
YHVH Means What Is: Buddhism and Judaism

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We're alive. We're here. What do we do about it?

It seems to me, that for as long as we've got, we ought to live like it matters, to show up for life and see it as clearly as we can. As Thoreau said, "to live deliberately—not to find, when I came to die, that I had not lived." Hardly a unique point of view today—it's become something of a cliché, I suppose—but still a starting point. Of course, the details of living in this way are different for different people. This essay is about how I do it.

To me, living deliberately means experiencing life as it is, without bullshit, without delusion, and without authority mediating truth for me; life, in all its richness, beauty, ugliness, pain, and surprise; experiencing and sharing love; and something to do with helping ourselves and others suffer less and be present more. Still nothing new—although quite different from what large constituencies of people believe, especially people who are conventionally understood as religious. I admit its simplicity; I just want to show up for life, express my true nature, and know the truth of what is. Whatever it is.

As the title of this essay implies, somehow this simple imperative becomes translated, for me, into an amalgamation of -isms. Now, I'm not an orthodox Jew or an orthodox Buddhist, and I neither claim nor desire to be a spokesman for any religious tradition. As if that were even possible—there is such wide and angry disagreement on what "Judaism is," that there really

isn't a single ism at all, and the Buddhism I practice really has very little to do with what most Asian Buddhists do, at temples, with offerings, or chants. Nor is it even beneficial to try to stake out territory with recourse to some greater tradition, as in "this thing called Judaism is important, and I'm going to tell you what it means!" But having said all of that, I do nonetheless find my practice of life ("spiritual practice" increasingly becoming too narrow a term) drawing on the systems of Judaism and Buddhism, and I want to explain how it works.

I see Judaism as a way of being in relationship with the sacred, which in Jewish language is usually called "God." (More on that word below.) By "sacred," I mean that which takes me beyond my personal concerns, and the tendency to make everything in the world either a useful or useless implement toward achieving them. "Sacred" is that which gets me beyond the selfish, and Jewish ritual helps me both to gain access to it (through prayer, meditation, study, ritual action) and to respond to it (through ethics, and more ritual). The image I like to use is of Jacob's ladder, in which the angel-messengers are seen ascending and descending the ladder to heaven. Ascending: how do we get to God, how do we have a spiritual experience, how do we live life fully. Descending: how do we respond to this Reality, how do we order our ordinary lives in a way that acknowledges it. And again, how do we live life fully.

Some people think of the "sacred" as something very special. It lives in a special place, and you can only see it at certain times. But I find that the sense of the sacred arises naturally whenever we are fully "present," by which I simply mean: awake, not distracted, focused, not deluded. Indeed, the more I practice, the more I see that the present *is* the sacred. It's really all there is—*ehyeh asher ehyeh*, it is "isness" itself. After all, when did something happen at a time other than now?

Clearly, this use of “God” is very different from the conventional one. I’ll get back to the conventional, mythic, personal God later—it’s an image that still has great power for me—but it should be fairly obvious that “isness” is not how many religious people, in the Bible or today, conceive of their deity. I have my reading of the Bible that accommodates my theology: the word “God” doesn’t translate the ineffable name YHVH. It translates “Elohim,” which is like the ordinary Biblical Hebrew word for gods, Elim. Our El, our God, is the God of Gods, Elohim. Its nature is YHVH, eternal presence. But I recognize that reading as my own, and there are times when I see it as so different from the conventional one that the word “God” seems more confusing than illuminating.

If “God” can be used to denote “What Is,” then all we really have to do to experience God is to be “present” in the meaning I’ve given above. But it’s not so easy, because at almost all waking moments, our minds are busy taking us somewhere else—into the future or the past, into evaluations about the thing rather than the thing itself, into a thousand different desires. In other words, we are not usually “present” in the sense of aware and attentive to it. You can have the television on and not even notice what show is on. You can be nervously twitching your leg without realizing it. You may be lost in thought and unaware even of your own emotions. So, what practice is about is becoming *really* present, aware of what’s happening now: what feelings are in the body, what emotions are in the mind and heart, what sounds and images are in your environment. Not being distracted by thoughts, which almost always refer either to the past or to the future, or by desires and aversions, which are more about what isn’t (i.e., what would be better than now, or what we fear might be worse than now) than what is.

So most of us need technologies to stop seeking, and show up for life instead of being distracted: things like ritual, narrative, life cycle events,

visiting holy places, art, meditation, or any number of other methods. And that's where, for me, Buddhism and meditation come in.

Here's a metaphor that I often use to explain why meditation is useful if your goal is, like Thoreau, to wake up and live deliberately. Generally, our minds are like radios that are filled with static. I find that to hear the music clearly, there are two choices. One is to turn up the volume, and the other to turn down the static. In life, turning up the volume means having intense experiences: peak spiritual moments, or other moments in life when things are suddenly crystal clear because you are really *there*. I hope you've had such experiences. Maybe when you were really "on" in some artistic creation, or, if you have a religious practice, when your practice took you to heights of ecstasy you'd never experienced before. These peak experiences are really nourishing. They show us that there is far, far more to this miracle of life than what we ordinarily experience. They give us a glimpse of possibility, of Light.

For many people, life is all about getting to those peak experiences, but they do have a tendency not to last, and to get a little old. In Jack Kornfield's words, after the ecstasy, there's the laundry. So, with gracious, ecstatic nods to Burning Man, Body Electric, the New York Marathon, psychopharmacology, and the many other modes of 'turned up' living I've experienced, I'm going to focus on tuning in better.

Instead of blasting the volume, can we fine-tune our perceptive apparatus so that the station gets tuned in really clearly and we can be present? Yes. And meditation is a process for doing so. Through various techniques of slowing down the mind and letting go of thoughts and desires and the rest, we enable ourselves to see clearly. That's really all meditation is. Yes, it can lead to profound states of mystical ecstasy, physiological phenomena like rapture, and deep relaxation. But, at least in the Buddhist world, that's not really the point. The point is to see clearly what is going

on, at any given moment—to become present. To really know this moment, intimately and clearly.

That's a Western-Buddhist way of saying it. Now let me translate all of that into Jewish language:

V'ahavta et adonai elohecha, b'chol levavcha, b'chol nafsbecha, u'v'chol meodecha. You shall love YHVH your god, with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your might. How do you do that?

Right now, you are reading, probably sitting down. Great. Look around you at the objects nearby, look inside yourself at your emotional state, your mental state. Are there things you would change, if you could, in your outer or inner geography? Inevitably, there are: there is almost always something about the present that we don't like. Or, alternatively, maybe there's something going on that you really *do* like, and would hate to see go. As it will. These preferences, in my experience, get in the way of fulfilling the exhortation to love God with everything we've got. Everything. Not holding back because of preference. Not remaining attached to ideas which we were taught as kids, or which powerful authority figures intone from raised platforms.

In the language of prayer, I would ask, God, what is holding me back, right now, from full acceptance of this moment, in all of its forms? God, let me surrender it, let me come closer, now, undressing this moment of its outer garments, revealing it to be what I know it to be, what I have felt it to be on many occasions, what every mystic in every tradition in every part of the world has said it is: You. The One. Being itself.

When I get challenged, or called a heretic, or uninvited from teaching events because I'm too "out there" for someone, it's what I try to remember: that I'm not after the weird, I'm only after God. God, when I am truly myself—which is to say, Yourself—all I am trying to do is love you fully. I'm not mixing -isms or undermining ideologies. I'm not provoking, or trying

to impress, or indulging, or shaming. Just loving. How can I do that? If I know that God fills every nonexistent subatomic particle of the empty, full universe, how can I turn that intellectual knowledge into real, deep, full-body-contact knowledge, the kind of knowledge that's practically a synonym for love?

The situation is really pretty simple. In Jewish language, which because of the way Jewish theology works raises more objections than it seems to resolve, we are nothing but God, right now, swimming in God. Or, if you prefer: we are not separate selves. We are, at our essence, Being itself, devoid of any separateness, devoid of any real identity—"we" are nodes of the vast matrix of causes and conditions in the universe. Yet we are going about our lives under the illusion that we are separate selves, with desires and preferences that are often—always—at odds with whatever the universe is presenting. Maybe you don't like the lasagna, or maybe you've had a sense of failure since you were an overachieving Jewish adolescent. Maybe you really want the Mets to win the World Series, or maybe you really want your aunt not to die of cancer. Large or small, these desires, and our attachment to them, blocks the view of What Is.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav said: "The world is full of light and mysteries both wonderful and awesome, but our tiny little hand shades our eyes and prevents them from seeing."

So how do we see? How do we see for ourselves whether these mystical claims are true, and how do we see our true nature clearly? In other words, how do we come to love What Is with everything we've got?

Translation complete.

None of this, I hope, is about putting Jewish garb on Buddhist ideas in order to feel better about them. Rather, my meditation practice, which is basically Buddhist in nature, though it has some Jewish elements to it, has enlivened, transformed, and renewed my Jewish observance and relationship

to God. One metaphor I like to use is, it's the answer key to my religion. *Now* I know what all those prayers and books are talking about! Another metaphor: meditation has filled with color what was previously a black-and-white photograph.

Remarkably, when I meditate, the sense of love and sacredness arises naturally; the mysterious quality of knowing itself... it is impossible to describe, and yet, it is accessible without any particular agenda. Try a deep meditation practice—a seven-day silent retreat should do the trick—and see what comes up for you. These sensations do come up for many, many, many other people, and is remarkably like what our religious visionaries and prophets talk about when they talk about God. Coincidence? Mass delusion? Maybe, but it's a delusion experienced precisely by those working to purify thought, see clearly, and notice intently.

Of course, meditation is not the only way to the sacred. Art is another—creating it or fully participating in it. So is love. One advantage of meditation, though, is that it enables not just another peak experience, but the possibility to be with negative mind-states also (sadness, anger, despair) and gain tremendous insight into how the mind works, and how the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion operate in the world. This doesn't usually happen if you're only getting high.

And meditation is a bit more truthful. (“The seal of God is truth,” Jews are taught in the Talmud.) What the Buddha observed, as a result of many years of sustained meditation and other practices, is that suffering is existentially real. We may well be the One, or Being, or God, or whatever—but the existential fact is that we are suffering because of our desires and aversions. The Buddha taught how to get free of it. Of course, we will always experience the arising of desire; enlightened people still get hungry. But that gnawing, thirsty, clinging desire—”If I don't get something to eat

right now, I'm gonna go nuts!"—that's what the Buddha taught how to lose.

Of course, there are important differences between Buddhism and Judaism, and I'm not one to efface them. In my own life, there are a number of Jewish elements that aren't very Buddhist, and a number of Buddhist ones which aren't very Jewish. For example, on the Jewish side:

- I cherish a personal relationship to personal God—albeit in a monistic and nondual sense, which tends to erase most of the traditional theist/atheist cleavage lines. My religion has a strong devotional element. I love to read psalms, to speak to God in hitbodedut, to cultivate a *love* for the Divine—not just an awe or presence with it. I want to be with God when I'm ecstatic, davening, walking, on the toilet, bored, irritated, and, of course, having sex. Throughout, though, I am not just being with what is. I am rapturously, deliriously in love of God. Some times more than others.
- Ritual in general, and Jewish ritual in particular, is my primary response to sacred. I observe much of halacha, particularly the sabbath and kashrut as traditionally understood. Putting on tallis and tefillin sometimes *feels* right, and loving, and beautiful. Asian Buddhists also have devotional ritual and mythic belief, of course—it's only the Western ones who don't. As Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi said, if Buddhism came to America in the form it exists in many Asian countries, no one would be interested. (The corollary is that we may need a similar practice of translation as we bring Judaism into the contemporary world.)
- Myth, stories, archetypes, language, culture, food, frame of reference. It is my cultural context, my tribe. For better or for worse, I have emotional roots in Israel and my 'home base' in the Jewish community.

- Ethics: the belief that the holy path, that of Moses, and the bodhisattva, is both ascending the mountain to God, and then returning down the mountain to communal and social responsibility. Wisdom leads to compassion. Holiness leads to an imperative to act. This is true in Buddhism as well, but I like the way it is systematized and expressed (though often not as it is explicated) in the Jewish tradition.
- I have an aversion to statues and “foreign” chants, which I respect because that aversion is part of my tradition and folkways.
- I feel that life is to be lived and enjoyed, and share Judaism’s anti-monastic bent. I even put Buddhism’s first noble truth (that there is suffering) in a certain perspective: not that it isn’t true, but that it is only part of the story, and that some kinds of pleasures and suffering are going to be part of a well-lived life. The question is how to ‘lean back’ a little, away from grasping at them so much, into a more balanced place of equanimity.
- I eat meat.

And here are some Buddhist bits I have, that aren’t necessarily very Jewish:

- The centrality of meditation and of experiential knowledge, not of text or authority
- The notion of Judaism and Buddhism as forms, not essences. They are paths to the One—fingers pointing at the moon, but not the moon itself. I honor these forms, but do not believe that they are anything more than that.
- A disbelief in the idea of one chosen people. I believe Jews are “chosen” only in the sense of, well, we’re the people who developed the Torah and Western monotheism. But not in the sense of being preferred to other

people, or better. When I see the word 'Israel' in Jewish prayer, I read it as "godwrestlers" of any persuasion, not people of a certain ethnic lineage.

- Disbelief in the idea of sin and punishment in the classical sense (if you sin, your crops will wither, or you'll be punished later). Actions have consequences, yes, but the wicked often get away with it, and the good often suffer.
- Disbelief in the literal Torah-from-Sinai law. As before, I can redefine "God wrote the Torah" in a nondual way, but I recognize that's not what Orthodox Jews mean when they say it.
- I believe in compassion—not obligation, faith in an origination myth, or fear of punishment—as the best motivator ethical behavior. I also believe that better action is not through external ethics (more the Jewish path: what is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor) but through inner transformation (more the Buddhist path: cultivate natural compassion through meditation and the practice of virtue). Practically, that won't work for everyone, so I still prefer the Jewish system for public ethics. But in private, it drives me bananas.
- While I have enormous humility in the face of the sages of Judaism, and respect and awe for their wisdom, I have no real fealty to rabbinic authority. The rabbis and prophets were wise men, operating within a cultural context. I think we do them a disservice by emphasizing the cultural wrapping rather than the religious impulse inside. For example, poetically, calling God the *gibor milchama* (war hero) had resonance once, but now it goes the wrong way. Legally, exempting women from commandments was once compassionate, but is now the opposite.
- For all my thinking about God, I'm really mostly interested in "Just this." Just this moment. Transcendence, sure, but real transcendence is emptiness.

Finally, God. As I've said, it's a misleading term, and I prefer God's primary 'name': YHVH, an untranslatable and unpronounceable word that seems to gesture to Was-Is-WillBe. What really *is*. The One, as accessed by us—in the Present. Moses asks how he's supposed to describe God, and gets the reply "I Am That I Am," Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh. Take out the pronoun, and you get "It Is What It Is."

This is really the core truth of Buddhism as well. It is what it is. I desire it to be something else, with more fame, friends and money. But without that desire, what is there? Exactly. This is how God is always present, even with prophets in jail and saints in death camps. Because the present is always present. So, as heterodox as it may sound, I really see no difference between the nondual YHVH and the Buddhist Being.

There is a difference in how it is described. In the Buddhist path, Being is perceived 'bottom up,' i.e., starting from our own experience. By closely watching our thoughts, and the awareness that accompanies them, we come to see—directly, not as a matter of doctrine—that there is nothing really here to call "me." Or anything else for that matter. If you like, take the example of a chair that you are sitting in. What is there, really? Perceptually, there is not "chair." Rather, there is the color of the chair, the different pieces of it, the feel of it, and so on. Where is the "chair" in your perception? It's not really there at all—rather, it's a concept you use to refer to this nest of perceptions. So is "chair" beyond your perception? No, "chair" isn't really there either. The physical phenomenon of "chair" has its properties not because of anything to do with this concept "chair" but because of a thousand other things. For example, its materials (wood, metal, whatever)—which in turn have their properties due to molecular structure, which have their properties due to the four basic forces of the universe and the empty, nonexistent subatomic non-particles within every atom of the

chair. So if you look at it, the concept of “chair” is never actually doing anything. It’s there only as a description of how things look from a certain perspective. And this is how it is for everything down the line. No concept is ever really there, when you look at it closely. There’s only emptiness out there, organized by “laws of nature” which themselves don’t really exist but merely describe how Being Is. So, going “bottom up,” from an experience of the chair to an idea about reality, Buddhists get to the great Emptiness.

The Jewish path, in contrast, expresses this idea in a “top-down” way. The great Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Cordovero wrote: “Realize that the Infinite exists in each thing. Do not say ‘This is a stone and not God.’ Rather, all existence is God, and the stone is a thing pervaded by divinity.” For Kabbalists, working within a world in which God is the foundation of everything, the top-down approach makes more sense. It’s certainly simpler. God is Infinite. Therefore, God fills every atom of Being, including those in your brain right now, having these thoughts. So actually, God is having your thoughts. God is reading these words. And God, however seemingly distorted, is writing them too. *Hineni*—here I am!

Personally, I find the bottom-up, Buddhist path to this realization to be easier to communicate than the Jewish one, because of that term “God.” That word, for all my redefinition of it, still seems to require faith, which most people today don’t have, myself included. Yes, I try to cultivate deep faith in the wisdom of others, so that even when I’m stuck at places along my own path, I can trust that the path I’m on is wise. But blind faith? Faith that can never be verified? In facts about the world? Why not blind faith in Odin? UFOs? Fascism? The faculty of blind faith is value-neutral. Often, authority figures use the fact of their authority as a way either to reassure us (trust me) or bludgeon us into having faith in them. But I question authority, always. In fact, precisely because it is authority, I question it more.

But in the realm of the heart, I find the top-down “God” more available than the bottom-up “Being.” To paraphrase Martin Buber, if we are talking about God in the sense of loving and knowing God, then I understand. If we are talking about something abstract, then I don’t.

Is my nondualistic definition of God a ‘Jewish’ view? Sure. It’s Kabbalistic, very neo-Hasidic, a little Reconstructionist. Are there other Jewish views? Sure. In some ancient Biblical texts, God is a warrior, fighting on our side against our enemies. In others, He’s a source for consolation and comfort. Modern thinkers have related to God as source of the categorical imperative, the eternal Other, and, of course, in many modes that don’t really work for me. Which texts and approaches we choose will depend, I think, on what we’re looking for. Since Judaism is generally a “religion of deed, not creed,” there are lots of available Jewish theologies, and mine are certainly as “hechshered” as more anthropomorphic ones.

So, this is my God: YHVH, the Is-ness of Is, the bare facts of Being. The contours of a moment, the silence that contains sound, the stillness that contains movement, the awareness that contains all that is. And I am in love, even though I frequently forget that I am, and get trapped in wanting other lovers instead. Money, success, acceptance—all prostitutes. But they have their attraction. I was raised an American Jew: I still have desires to create something, to ‘make something of myself,’ and I honor those desires in my writing, my teaching—even in building a software company, which I founded many years ago and which is now a source of some pride and success. I am the chief editor of a magazine, *Zeek*, which seeks to explore an integral Judaism in interviews, criticism, poetry, and prose. I teach Kabbalah, embodied Judaism, queer theology, Jewish environmentalism, and a lot of other things too. I make music, I write for newspapers, I write poetry and fiction and nonfiction. I am active in

political life and the struggle for social and environmental justice. And I am continuing my explorations of the permeable boundaries of human ecstasy.

I, I, I, I. This is my life in the world of *yesh*, of form—achieving, building, making, doing. The challenge I constantly face is making room too for the *ayin*, for emptiness. The Hasidic Jewish path, at least, is “both-and”—it both sees the world as God, and engages with the world as it appears. In the Buddhist mode, especially in the Theravadan world in which I practice, there’s more emphasis on the contemplative life, and more recognition of the need to choose—though Western Buddhists claim to be both-and also. But the Jewish path is neither wholly mystical, nor wholly worldly. Neither renouncing nor fully indulging the self. Kabbalah is largely about balance: between expansion and restraint, between discipline and inspiration. The metaphor of *ratzo v’shov*, running and returning, is central.

It’s easier in theory than in practice. My real tensions aren’t between Buddhism and Judaism so much as between spirituality and self-actualization. I really want success, I really want approval. The consolation, if there is one, is that to “be here now” is always, always available. Because, conveniently, it’s always now and always here. And with practice, it’s possible to get used to the sensation of settling back into awareness, into the sky instead of the storm passing through it. On the most important journey, each step is the destination. All the causes and conditions in the universe have conspired to bring this very moment into existence, and there is nothing at all that you need to do to change it. In this moment, in this place, through these eyes and in this Mind, God is here. Are you?