

# From Judaism to Buddhism

## *A Jewish Woman's Search For Identity*

by Deborah Brodey

*L'auteure décrit son cheminement spirituel de femme juive attirée par le Bouddhisme.*

---

*I became aware of another reality, one that goes beyond the secular teachings I grew up with in the Judaism I experienced. I began to see myself as a spiritual being in relation to the world, part of an interrelated universe.*

---

For the last eight years I have been travelling back and forth between India, Nepal, and Toronto. The first couple of trips I spent working and travelling. The third trip, however, took me on a journey that was the start of my awareness into the realm of the spiritual. This journey transformed my life.

When I left for Kathmandu in October 1991, I knew this trip would be different from any other. I had just finished a contract working with Native women, where I learned many things from the women I worked with. The most important teaching for me was that I became aware of another reality, one that goes beyond the secular teachings I grew up with in the Judaism I experienced. I began to see myself as a spiritual being in relation to the world, part of an interrelated universe. This new awareness is what led me back to Asia.

I spent a month at a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery called Kopan, where Tibetan Lamas taught hundreds of hungry westerners about the Buddhist Eight-Fold Path. It was a time of a lot of reflection, resistance, and opening up for me. Was this a viable path for me? Could I embrace this path, or would I feel conflict because of my Jewish background? What would my family think? At Kopan I

didn't commit to the Buddhist path but there was a seed planted. While I was there I couldn't help noticing the disproportionately large numbers of other Jewish women and men participating. I was fascinated by this.

Why are Jews attracted to Buddhism and other eastern traditions? What kind of backgrounds do they come from? Will they leave Judaism or can they be Buddhists and remain

Jewish? Do they feel conflicted about it? These questions remained unanswered in the back of my mind.

I continued to explore Buddhism after Kopan by participating in other meditation retreats from various Buddhist traditions, ranging from Tibetan Buddhism to Vipassana to Zen. Gradually, over time, I found myself becoming more immersed in the teachings. I was attracted to the experiential approach of Buddhist meditation and the emphasis on testing the teachings out for oneself. It is very direct compared to learning by rote at religious school. Sitting in my inner sanctuary was vastly different from sitting in a synagogue and listening to passages from the Torah of a male God which I couldn't relate to. The central teaching in Buddhism, that there is suffering in life and that there is a way to end suffering, was very appealing to me since I was going through a difficult time in my life. This approach gave me a new lens through which to view my own suffering and the suffering of others, allowing me to be more accepting of my own pain and others', rather than fighting it. As well, the teaching of the interrelatedness of all life resonated with me. I had learned the same perspective from the Native Wisdom teachings and was for me a powerful

antidote to the patriarchal notion of understanding the world in terms of oppositions that has been inherent in the mainstream branches of the Judeo-Christian traditions: female and male, good and evil, human relationship to nonhuman nature, us versus them.

In 1993, I made a formal commitment to Buddhist practice with the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hahn. I felt connected to his approach to Buddhism which emphasizes mindful practice in our daily lives and in society in order to transform ourselves and our environment. Making this commitment was a big step for me and I struggled with what it would mean to be a student of Buddhism and a Jewish woman. Despite some conflicted feelings, I decided to dive in anyway. As I continued to learn and understand more about what it was I was committing to, I became increasingly interested in what Judaism as a spiritual path was, as well as thinking about the forces that caused me to seek outside of Judaism.

I come from a family of mixed parentage; my father is Jewish and my mother, an agnostic from a Protestant background. According to many Jews I am not considered Jewish. I was, however, raised as a secular Jew and was accepted into a Reformed Synagogue as a Jew. Moreover, I identified as a Jew. I received a Jewish education from a Reformed Synagogue and from a Hillel workshop for youth and their parents. Unfortunately, as an adult I retained very little knowledge and understanding of Jewish religion. My Judaism meant having a strong sense of family, history, and of social justice, and the remembering of the suffering that we as a people have endured. I don't remember ever feeling connected to the religious aspects we were taught. For example, I couldn't believe that God was a "he." I can remember being in

one of the classes and the teacher asking us to describe God. Many of the children talked about God being an old man with a big white beard looking down on us. I remember saying that I thought God was more of a presence or an energy all around us rather than a person. It was love. I don't remember how the teacher responded, but I remember having difficulty relating to the concepts of God that the others spoke of. That is one of my more vivid memories. Mostly I remember feeling uncomfortable. I am unsure if this had to do with my general discomfort in classrooms and the rote style of learning or because I had a father who had very conflicted feelings about his own Jewish identity, particularly when it came to religion, or because half of me was WASP and I grew up in a non-Jewish neighbourhood. Perhaps all of the above is relevant in shaping my experience. In any case, my formal Jewish education ended when, much to my relief I was 14 with my informal bat mitzvah/confirmation.

When I was 20, I went to Israel to live on a Kibbutz for three months. I don't know if I was aware of it then, but I think I went there to find out about my history, my self, my identity. It was a spiritual pilgrimage of sorts. My experience there made me question many things. When I went to the Wailing Wall I had difficulty relating to the religious Jews and understanding how I was connected to these people. As well, it was the first time that I was told that I wasn't considered Jewish because my mother wasn't Jewish, which was very confusing and affected me a great deal. After I came home from Israel I began to call myself half Jewish with my new awareness that I didn't totally belong anymore. Through the next several years, I articulated this feeling of not totally belonging, as being caught between two cultures, Jewish and WASP, and not really belonging to either. Perhaps that is why I travelled so much to far away places such as India and ended up making a commitment to a Buddhist practice. Interestingly though, I found the more

I delved into Buddhism the more I wanted to understand what Jewish spirituality was about and, since it was clear that my knowledge of Judaism as a spiritual path was lacking, I began to read about Judaism, hoping to understand more about Jewish religion.

I picked up books on Jewish history, Jewish meditation, and Jewish religion. I eventually came across *The Jew in the Lotus* by Rodger Kamenetz. It was the book I was looking for. A Jewish poet describes an important meeting which brought together Jewish Rabbis from all the branches of Judaism and the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet to Dharamsala, India (home of the Dalai Lama in exile and a place in which I've spent a lot of time). They came together to exchange a number of interfaith topics, including Buddhist Tantra and Jewish Kabbalah, as well as the Dalai Lama's request to understand the Jewish secret of survival since the Tibetans have undergone genocide at the hands of the Chinese and are now dealing with their own diaspora. Another topic that was of great interest to me has to do with the disproportionate numbers of Jews who have turned to Buddhism for their spiritual nourishment. Kamenetz called these individuals "Jubus" (Jewish Buddhists) or "Bujus" (Buddhist Jews) depending on whether Judaism was given up or not. This was the first book I found that I could identify with and it grappled with some of the questions I had been wondering about since my time at Kopan Monastery. It also opened up a Judaism to me that I had never been exposed to.

At the time I was reading Kamenetz's book, I was thinking of dropping out of the MA program I was registered in, as I was having difficulties finding a thesis topic that moved me. I was finishing my last paper when I spoke to a colleague and told her about this wonderful book I was reading and how I'd rather be reading than working on the paper. She asked whether there was a thesis topic in that book for me. From that moment

on, I knew my research had to focus on Jewish women who have made a commitment to a Buddhist practice. I chose to concentrate on Jewish women because I found in Kamenetz's work, as I find in most works written by men, that women's voices were lumped together with men's in statements about Jews, thus excluding the uniqueness of women's experience of their own spirituality.

In the past year I interviewed ten other women about their lives as Jewish women and why they were drawn to Buddhism as well as the nature of their commitment, how they integrated coming from a Jewish background and committing to a Buddhist practice, and whether they experienced conflicts. I interviewed five of the women in Dharamsala during the annual teachings of the Dalai Lama in March of 1996. The rest of the women were interviewed in Canada. The process was exhilarating for me. It was much more than a piece of research. This is a work that feeds my soul, guides me, nourishes me, and is much greater than me. Meeting other Jewish women who are Buddhists has been an incredible experience. I saw myself reflected in some of their stories as well as seeing the individuality of each woman. As I interviewed the women, I felt affirmed somehow. My identity as a Jewish woman was becoming stronger as I listened to the familiar struggles of these women. In a way, the interview process helped me to work through my own conflicting feelings of what it means to be a Jewish woman. I realized that my biggest conflict lies with being half Jewish and, as such, not being recognized by the Jewish community, and not feeling that I really belong. The conflict I experienced when deciding whether to make a commitment to Buddhist practice was probably fueled by feelings of guilt that perhaps I was betraying my ancestors. This may also explain why once I did make a commitment, I was unable to call myself a Buddhist.

Today I am a Jewish woman and a student of Buddhism. I've been able

to integrate the two since Judaism for me has never been about practicing the Jewish religion. Judaism has been a cultural identity, part of my history, an integral part of who I am, and a significant part of my family identity. This is not to say, however that I'm not prepared to explore Jewish religion further, especially since this past year I felt compelled to buy my first menorah. Since exploring my thesis project, my identity as a Jewish woman has become stronger, but I've also made a stronger commitment to a Buddhist practice by joining a meditation group. This is an important step for me since I have resisted joining any Buddhist group. Somehow by doing this work, I've come to a place where I am able to embrace my Jewish identity along with the Buddhist path I have chosen. I'm also open to other approaches. In a way my approach is becoming universal as can be seen by the many different religious symbols, some of which include, a Buddha, a menorah, a cross, a medicine wheel, and Laksmi (the Hindu Goddess), that are present in my living room. Maybe it's not so different from when I was growing up. In my family Chanukah candles burned beside the "Chanukah bush," where we hung our stockings for St. Nick.

In many ways, I am conflicted in the same way my father was. I've been searching for different approaches to resolve this conflict I have inherited and chosen. In Buddhism I have found a philosophy and way of life that is spiritually meaningful and which allows me to keep on struggling with my Jewish identity while redefining who I am in terms of the greater Self.

*Deborah Brodey is completing an MA in Adult Education at OISE in Toronto. She has travelled extensively throughout Asia and is a student of Thich Nhat Hahn, a Vietnamese Zen Master.*

#### References

Kamenetz, Rodger. *The Jew in the Lotus*. New York: Harper, 1994.

# Lilith

*by Women and Torah*

Now Lilith was born of sky, fire, and freedom, but Adam was earth-bound (adamah—earth). For a while they lived in perfect harmony and equality and it was paradise, the garden of Eden. But Adam could not join her in flight—they could only be together when Lilith came to earth. So Lilith chose to join him.

But Lilith was a bird in a gilded cage. She remembered that there had been a time when she soared above the earth. And she knew that the earth-bound existence was not enough.

And Adam was afraid, because he thought she might leave him. He wanted to be sure she would always stay. And so he clipped her wings.

Lilith mourned, but time passed and her wings shrivelled and died. After more time, she forgot she had even been other than she was—Eve, wife, and mother. Only in her sadness and her dreams did she know that once she had flown.

*And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:27)*

*Women and Torah is an independently operating subgroup of Tapestry, a Jewish feminist group in Calgary, formed to enhance our spirituality as women. The group, which meets monthly, focusses on selected women in the Torah. Their purpose is to gain an understanding of these women, to discuss their roles, to highlight their contribution to Judaism, and to enhance their own spirituality through an understanding of their legacy. Members of the group include Carla Atkinson, Elaine Bucknum, Loretta Busot, Shirley Dunn, Jenny Glickman-Rynd, and Maggie Serpa.*



Lilian Broca, "Lilith and Eve," graphite, acrylics, collage, spackle on paper. 22.25" x 42.75", 1996. Photo: Weekes Photo Graphics.

*Lilian Broca received her BFA from Concordia University, Montreal, and her MFA from the Pratt Institute, New York. She has taught Painting and Drawing at Kwantien College for 13 years, and has been exhibited internationally since 1971. Her works are in important public and private collections all over North America. She lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.*