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### **Part I: The “Oy Vey” School of Buddhism**

*This is the first of three postings about some of the similarities and differences between Buddhism and Judaism, following the lead of Rabbi Akiva Tatz’s recently-published “Letters to a Buddhist Jew” (Feldheim Brothers), although from a Chassidic point of view. It is inevitably over-simplistic and should be at least ten times as long, but it’s a start! -- DS*

The late Tibetan Buddhist guru Chogyam Trungpa once quipped that he had so many Jewish students that they constituted a new sect: the “Oy Vey” school of Buddhism. For a people that has resisted conversion to other faiths for thousands of years, even on pain of death, the attraction of so many Jews to Buddhism – a religion that does not proselytize anyone -- is an enigma. (Maybe we could call this the “Enigma-pa” school of Buddhism...) And it is an enigma that Jewish religious leaders would be unwise to ignore.

For JuBus who question my credentials in tackling this subject, I confess that they are limited – but not totally lacking. As a child of the 60s, I read the mandatory Allan Watts and D.T. Suzuki books, and as a teenager, briefly attempted to pursue the life of a mystical hermit. In the summer of 1969, I found a battered lean-to on the south coast of Block Island and moved in with a volume of Chuang-Tzu, Jack Kerouac’s “Desolation Angels,” and a beautiful hand-made candle – but neglected to bring along any food or water. The next day found me back in town, with a new appreciation of warm ginger ale. Several years later, I heard Chogyam Trungpa lecture on Tibetan art at Boston University, and encountered him again that evening at the opening of a related exhibit, which was in a gallery belonging to MIT. As we passed each other on the walkway to the museum, the guru looked at me, lurched as if he had seen one of those terrifying “wrathful deities” from the colorful *thangka* paintings inside, and with the assistance of two “*gabba'im*” clad in Burberry coats, disappeared into the night. I’m still not sure if the reason for this was my aura or the clear liquid he had been drinking out of a glass beer mug during the lecture.

Ironically, during the past ten years as a teacher of Chassidic thought, I came to learn more about Buddhism from two students: a retired English teacher, who practiced and occasionally taught Zen for more than thirty years; and an artist and college instructor, who studied Tantric Buddhism for some twenty years and lived for an extended period in a community in the mid-west. Both simultaneously maintained a connection with Judaism, primarily (although not exclusively) through the teachings of Rabbi Nachman.

Some readers may be surprised to learn that an estimated one-third of American converts to Buddhism are Jews, including many prominent teachers (e.g., Sharon Salzberg, Bernie Glassman, Sylvia Boorstein, Norman Fischer, Jeff Miller/Surya Das, Phillip Kapleau, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfeld, and Helen Tworok, among others). Poet/academic Rodger Kamenetz, author of “The Jew in the Lotus,” coined the term “JuBu” for such people – a term that some don’t mind and others find offensive. (My apologies to the latter. I’m just using the word because it has become standard currency.) From the JuBus I have met and whose works I have read, they seem to be intelligent, highly-educated, and quite sincere in their spiritual quest. It is probable that more Jews have left the fold for Buddhism than for Christianity or any other religion, certainly in modern times. Why?

1. The most obvious reason is the widespread lack of Jewish religious education and awareness of spiritual models from Jewish tradition. However, this is only one part of the problem.
2. Even for those who had the good fortune to be exposed to some basics of the Jewish religion, the prevailing mindset of educated Americans and westerners subtly and often not-so-subtly militate against religious faith – especially faith in a minority religion like Judaism.
3. Moreover, most traditional Jews identify with the historical, creedal, and communal aspects of Judaism, but do not take it to be a *spiritual path*; i.e., a way of inner transformation. This “unspiritual” approach is a major turn-off to Jews who are seeking precisely such a path.
4. As one person told my friend, Rabbi Ozer Bergman of the Breslov Research Institute, “The ‘cover charge’ of Judaism is higher.” (Ozer replied that the drinks are much better.) It is undeniable that the rigorous minutiae of Halakhah (Jewish religious law) are often forbidding to people who were not exposed to them during their formative years. To those of limited knowledge, Halakhah may seem burdensome and arbitrary, lacking in

- meaning beyond the “high-tech” legalism of the Talmud, compounded with a certain amount of common sense. A compelling spiritual and philosophical framework for understanding the primacy of Halakhah is lacking.
5. Although the existence of the Kabbalah and Chassidus is no secret these days, these arcane teachings remain relatively obscure in a practical sense. With rare exceptions, the local synagogue is the last place one would expect to find instruction in the mysteries of the Zohar. (The Dalai Lama mentioned this to the Jewish group that visited him in Dharamsala, India, about a decade ago, encouraging rabbis to make Judaism’s mystical teachings more accessible to the masses.)
  6. Most importantly: Buddhism is particularly congenial to the mindset of secular, but spiritually-sensitive modern Jews. Existentialism helped paved the way for this with the concept of an absurd universe (Camus, Sartre, Beckett). The non-theistic, don’t-try-to-make-sense-out-of-this-screwy-world posture of Buddhism seems kindred to the existentialist sensibility. They may not be identical, but are just a subway-stop away.
  7. Plus Buddhism was popularized by Beat writers such as Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg. A number of Jewish musicians, too, turned to one form or another of Eastern wisdom: Yehudi Menuhin, Phillip Glass, Leonard Cohen, Kenny Werner, etc. This gave Buddhism a certain prestige in intellectual circles, at a time when other faiths were widely regarded as obsolete.
  8. Since Buddhists have never persecuted Jews, those who embrace this path do not feel that they are betraying their forebears. This observation has been made by leaders of the Jewish Renewal movement – which has actually welcomed Jewish-Buddhist teachers to their retreats and other events. (The same may be said for Hinduism, which in one form or another has attracted disaffected Jews, including counter-culture guru Richard Alpert / Ram Das.)
  9. There is something about Buddhism that “strikes a chord” within many Jews. Which Jew who has suffered insult and exclusion, and which Jew who has any awareness of Jewish history, could disagree with the Buddha’s “First Noble Truth”: the truth of suffering as a given in life? (Of course, everyone suffers; I’m just underscoring the special familiarity with one type of suffering that is the shared experience of the Jewish people.) And Buddhism offers the hope of a way out of existential conflict through practice in the here and now, and not through the pole vault of other-worldly faith that secular Jews cannot manage.
  10. In addition, there are points of commonality between Judaism and Buddhism. For example, both traditions encourage questioning and

debate. And despite the icons and statues associated with Buddhism – no doubt a source of conflict for many JuBus -- both religions reject images and forms of the Ultimate, conceiving the Absolute to transcend all form and limitation (more about this in Part II).

All of this adds up to an extremely potent alternative to Judaism for the enormous number of unaffiliated Jews who are searching for a spiritual path. A Jew without Torah is like a fish without water. If we cannot find spiritual sustenance at home, inevitably we will go searching for it elsewhere.

The need for dialogue with Buddhist Jews has come to be recognized by a number of Jewish leaders, especially in the Jewish Renewal movement, which is associated with Reconstructionism. However, a few Orthodox rabbis are beginning to respond, too. One is Rabbi Akiva Tatz, author of “Letters to a Buddhist Jew” (Feldheim), who explains Judaism as a spiritual path from the Lithuanian Mussar point of view. A teacher for the Jewish Learning Exchange in the UK, Rabbi Tatz has a website: <http://tatz.cc>. Another is Rabbi Dov Ber Pinson of Chabad, who teaches and has written about Jewish meditation and other subjects that overlap with the primary concerns of Eastern religions. His Iyyun Institute’s website is [www.iyyun.com](http://www.iyyun.com). An online resource that presents various Chassidic perspectives on meditation is Rabbi Tal Moshe Zwecker’s <http://meditationmeaning.blogspot.com>. The late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan paved the way for all this with his translations of classical Jewish mystical texts and original works; among them “Meditation and the Kabbalah” (Samuel Weiser), “Chassidic Masters” (Moznaim), and “Rabbi Nachman’s Stories” (Breslov Research Institute).

Breslov, in particular, with its cultivation of the inner life, would seem to be a “natural” for outreach to Jewish Buddhists. In fact, several of my friends in the Breslov community or on its perimeter explored Buddhism intensively before becoming ba’alei teshuvah. (One can translate Tibetan, another can translate Sanskrit, and a third still remembers some Japanese.) All three still meditate – although not necessarily the same way as Buddhists -- and remain fully observant Jews, who have amassed extensive Torah knowledge. For them, there was surely a bridge between the two paths.

In the next posting, God willing, I will try to examine some of the major similarities -- and differences -- between Buddhism and Jewish mysticism.

## **Part II: Comparing Jewish Mysticism and Buddhism**

*Since this is not an in-depth treatment of this subject, we have made few distinctions between different schools of thought in each of the two religions. However, the reader should know that they exist. In particular, some of the Buddhist doctrines mentioned below are not mentioned (or barely mentioned) in Zen Buddhism, which is rigorously experiential. And different Chassidic schools disagree about such things as the nature and role of the rebbe, and the degree to which the average Chassid should be involved in esoteric studies and practices.*

The most conspicuous difference between Judaism and Buddhism concerns belief in God. While Judaism is the foundation of monotheism, Buddhists do not espouse belief in God (or for that matter, belief in multiple gods in the same sense as the polytheists of ancient Rome, etc.). They also define their creed as “anatman” – rejecting the Hindu belief in atman, Sanskrit for the “soul.”

According to ancient tradition, when the historical Buddha (fifth century b.c.e.) was asked whether or not God exists, he remained silent. This silence was interpreted in two ways: either he intended to demonstrate that God is beyond words, transcending all limitation and definition; or he considered theism and atheism as not germane to his doctrine regarding the path of side-stepping existential suffering through dismantling the illusory sense of self. For this reason, some Buddhists reject the definition of their path as a religion. Some also reject the notion that it is a philosophy, since the main thing is practice – as informed by a profound understanding of the workings of the human mind.

However one interprets the Buddha’s silence, the argument of theism vs. non-theism (we can’t say atheism, because he didn’t overtly deny the existence of God) is not necessarily the insurmountable theological problem between the two religions that it appears to be at first glance. We, too, assert that the nature of God is essentially unknowable (Shomer Emunim HaKadmon, 2:1, sixth principle). Aside from Divine Names and permutations of Divine Names, the kabbalists use various terminologies for God in different contexts: Ayin (“Nothingness”); Yachid Kadmon (“Primordial One”); Ein Sof (“The Infinite”); Achdus HaPashut (“Simple Unity”); etc. Buddhist philosophers, too, use various terms for the ontological origin of the universe and for the unitary essence of existence

underlying all phenomena. In English translation, these terms include “Ground of Being,” “Absolute Reality,” “Emptiness,” etc.

When I emailed a friend in the Breslov community who in a “previous lifetime” had immersed himself in Tibetan Buddhism and recently received semichah (rabbinic ordination), he wrote: “It seems possible to me that the Buddhist ‘emptiness’ and the Jewish ‘Ayin’ may turn out to be the same...” (I guess we’ll have to wait and see on this one.)

The central issue is what one does (or “undoes”) in relationship to the Ayin / Ein Sof / Achdus HaPashut. There is a reason why prayer is the core practice of Judaism, and meditation the core practice of Buddhism. But we’re jumping the gun.

**Dissolution of the Ego:** Another possibly common-point is what Jewish mystics call bittul ha-yesh -- in American Buddhist language (at least back in the 60s), “annihilation of ego.” This denotes seeing through the illusion of the historically-conditioned self as a fixed entity, as well as the sense of self-importance and the need for self-aggrandizement – “proving yourself.” Both paths assert that overcoming the ego is the main prerequisite to spiritual awakening.

However, there may be a subtle difference here, too. As we will see in Part III, transcendence of ego in Judaism is not an end in itself. The Jewish mystic will put the “old coat” of personality back on in order to continue to perform his spiritual work in the world through the Torah and mitzvos.

**Transmuting Negative Tendencies:** Buddhism speaks of negative traits, known as kleshas (defilements), which each of us must strive to nullify: sensual desire, anger, laziness, etc. The kabbalists propose something similar, based on the “Four Elements” of earth, water, wind, and fire (equivalent to the Pali “mahabhuta”). Indolence and depression correspond to earth; sensual desire and covetousness correspond to water; worthless or harmful speech corresponds to wind; anger and pursuit of power or honor correspond to fire (Mishnas Chassidim, Masekhes Asiyah Gufanis, chap. 1; cf. Likkutei Moharan I, 4:8). According to Rabbi Nachman the fifth element is ego / self-importance, which is the root of the other four (Likkutei Moharan I, 52).

**Compassion:** Buddhism understands compassion to be a corollary of perceiving the interconnectedness and underlying unity of life. This is

something that is vividly experienced by the Buddhist practitioner. Although Judaism sees man as the central figure in creation, it nevertheless asserts the kinship of all beings and calls upon us to respect all creatures. For example, the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Chassidic movement, taught: “In what way is a human being superior to a worm? A worm serves the Creator with all of his intelligence and ability, and man, too, is compared to a worm or maggot; as the verse states, ‘I am a worm and not a man’ (Psalms 22:7). If God had not given you a human intellect, you would only be able to serve him like a worm. In this sense, you are both equal in the eyes of Heaven. A person should consider himself and the worm and all creatures are friends in the universe, for we are all created beings whose abilities are God-given...” (Tzava’as HaRivash 12).

And from the non-Chassidic camp, Rabbi Menasheh of Ilya wrote: “What am I in comparison to the many forms of sentient life in the world? If the Creator were to confer upon me, as well as my family members, loved ones, and relatives, absolute goodness for all eternity, but some deficiency remained in the world – if any living thing still were left suffering, and all the more so, another human being – I would not want anything to do with it, much less to derive benefit from it. How could I be separated from all living creatures? These are the work of God’s hand, and these, too, are the work of God’s hand” (Author’s Introduction, Ha’amek She’eilah). It seems that a “Litvak” might qualify as a Boddhisattva, too.

**Impermanence:** Preceding the historical Buddha by more than a century (if not two), King Solomon spoke of earthly desires as “hevel havalim, vanity of vanities” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). This concept is repeated again and again in the Rosh Hashanah prayer service (“What is a man’s life but a fleeting dream, a passing shadow, a vaporous cloud, a gust of wind, and a swirl of dust?” etc.). These expressions bear a striking similarity to the Buddhist description of the transitory nature of the phenomenal world and impermanence.

However, in Buddhism, impermanence is an encompassing perception of the nature of all things. This perception has a somewhat different “spin” on it in Judaism – where it is a way of underscoring the urgency of returning to God and engaging in Avodah (divine service), rather than pursuing vain and materialistic goals.

A notable exception to this is Rabbi Nachman’s teaching about the dreidel, the four-sided top with which children play on Chanukah. He conceives

this as a “revolving wheel” or “wheel of transformation” -- a metaphor for the impermanence of all creation, which comes forth from the undifferentiated Divine Wisdom / Nothingness (see Sichos HaRan 40).

**Equanimity:** According to the Buddhist approach, equanimity and detachment are concomitants of impermanence. Jewish mystics also strive for such virtues. Says the Baal Shem Tov (Tzava’as HaRivash 53): “One should make himself as if he did not exist -- as the Gemara states in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: “The words of Torah cannot be fulfilled except by one who makes himself as if he did not exist (ayin)” (Sota 21b). Thus, it is written, ‘And wisdom from where (ayin) does it come?’ (Job 28:12). [Or: ‘Wisdom comes from nothingness.’] This means that one should consider himself to not exist in this world at all; so what difference does it make if he is important in the eyes of others?”

At the same time, equanimity in the face of praise and blame and the ups and downs of life is no contradiction to serving God with love and awe (ahavah ve-yirah). Through this level of Divine service, we transmute our most powerful emotions to the spiritual plane.

**Life After Life:** Another common doctrine is that of reincarnation (which Buddhists prefer to call “rebirth”). In Jewish tradition, this is known as gilgul, which might be loosely translated as “recycling.” The Zoharic literature and writings of the ARI and Safed kabbalists are replete with discussions of reincarnation, even into non-human forms such as animals, plants, and clumps of dust (may God spare us). As in other spiritual systems, gilgul is understood as one of Heaven’s ways of enabling the soul to become cleansed of evil and to attain perfection. The Vilna Gaon wrote an entire commentary on the Book of Jonah as an allegory for reincarnation.

**Karma / Cosmic Justice:** The determining principle behind reincarnation actually applies to all of a person’s circumstances in every lifetime and indeed, in every day. Buddhists and Hindus call it “karma,” which means a kind of cosmic justice reflective of one’s merits and demerits. The Talmudic sages call it the principle of “middah keneged middah” – “measure for measure.” One example is the Mishnah that describes how Hillel observed a skull floating down a river. He said to it: “Because you drowned others, they have drowned you. And ultimately those who drowned you will themselves be drowned” (Avos 2:6). This cosmic principle is democratic and non-sectarian; as the rabbis state: “

‘Merit is given to the meritorious, and guilt to those who are guilty.’ This rule applies to all families of the earth” (Tanna D’vei Eliyahu Rabbah 16:1). (As a religious Jew, it is extremely difficult for me to understand how Buddhism can accept the principle of karma and remain non-theistic. If there is justice, there must be a judge. But maybe my thinking is too square to grasp the spontaneous “arisings” in Buddhist metaphysics.)

A related issue is that of what C.G. Jung called “synchronicity” – the “hidden miracles” of everyday life that bespeak another determinant of what goes on in the world beyond the causality of one-plus-one-makes-two. In Buddhism, these phenomena also fall under the rubric of karma, pointing to the transpersonal matrix that underlies the appearance of separateness. In Judaism they are understood as evidence of “hashgachah p’ratis,” vivid manifestations of divine providence that break through the seeming autonomy of nature like moonlight through the clouds.

**Teacher-Student Relationship:** Eastern religions, including Buddhism, put great emphasis on the relationship with one’s guru, or “teacher,” who may take on larger-than-life dimensions. Analogous to this, the Talmud states that one should seek instruction from a teacher who is “comparable to an angel of the God of Hosts” (Chagigah 15b). In the Chassidic conception, the “Rebbe” is a kind of guru, in that it is his mission to guide the Chassid on the path of spiritual growth.

Sometimes the master-disciple relationship takes on some strange forms. In certain schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the guru is a “spiritual friend” – whose compassion consists in driving you “crazy” (i.e., into new ways of perception). The Japanese Zen teacher also typically resorts to unusual behaviors to jolt the student into enlightenment. There were Chassidic masters who came up with similar strategies. One was the fiery Kotzker Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern, 19<sup>th</sup> century). In our generation, the late Reb Osher Freund of Jerusalem was famous for his often outrageous tactics to force his followers to let go of their spiritual props in order to find more authentic ways of being-in-the-world.

In Hinduism and other Far Eastern religions, the guru is variously perceived as an enlightened teacher, a channel for a divine emanation, or an incarnate god. There are even some divergent ideas about this in Buddhism. However, in Judaism the tzaddik (or in the Chassidic world, “rebbe,” meaning “master”) is never deified. God’s Oneness is absolute (e.g., see Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, Rav Pe’alim, Vol. I, Teshuvah 1,

for a clear and concise kabbalistic explanation of unity and multiplicity). Having purged himself of all desire and evil traits, the tzaddik is a channel or vehicle for Godliness -- but not a divinity unto himself.

**Practice:** Buddhism advocates silent meditation as the arena for spiritual work and existential discovery. To some extent, the Lithuanian Mussar schools cover some of the same ground through self-examination and contemplation, especially the path of the Alter (“Elder”) of Novhardok. The Piacetzna Rebbe, a towering 20<sup>th</sup> century Chassidic leader who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto, taught classical silent meditation (see “Inyan Hashkata,” appendix to *Derekh HaMelekh*, and his treatise “Bnei Machshavah Tovah,” translated to English as “Conscious Community.”) He also discusses meditative visualization, which plays a role in earlier kabbalistic meditation systems. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov discusses hisbodedus – secluded, improvisational dialogue with God and prayer in one’s native tongue – in surprisingly similar terms (as we will see in the next posting).

Yet assumptions about the nature of reality and purpose of life that condition the practitioner’s meditative experience, or are implicit in the meditative methods used, differ between the two religions. For one thing, Buddhism stresses dismantling the illusory solidity of the personality during meditation, whereas Judaism focuses on reconnecting with God. Thus, 18<sup>th</sup> century Zen master Hakuin experienced shunyata (“emptiness”) in meditation, while his contemporary, Chassidic master Rabbi Dov Ber, the Great Maggid, experienced the “Divine Nothingness.”

**Enlightenment:** In Judaism, this is the Da’as (literally, “knowledge”) associated with the Future World – which tzaddikim are privy to in this world, as well. The Talmudic mentions that certain sages were accustomed to bless one another: “May you see your World [to Come] in your life [in this world]...” (Berakhos 17a). According to Rabbi Nachman, this perception may come about in a sudden flash, without any prefatory concepts (Likkutei Moharan I, 21; however, one must make extensive spiritual preparations to be worthy of the divine influx). This sounds remarkably like Buddhist descriptions of the enlightenment experience. (Not being enlightened according to any school of thought, I couldn’t say if this is a mere parallelism, or if they are truly the same.)

The attainment of enlightenment in Judaism is bound up with the mystery of prophecy, which lies at the core of our religion. The Torah is the story of

God's dialogue with man. And although the age of the prophets came to an end long ago, to be superseded by the divinely-inspired intellectualism of the Talmudic sages ("chokhom adif mi-navi"), we anticipate the return of prophecy during the Messianic age. The Piacetzna Rebbe explains that prophecy does not only mean the obtainment of a divine message for the world, but the mystical experience in general – and on some level, this available even today (see Mevo She'arim, beginning).

**Eschatology / End of Days:** Buddhism describes an "End of Days" scenario characterized by a gradual process of global spiritual degeneration, after which a new enlightened being named Maitreya will renew the teachings of Buddhism and teach the path leading to Nirvana (cessation of illusion / bliss / immortality). At present, Maitreya resides in a certain heaven, awaiting his final rebirth in the world.

In Jewish mysticism, the soul of Mashiach is somewhat similarly described as being stored away in the heavenly "Garden of Eden" until God mercifully decides to confer it upon a great and awesome tzaddik living in the world. This tzaddik will then usher in the Messianic Age (Rabbi Chaim Vital, Arba'ah Me'os Shekel Kesef, 68a). The Mashiach will bring wisdom and peace to the world, return the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, and rebuild the Holy Temple. These events will be followed by the Resurrection of the Dead, Divine Judgment, and eternal bliss for the righteous (see Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's translation of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto's "Essay on Fundamentals," included in *Derekh Hashem / The Way of God*, Feldheim, pp. 385-390; there is a dispute among the authorities as to whether the souls of righteous non-Jews will share in the Resurrection or will remain in the World of Souls). Buddhism and Hinduism espouse a cyclic view of history, according to which the universe will eventually be destroyed, and a new cycle of creation come into being. Some kabbalists take this position, too (see Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's *Immortality, Resurrection, and the Age of the Universe*, Ktav, pp. 1-15).

In addition to the points we have listed, Judaism and Buddhism possess many parallel traditions about angels, demons, disembodied souls, and spirits. And both religions believe in heaven and hell as afterlife experiences conditioned by one's deeds in this world.

Yet as we have already noted, some major differences exist between Jewish mysticism and Buddhism. There is a Chassidic discourse that illustrates both the similarities and differences vividly: Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's

**“HaNei’or BaLaylah / Awakening in the Night” (Likkutei Moharan I, 52).  
We will take a look at this teaching and consider its implications in the  
next posting, God willing.**

### **Part III: Rabbi Nachman's "HaNei'or BaLaylah / Awakening in the Night"**

Basing his ideas on a Mishnah, Rabbi Nachman's Likkutei Moharan I, 52 ("Awakening in the Night"), presents an overview of the main practice he taught his followers: hisbodedus -- literally, "seclusion," but in this context a kind of improvisational prayer and self-examination, ideally conducted in the forests and fields or another natural setting at night.

First, the Mishnah: "*Rabbi Chanina ben Chakhinai used to say: One who awakens in the night, and walks on an isolated path, and turns his heart to empty matters – behold, such a person forfeits his life*" (Avos 3:4). The simple meaning is that if a person squanders his time and energy on vain pursuits instead of contributing to civilization, he loses his reason for existence.

While not disagreeing with this, Rabbi Nachman peremptorily turns Rabbi Chanina's words inside-out and upside-down in order to teach us about the mystic's quest. "*One who awakens at night*" is the intrepid Breslover Chassid who wants to practice hisbodedus / secluded meditation; "*and walks on an isolated path*" means that he heads for the countryside, away from human habitation, so that he won't be affected by any of the thoughts and desires that still linger in the air; "*and turns his heart to empty matters*" means that he empties his heart of all negative traits; "*such a person forfeits his life*" means (by resorting to an elaborate word-play) that he becomes transformed from the state of a "Contingent Existent" to that of the "Necessary Existent" or "Essential Reality" -- which is Divinity.

Rabbi Nachman builds up to this point by asking how the materialist philosophers could come up with the idea of the eternity of matter – i.e., the mistaken assumption that the universe is a "Necessary Existent" – since even a false idea must begin with a grain of truth. In the course of explaining this mystery, he introduces the concept that by performing God's will, the Jewish people become reabsorbed in the true "Necessary Existent," which is God; and in so doing, restore all of the worlds and all elements of creation to the Divine Oneness, along with them. Thus far, the first half of the lesson.

"However," Rabbi Nachman continues, "to attain this, to become reabsorbed in your Source – that is, to go back and become reintegrated within the Divine Oneness, which is the Necessary Existent – this can only

be accomplished through bittul (nullification of ego). You must nullify the ego completely, until you become restored to the Divine Oneness. And it is impossible to come to a state of bittul except through hisbodedus...” Then he goes on to explain what hisbodedus is all about; how the spiritual seeker must get away from the world in order to commune with God, and in the course of hisbodedus work on each negative trait, one after the next, until he reaches the subtlest root of ego – and this, too, can be removed through hisbodedus. Upon achieving bittul, one immediately experiences the Essence of Reality, which is the Divine Unity.

Although their methods are different, Rabbi Nachman’s hisbodedus and Buddhist meditation share similar goals. Both intend to deconstruct illusory mental structures in order to reveal a transpersonal reality of an incomparably higher order of truth.

However, we must remember at which point in his lesson Rabbi Nachman turned off the “main road” to discuss the practice of hisbodedus: right after declaring the necessity of our performing God’s will. This remains our primary responsibility in this world. The attainment of self-nullification in the stillness of the fields through hisbodedus must be combined with performing the mitzvos – with bittul.

I once read that a contemporary Zen Roshi met a prominent figure in the Jewish Renewal movement, and asked what he should teach his Jewish students. The Jewish teacher replied, “Show them how to put on Tefillin in a Zen way.” This actually accords with Rabbi Nachman’s lesson -- if the “Zen way” corresponds to the bittul ha-yesh that is the goal of hisbodedus.

When it comes to self-nullification, there seems to be an overlap between the two paths. However, upon examining Rabbi Nachman’s lesson carefully, we also find two key differences:

1. The Mechuyav HaMetziyus / “Imperative Existent” of Judaism is not only the Buddhist “Ground of Being,” but the God of revelation Who, through the mystery of prophecy, gave Israel the Torah. God not only exists and creates, but commands and claims. Thus, much of Judaism is about *service*, instead of meditative absorption.

2. The primary task of Israel is to perform the commandments, which are God-given, and which in both a practical and mystical sense refine and transform creation.

It is true that Mahayana Buddhism in particular has a “this-worldly” side in its ethic of seeking the benefit of all beings (i.e., the Bodhisattva Vow). But this is not the same thing as the Jewish people’s performance of mitzvos, which are specific divine mandates, and not just “good deeds.” Some mitzvos called chukkim (“decrees”), like the ritual of the Red Heifer, completely surpass human understanding. The complex Jewish dietary laws also fall into this category, although the kabbalists reveal some of the reasons behind them. The task of studying the Torah and performing the 613 mitzvos uniquely rests on the Jew. On some level, as Jews, we all know this, and feel unfulfilled if we fail to accomplish our mission.

This is not meant to be a weighty burden. The holy ARI (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, sixteenth century) attributed the high spiritual levels he reached to “simchah shel mitzvah,” rejoicing in the performance of the commandments (see Mishnah Berurah 669:11; cf. Likkutei Moharan I, 24:2). Why did he feel this way? And why should we feel this way? For the simple reason that to a Jew who believes in God, the mitzvos connect the one who performs them with the One Who gave them.

The kabbalists describe the 620 mitzvos (613 Torah mitzvos plus seven rabbinic mitzvos) as “620 columns of light” (Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, Pardes Rimonim 8:3). (620 is the numerical value of Keser / Crown, the highest of the ten sefiros and locus of the Divine Will.) Chassidic master Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi explains this to mean that the mitzvos are actually spiritual channels by which we connect to the Divine Will at their root (Tanya, Iggeres HaKodesh, Letter 29). That is, we become instruments of the Divine Will and therefore bound to God in a manner that transcends the limitations of intellect. For one who takes this to heart, performing a mitzvah is a source of boundless joy.

Breslover Chassidism would say that we need both factors: bittul, which comes through hisbodedus, and the mitzvos, which connect us to the divine purpose in creation in the here and now – and which enable us to fulfill our unique mission as Jews. “Know Him in all your ways” (Proverbs 3:6), King Solomon declares. This is the source of Chassidic joy.

**The Mixed Blessing of Dualism:** The metaphysical villain is dualism – estrangement from the Primordial Unity; yet dualism makes it possible for us to have a *relationship* with G-d and with each other. One of the meanings of the Torah’s story of how Eve was separated from Adam is that this alludes to how creation was “separated” from the Creator, all so that

we might have a relationship. This is the positive meaning of creation. Dualism is not just an illusion or spiritual obstacle to overcome, but the necessary precondition for having a relationship. This, too, is the meaning of the Song of Songs, which is an allegory of the love between God and the Jewish people, who serve Him through the Torah and mitzvos.

Yet at the same time, dualism goes hand in hand with the ego, which blocks the road back to God and distorts our spiritual vision. How can we get out of this conundrum? Rabbi Nachman alludes to this problem and its solution in one of his thirteen mystical stories, “The Tale of the Seven Beggars.”

**The Heart and the Spring:** In this sub-plot of the tale, the third holy beggar materializes out of thin air at the wedding feast of two orphans, who are the story’s protagonists. He is the Beggar with the Speech Defect – whose apparent deficiency masks his greatest spiritual power. He claims that his parables and lyrics contain all wisdom – and the “proof” he offers is the testimony of the True Man of Kindness.

The Beggar with the Speech Defect goes around and gathers up all true kindness in the world and brings it to the True Man of Kindness, who presides over time. In the merit of the human acts of kindness he receives, the True Man of Kindness gives a new day to the Heart of the World, who gives it to the Spring, thereby sustaining the universe.

How so? On the top of a certain mountain, there is a stone, out of which flows a wondrous Spring. At the other end of the world, stands the Heart of the World, which longs and yearns and cries to go to the Spring. The Spring also yearns for the Heart. However, the Heart cannot go to the Spring – for if it came too close, it would no longer be able to see the peak from which it flows. And if it stopped looking at the Spring for even an instant, the Heart would perish; and with it, the entire world, which receives its life-force from the Heart. Therefore, the Heart stands facing the Spring, yearning and crying out.

The Spring transcends time. Therefore it only possesses the time that it receives from the Heart as a gift for one day.

When the end of the day draws near, they begin to part from one another with great love and wonderful poetry. Watching over all this, the True Man of Kindness waits until the last minute and then gives the Heart a gift of

one more day. The Heart immediately gives the day to the Spring, and thus the world endures. Yet everything depends upon the Beggar with the Speech Defect, who collects all of the true kindness, in the merit of which time comes into existence. Therefore, all of the wondrous parables and lyrics are his, too.

This story, like all of Rabbi Nachman's tales, has multiple levels of meaning, rooted in the mysteries of the kabbalah. On one level, the Heart and the Spring is an allegory about the primacy of our relationship with God, which is like a marriage. (This, too, is why Judaism is not a monastic tradition, but places so much emphasis on marriage. Indeed, the marriage relationship is called "kiddushin" or "sanctification" for two reasons: because each partner becomes "kadosh" or designated to the other; and because marriage is intrinsically holy. It is a spiritual relationship, which challenges us to get past our innate selfishness, to cease to be mere "takers" and become "givers." The tale of the Heart and the Spring also indicates why the sculpted forms of the K'ruvim, male and female winged angels, hovered over the Ark of the Covenant in the inner sanctum of Holy Temple. Their embrace represents "unity in dualism.")

We relate to God with the longing of the Heart for the Spring atop the faraway mountain. The "catch" is to realize that God is present on both sides of the relationship.

The vehicle for attaining this perception is hisbodedus. As third-generation Breslov scholar Rabbi Nachman Goldstein, the Rav of Tcherin, wrote:

"The perfection of hisbodedus is to attain deveykus – to cleave to God until you become utterly subsumed within the Divine Oneness. The word hisbodedus is a construct of badad, meaning either 'seclusion' or 'oneness,' as in the phrase 'they shall be one with one [i.e., of equal weight]' (Rashi on Exodus 30:34). That is, you must become 'one with God' to the extent that all sensory awareness ceases, and the only reality you perceive is Godliness. This is the mystical meaning of the verse, 'Ein ode milvado . . . There is nothing but God alone' (Deuteronomy 4:35). This, too, is why the Torah calls Israel 'a people that dwells alone [badad]' (Numbers 23:9). The destiny of each Jew is to attain complete unification with God, without any intermediary" (Zimras Ha'aretz, I, 52; translated in "The Tree That Stands Beyond Space," p. 83).

In hisbodedus – if one succeeds in “breaking through” – one discovers that God stands on both sides of the relationship. In a sense, God davens (prays) to Himself.

If Zen master Hakuin, famous for his consciousness-altering koans (conundrums), were a Breslover Chassid, he might say that this is the “sound of one hand clapping.”