

Facets of the relationship between Buddhism and Judaism

Nathan Katz in an interview with Frank Usarski*

Could you give us an overview of the “dogmatic” principles and relevant traditional sources (sutras etc.) that have served as references for the Buddhist-Jewish encounter?

The Buddhist principle taught by the Buddha is that wherever the eightfold noble path is found, there is his Dharma. This means that insofar as any religion teaches those principles, then it is accord with Buddhism.

From the Jewish side, we have the rabbinic reading of the Torah which teaches there are seven basic mitzvot given to Noah that are incumbent on all people, and insofar as a teacher adheres to these principles, then that system is “righteous” and not idolatrous and is compatible with Judaism.

From which period in time did the Buddhist-Jewish encounter become manifest, and what were the geographical and socio-cultural circumstances under which early encounters occurred?

There are shadowy hints from ancient and classical times. For example, the Mahoshadha Jataka and the biblical Book of Kings have the identical story of a wise king’s judgment about two women who claim the same baby as her own. The Buddhist Jataka tale is about the King of Benares, a former life of the Buddha, and the biblical story is told of King Solomon, the wisest of all human beings. The story is the same.

But any Buddhist-Jewish contacts up until the modern period are obscured by a terminological issue. From the Talmud on, anything from India is called “Hindu’a” – so whether something is Buddhist or Hindu is never clear. Actually, this reflects not only a foreign misperception of India, but within India religious divisions are in many senses a recent phenomenon. From the other side, Indian texts refer to all foreigners as “Yavanas” – Greeks

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literally (the same word is in Hebrew!), but all foreigners. So when we look at the texts, we can never be sure who is being discussed. All we have are Hindu'a and Yavana.

Did the relationship between Buddhism and Judaism suffer modifications over the course of history, for example in terms of a greater mutual intimacy and/or a (perhaps unilateral) rejection and, if so, what intra-religious developments (within Buddhism/Judaism) contributed to the changes in Buddhist / Jewish relationships?

During medieval times, we have intriguing hints in travelogues. The ninth century Muslim traveler, al Beruni, wrote about a great Jewish presence in Kashmir. Marco Polo wrote that there were Jewish advisors to the Chinese Emperor. Sir Thomas Row, British Ambassador to the Mughal Court, described Jewish influences there. And the 12th century Jewish traveler, Benjamin of Tudelah, described a large Jewish community in close proximity to the King of Kandy in Sri Lanka – but that report is almost certainly mistaken.

European Jews were interested in Buddhism more as Europeans than as Jews. That is, Buddhism was of cultural interest in secularized Europe, and most European Jews were secularized. We have a Yiddish translation of the Dhammapada, for example, and Martin Buber and other secular Jewish thinkers discussed Buddhist thought extensively. In those days, the meeting was primarily textual.

We know of ancient Jewish communities in India, and colonial-era communities in Burma, Japan, China, etc. But we have no evidence of any interreligious interests on their part – with one exception. A Yemenite kabbalist who lived in Darjeeling in the Himalayas wrote an enticing and very difficult text that drew parallels between Kabbalah and Tibetan tantra, especially magical practices. I have been working on it for some time, but frankly it is beyond my abilities.

The real encounter between Jews and Buddhists begins, paradoxically, during the Holocaust era. A number of German Jews made their way to India, some seeking refuge and others enlightenment. Among them were some who became very influential Buddhist monks and nuns. They influenced Buddhism, especially in articulating a socially activist Buddhism and in the international Buddhist women's movement.

Later this phenomenon of the JuBu (a Jew who practices Buddhism) produced some of the most significant Buddhist teachers of the twentieth century. Among them are Nyanaponika Mahathera, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ayya Khema, Lama Anagarika Govinda, Philip Kaplau Roshi, Bernie Glassman Sensai, Jack Kornfeld, Joseph Goldstein, Sylvia Boorstein, Lama Surya Das, Harvey Aronson, Daniel Goleman, Thubten Chodron, etc.

At the same time, western scholars of Buddhism include a disproportionate number of Jews. These large numbers of Jewish Dharma teachers and scholars led to the first semi-official encounter between Buddhists and Jews, the 1990 Tibetan-Jewish dialogue hosted by H.H. the Dalai Lama and recorded in *The Jew in the Lotus* by Rodger Kamenetz.

Are there differences between Buddhist schools in terms of the Buddhist perception of, reaction against, or collaboration with Judaism?

No, although the encounter takes different forms in different cultural contexts. For example, Tibetans are very interested in Jewish survival as a religious and cultural community despite the loss of their homeland. So for them, diasporization was atop the agenda. Buddhists in Japan had other topics, some rather unsavory, as described in *The Fugu Plan* by the former chief rabbi of Japan, Marvin Tokayer, about how Japanese leaders wanted Jewish collaboration for their war effort. David Ben Gurion and U Nu of Burma had a very significant relationship that touched upon both the development of their new countries and on a non-clerical reformation to secularize their religions.

Here in Miami, when the local Thai community wanted to build a temple there was a great deal of opposition. The leader of the local rabbinic association led an effort to gain acceptance of the temple by the local zoning board and met with success. In the United States, to speak generally, often the grist for the Jewish-Buddhist encounter is how to thrive in American society while preserving indigenous values and traditions.

Is the Buddhist – Jewish dialogue partly institutionalized in terms of special or regular meetings, or at least contextualized within inter-religious meetings of a wider scope? If there are special meetings, who is responsible for the organization of these events? Who is engaged in this kind of dialogue (e.g., individual representatives, such as the Dalai Lama, associations, particular religious communities)?

These meetings have become almost routine of late. The Dalai Lama met with the Chief Rabbi of Israel in Jerusalem, and one finds many synagogues hosting Buddhist-Jewish dialogues. However, far too often the Buddhist dialogue partner is a JuBu rather than a Buddhist from a Buddhist culture. The institutional Jewish world has yet to learn very much about Buddhists and Buddhism, with all its cultural and ethnic diversity. For the most part, Jews – like most westerners – are familiar only with what has been called “nutshell Buddhism” or “export Buddhism” or “Buddhism lite,” by which I mean a simplistic view of life, the practice of meditation, and New Age sensibilities. Many Buddhist teachers, seeking followers, pander to these expectations. Buddhism is actually a rigorous intellectual system with a very demanding code for living, as well as great diversity of approach.

Is it possible to identify the main subjects of the current dialogue (for example: the environmental crisis, roles of women, the death penalty, euthanasia)? If so, on which issues do the dialogue partners agree or disagree?

All of these are viable topics for discussion, but there is no agreement within Judaism or within Buddhism, let alone between them. There is no one Buddhist approach to the role of women, for example, just as there is no one Jewish approach.

I have mentioned a number of topics of interest to Buddhists: diasporization, modernization, how to combat terrorism, economic development, maintaining values, etc. Jews are often more interested in meditation, spirituality, and the like.

Despite such divergent agendas, fruitful dialogues are possible so long as one does not enter the dialogue with too many preconceptions as to what the other is all about. Openness, in other words, is the key to genuine encounter.



Additional comments, for example, referring to the possible future of the Buddhist-Jewish encounter....

The Buddhist-Jewish encounter is a two-way street. Jews have things they want to learn from Buddhists, of course, but it is equally true that Buddhists have things they want to learn from Jews!

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