

# Questions

*Dear Rabbi Tatz,  
I am a Zen Jew struggling to resolve these two identities.*

*Two Orthodox rabbis here in Chicago, Yehoshua Karsh and Zev Kahn, suggested that you might be able to provide me with some counsel and direction, and after listening to recordings of some of your lectures that Rabbi Kahn has been kind enough to give me, I think they may be right. My wife, my daughters and I have studied with these warm and wise rabbis and they have helped my wife maintain perspective and patience with me and my Zen practice; but her visceral discomfort has now reached the point of the unbearable (“David, your practising Buddhism is a knife in my heart”).*

*It is I who have brought her to this point, and I must make a significant decision: do I commit myself fully to Judaism and abandon Zen altogether – the Zen that helped me to awaken spiritually for the first time in my adult life? And if I do commit to Jewish study and practice, where can I find the vibrancy, the wisdom and the source of spiritual connection which, for me, Judaism has never held?*

*My wife and I belong to a Conservative synagogue in Chicago’s northern suburbs, but for some years I studied meditation at a Zen Buddhist center in nearby Evanston, Illinois. My involvement in the practice became rather intense and I underwent “lay ordination,” meaning that I formally accepted the basic Buddhist precepts (quite similar to the Ten Commandments) as a code for living.*

*My wife was raised with a strong Jewish identity and education; I was not. Consequently, my ability to learn and adapt to the strictures of Conservative Judaism and to learn its language and liturgy initially proved a barrier in my spiritual awareness and religious practice. It was in this context, being drawn to meditation and believing that there really was no such thing as Jewish meditation, that I immersed myself in the study of Buddhism.*

*However, my Zen practice caused increasing discomfort and friction, not only within myself but between me and my wife. In time, I came to see certain elements of Buddhist meditation as extremely helpful to me personally, but the adoption of Buddhism as a religion to be a source of internal and external division.*

*I have resumed studying Hebrew and begun to learn to read the Torah in the hope of doing an “adult Bar Mitzva,” and am steadily increasing my Jewish literacy.*

*If you agree, I would like to pose some of the questions that bother me and others who have walked this path. Some of these questions are sharp for me now, others have been sharper in the past, but they all need resolving. I will give you some further personal background if that will be helpful; I shall also suggest some basic Buddhist texts that will help frame these issues more clearly. For a start, I am attaching a reference to a basic work on “The Noble Eightfold Path,” and a book by Shunryu Suzuki. Suzuki was a Japanese Buddhist monk who came to San Francisco in the late 1950’s; he started the San Francisco Zen Center, now the nation’s largest, and was largely responsible for the surge of popularity of Zen Buddhism in America. This book contains excerpts from his lectures (called “dharma talks” in Zen lingo) to his students about approaching Zen, and life, with the clear and open mind of a beginner. These two books would, I think, give you a clear picture of what captivates Westerners, and especially Western Jews, about Buddhist thought and practice.*

*Wishing you peace and good health,  
David Gottlieb.*

12 LETTERS TO A BUDDHIST JEW

Dear David,  
I am not sure you have come to the right address, but go ahead and send your questions; I shall do my best to answer.

Best wishes,  
Akiva Tatz.

*Dear Rabbi Tatz,  
Thank you for your willingness to help me navigate towards the answers to these questions. As you'll see, they are complaints or objections due partly to my experience and partly to my ignorance.*

*Here, then, are some 15 questions and observations about Buddhism's "advantages" over Judaism that concern me and often trouble Jews who are involved in the practice of Zen Buddhism.*

#### **A JEWISH BUDDHIST'S COMPLAINTS ABOUT JUDAISM AND COMPARISONS OF JUDAISM WITH ZEN**

##### **1. GOD**

*Although Zen Buddhism does not deny the existence of a Divine force at work in the Universe, it does not focus on a God who must be obeyed or, more importantly, believed in. Buddhism focuses on what can be experienced, and although many believe they can experience God... can they, really? The whole concept of building a worship system around a Supreme Being who cares at all about what we do and don't do, and all the "myths" attendant on that belief, is like building a castle to live in and expecting it to float in mid-air.*

##### **2. ACCESSIBILITY**

*Although Buddhism can get very ornate and very intricate, its basic tenets are extremely simple, and it is therefore not only extremely accessible, it's also portable: that is, it does not conflict with the practice of other religions. You can practise Buddhism and still be a Jew. After all, I'm merely cultivating mindfulness, watching my*

*breath, realizing the interconnectedness of all things and beings, and striving to recognize and uproot the causes of suffering.*

*Judaism, on the other hand, is confoundingly inaccessible, and the deeper one tries to go, the denser the thicket of laws, and texts, and beliefs, and practices gets.*

### 3. CHOSENNESS vs. UNIVERSALITY

*Buddhism recognizes and focuses on the interconnectedness of all things and beings. In fact, in meditation one can concretely experience this, and it is extremely liberating. Contrast this with the concept of chosenness, which is a fundamental cause of the Jewish people's deliberate separation of themselves from the rest of society – a cause, one might even say, of resentment leading to anti-Semitism and its horrifying consequences. To be a practising Jew, you really have to believe that you are part of a covenant in which you have been selected for a special task or role in life. This fundamentally sets you apart, and obstructs you from experiencing the true nature of the Universe.*

### 4. SELF-KNOWLEDGE

*Buddhism helps one to see that there is no such thing as the “self,” with a small “s”. Sure, there's a body, and an agglomeration of personality traits within it. But all our “selves” are interconnected like bicycle spokes. This perspective frees us from grasping and clinging to ideas and desires – the ultimate causes of suffering.*

*Judaism, on the other hand, upholds the notion of self, and from the get-go, puts burdens on it: 613 commandments; and sets for one goals that lead to grasping, clinging, and the endlessness of the cycle of suffering. One could say, then, that in focusing on the true nature of “Big Self,” that is, the interconnectedness of larger Universal identity, in which we all repose, Buddhism gives a deeper, more accurate, less agonizing self-knowledge than Judaism could, and after all, it is with self-knowledge that we begin to ready ourselves to serve the larger world and avoid inflicting suffering on others.*

## 5. BELIEF

*Now, Buddhism in some forms does entertain certain ideas that might be called belief, but if we're talking here about Buddhism in its sparsest and most common Western form – specifically, Soto Zen – then one of its great strengths would be that you don't have to believe. You experience for yourself. This is what made Shakyamuni Buddha such a revolutionary spiritual leader. He saw belief systems as forms of enslavement, either to political systems or to mirages that inflamed suffering. In Zen, you simply experience. Belief is a kind of smokescreen that obscures reality.*

## 6. TORAH FROM SINAI

*This is connected to my previous question concerning belief, of course. If one does not believe in the revelation at Mt. Sinai, how can one call oneself Jewish? One may hear many distinguished Jewish scholars, yourself included, note that there is no revelation in history like that of the Jews at Sinai. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, blown backwards by the voice of God Himself, and the numerous experiences of God by the desert wanderers thereafter.*

*But a Buddhist might say that this is little more than an excellent myth, and if you can't fully believe this myth, are you really Jewish? And if you do believe it, are you not suffering from delusion, one of the Three Poisons? In contrast, a Buddhist might say, the Buddha was, we're sure, an historical figure, whose movements were tracked, sermons documented, whose life and death are historically known. He was utterly human, and transformed himself through inquiry. No hocus-pocus.*

## 7. LEGALISM

*The preservation of arcane traditions, and the inability of Judaism to adapt itself to the different times and cultures in which Jews have found themselves, can account for a lot of Jewish seeking, and finding, in Buddhism. How can a spiritual tradition with a close connection to a vibrant, present One God maintain that connection in the mind-numbing tracts of legislation and commentary through which Jews approach their relationship with God?*

## 8. SPIRITUAL VACUITY

*Many see Judaism as so engulfed in procedure and law that it, and its adherents, are utterly lacking in spiritual identity. A Buddhist almost invariably puts openness and awareness and compassion front and center, and is a spiritually enlivened being. Many Jews seem utterly unconcerned with spiritual life and development, but still proud to call themselves Jews, and it is the sons and daughters of these people who join other religions or fall away from all spiritual practice, who intermarry, who lose any connection to Jewish identity.*

## 9. CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF JUDAISM IN THE WORLD

*Buddhists in the West are compassionate and caring, socially active and humble people. It may be an overgeneralization verging on anti-Semitism, but some Buddhists who are Jews might say that they are turned away from Judaism in no small measure by the way they see Jews living: in self-selected enclaves of, largely, wealth and privilege. How can a vibrant spiritual tradition lead to this kind of self-imposed spiritual apartheid?*

## 10. EMPTINESS

*This is a Buddhist concept that I'll have to recommend a text for. But essentially, it is that all things, all beings, are creating themselves from moment to moment, and have no inherent quality or personality. Rather, it is the overlay of our perceptions, born of our own misconceptions and our chemical and psychological interplay, that lead us to mistakenly endow things and people with qualities that, in the whole, they do not have.*

*This radical view, arrived at by great Buddhist philosophers of roughly the 10th century, unravels more traditional views of personality, personal experience, and of course, God.*

## 11. TRADITIONS AND STORIES RENDERED MEANINGLESS OR TERRIBLE BY TIME

*Shaking the Lulav and Etrog, dwelling in booths; the dedicated reading of Torah portions about brutal savagery in war, sacrifice, plagues and torment visited upon enemies: some aspects of Jewish life and observance, and the stories by which we guide ourselves, seem to modern sensibilities arrogant, bizarre, war-like. Although it is beyond argument that the Jewish people endowed the Western world with much, if not all, of its moral code, it is nonetheless strange that we adhere to the customs and tell the stories of an ancient agrarian conglomerate of nomadic tribes when the world has changed so much.*

*Much of Judaism appears impenetrable and archaic, so that it becomes the last place many Jews would look for a vital connection to the Divine. A book that recently received a lot of attention here in the States makes the claim that Judaism is dying because rituals have frozen the spiritual truth of the religion in inaccessible amber, and what's left has been expropriated by Jewish agencies using the Israeli/Palestinian crisis as an excuse to raise money to perpetuate themselves. This view is not entirely unrepresentative of much of my generation's take on contemporary Judaism.*

## 12. THE CULT OF JEWISH VICTIMHOOD

*Some feel that Judaism as a whole perversely revels in its victimhood on the one hand, and that the current version of Zionism is imposing this very kind of victimhood on others. In contrast, Buddhism espouses detachment from forms of identity, from all places or things, that would lead to this kind of suffering. Many Buddhists (and particularly ex-Jews) might point to relentless reminders of the Holocaust on one hand, and the current strife in Israel on the other, and simply say: "You see? This is what comes of a religion that clings to ancient ideas, to myths and to lands. Show me a country torn apart by Buddhist strife." (One might respond that Buddhist priests in WW II Japan advocated mindfulness while killing the enemy, but that's another story.)*

### 13. JOY

*When one experiences emptiness, when one frees oneself from delusions and attachments, one experiences a profound upwelling of compassion for all sentient beings. This egalitarian openness is a major avenue leading to the elimination of suffering. Even if you aren't enlightened, this is a joyful experience. Joy is not the major aim of Buddhism. Understanding is. But the two are closely related.*

*Where is the joy in Judaism?*

### 14. MEDITATION

*Most Jews are drawn to Buddhism because it is, by its very nature, quiet, deliberate, even solitary. It is inwardly focused, calm, serene. No minyans, no noisy shuls, no scolding rabbis. Is there such a thing as Jewish meditation?*

### 15. SUFFERING

*Buddhism aims to eliminate suffering. Judaism seems to see suffering as integral to growth. Yom Kippur, one could say, positively enshrines suffering – ennobling the very thing Buddhism seeks to extirpate! There is a fundamental gap here.*

*Rabbi Tatz, I look forward to hearing from you.*

*Rabbi Kahn tells me that you will be coming to Chicago later this month; perhaps we could meet? My wife and I would be honored to host an informal dinner for you Sunday evening in our home; others would be interested in joining us and hearing you speak.*

*David Gottlieb.*