Emotional Healing and Inner Wholeness.* Shambhala Publications.

This is a new entry in the field of Jewish Spiritual Direction. Unlike other books on practical Kabbalah by Laibl Wolf, and Mindy Rivner, this uses the metaphors of the Kabbalistic tree for therapeutic purposes.

A TOUR OF OTHER FAITHS:

Stuart M. Matlins and Arthur J. Magida, editors. *How to Be a Perfect Stranger.*

Use this as the Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook for visiting other faiths and their celebrations, like weddings, funerals, etc. It does not handle conflicts around bowing down in Buddhist sanctuaries and the taking of the Catholic Eucharist.

THE LARGER PICTURE:

Karen Armstrong. *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of our Religious Traditions.*

Armstrong introduces a term originated by Karl Jasper called “the Axial Age, “ which began in the ninth century BCE when four distinct religious movements were born independent of one another in different geographical regions – something like the 100 monkey theory: Confucianism and Daoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; Monotheism in Israel and Philosophical Rationalism in Greece. Each had a concept like the Golden Rule at their base. (Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and Islam were “secondary flowerings of the Original Israelite Vision.) Institutionalized organized religious frameworks followed the original conception and either continued the original concepts

or rigidified them. This is not, however, about dogma. The flyleaf says, “All traditions of the Axial Age insisted on the primacy of compassion even in the midst of suffering. In each case, as revulsion of the violence and hatred of the times became a catalyst for spiritual change.

Rabbi Marc Gellman and Monsignor Thomas Harman (NY’s “God Squad”) *Religion for Dummies*.

The first hundred pages are devoted to the need, rationale, emotional and organized for religion. Then they are fairly accurate about the descriptions of other religions and give a good list of each of the basic sacred texts in each path. There is no mention, however, of recent developments like Engaged Buddhism, Mixed gender prayer services in Islam and Jewish Renewal.

Sharon Janis. *Spirituality for Dummies*.

Janis is a former nun and raised deep spiritual questions about our mission in life, and what to do in the depths of spiritual crisis. She isn’t totally accurate about Jewish Mantras, but she does give a decent list and some very soul-searching questions and practices which should be the basis for any spiritual life pursuit.

For academic librarian, this is a different list. Various Brandeis undergraduates for their projects regarding Buddhism have interviewed me. However, not too many Jewish libraries have the primary sources necessary for a good overview of Buddhist texts. Here are some suggestions.

The Teachings of the Buddha: The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha. (Wisdom Publications, Somerville MA 1995) Translated from the Pali by Bhikku Nanamoli and Bhikku Bodhi. (Wisdom Publications. Boston in association with the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.) This is one of the major collections of texts in the Pali Canon, the authorized scriptures of the Theravada Buddhism, the oldest records of the historical Buddha’s original teachings consisting of 152 sutras. Some sutras include how to use breath to attain higher states of consciousness, how to deal with anger, and what to say to a dying person.

Edward Conze. *Penguin Classics: Buddhist Scriptures*. (Penguin Books, Canada and England 1976). This is a classic history of Buddhism with summaries of the basic doctrines as well as translations of the original Buddhist texts.

Sogyal Rinpoche. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. (Rupa Paperback. India). The accumulated wisdoms of centuries of Tibetan Buddhism.

Samuel Bercholz and Sherab Chodzin Kohn. *Entering the Stream: An Introduction to the Buddha and his Teachings*. (Shambhala Publications. Boston 1993). This includes essays by leading Buddhist teachers, past and present detailing the main schools of Buddhism.

Robert Thurman. *The Essential Tibetan Buddhism*. (Harper SanFrancisco 1995) Thurman is Professor of Indo-Tibetan Studies at Columbia University and the Dalai Lama's US Liaison. This detailed summary relates Buddhist concepts to Western spirituality.

For more information contact:

Rosie Rosenzweig (jewmomrose@aol.com)
Resident Scholar in Women's Studies
Brandeis University, Mailstop 079
Waltham MA 02254
Author of *A Jewish Mother in Shangri-la* (Shambhala)
Founder of Mitbonennim, a Meditation society at
Brandeis
http://www.brandeis.edu/centers/wsrc/scholars/Scholars/R_Rosenzweig.html