

Book Review:**Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and The Way of the Buddha***By David Blumenthal*

H. Kasimow, J. and L. Keenan, *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha* (Sommerville, MA: Wisdom Publications: 2003), 284 pages, ISBN 0-86171-336-2, paperback, \$14.95.

Asian Buddhism is about "clapping hands and ringing bells to get the attention of some god, and the tying of paper prayer slips to the branches of trees ... Buddha statues of all sorts, along with fearsome demonic figures ... the spirits of ancestors,"¹ and incarnation, incense, and bowing before the Buddha.² It is also about very strict and prolonged moral and spiritual discipline. For example, "We would effectively sit in meditation for months at a time ... The gates to the monastery were locked shut for the winter, and we lived in a state of deep contemplation until spring."³

Few of the contributors to this book have submitted themselves to this extended discipline; fewer still live in the ethnic-cultural world of Buddhism. Rather, all have opened themselves to what Reb. Zalman Shachter-Shalomi calls "Buddhism for export," that is, Buddhist ideas that are compatible with the west and Buddhist practice that is non-denominational, not tradition specific. In doing so, they have added a dimension of spirituality to their own lives which, in turn, has refreshed and renewed their appreciation of their own religious traditions. In this sense, *Beside Still Waters* is a very good book, but it is neither an exposure to Buddhism nor a book of dialogue in which Buddhists talk about what they have learned from Jewish or Christian spirituality.

To put it another way: Norman Fischer, himself a Buddhist abbot with Jewish roots, distinguishes between "religion" and "spirituality." The former is rooted in tradition, doctrine, belief, ritual, rule, authority, coherence, and sanction from the past; it is culture-bound. The latter is a liberation from culture, an opening to experience and feeling. For exactly that reason, he maintains, "It is easier to find spirituality in a tradition you are not culturally embedded in ... For the authors of this book, Buddhism was more a catalyst toward spirituality than a religious tradition."⁴ Thus, those who practice Japanese Zen Buddhism are able to do so while ignoring the deeply racist nature of Japanese society where, to the best of my knowledge, there is no such thing as naturalization, where discrimination against

non-racial Japanese is deeply rooted and so on. Still, as Fischer and others point out, "for western people ... God can't hear us and we can't hear God as long as there is too much noise." And, conversely, "although meditation practice awakens so much within us, and satisfies so much for us, it leaves some corners still crying out for warm contact ... a feeling for calling out and being called to."⁵

This book shows how this crossing over to a non-tradition-specific Buddhist practice can enliven one's own roots. Fortunately, all the essays are rooted in personal experience: autobiography is the only way to display this openness, and each of the essays is well done. Some writers have had deeper Buddhist experience than others; Alan Lew, the rabbi, seems to have gone the farthest. Some integrate better than others; Terry Muck, the evangelical Christian, has put it all together in very coherent form. But all have reached out, have tried, have "sat" in meditation practice and then have returned to their own religious traditions.

The path of enlightenment, however, is not lacking in difficulties and inconsistencies. Several of the essayists deal with the problem of maintaining spiritual composure in the midst of a hectic western life. Richard Marks writes of having Buddhist statues in his living room for religious reasons although he is actively Jewish. He and others write about how one tries to mix meditation with carpools, laundry, sibling rivalry among children, and the burdens of a double career family.

Sallie King, in her aptly entitled essay, "The Mommi and the Yogi," brings the reader to yet a deeper level of conflict: "The Buddhist message I heard was this ... Attachment is what returns us again and again to this *samsaric* world. The proper response to the *samsaric* world is detachment ... But, at the same moment, I have before me this infant ... Our bonding has tied me to her ... there is ultimacy in this world. In practice, it is an ultimate good, for me, to care for this child. Nothing else matters as much; nothing else comes even close."⁶ The stark contrast between the attachment of motherhood and the detachment of Buddhist practice could not be more clearly stated. King compensates by the practice of Quaker love, even as, toward the end of the essay, she realizes that "letting go" is also a form of love. She is honest enough to say that she is comfortable in neither tradition but needs both.⁷

In this sense, the Jewish contributors did not, I think, penetrate to the deeper levels of conflict. The Buddhist teaching of the insubstantiality of suffering runs deeply against the grain of Jewish national identity. Jews have suffered and still do suffer at the hands of enemies who say, "Let us destroy their national being so that the name of Israel never be mentioned again."⁸ And one must deal with this suffering, not by getting beyond it but by active, forceful resistance. Similarly, the Buddhist teaching of the insubstantiality of joy runs deeply against the mainstream of Jewish mystical experience. It is those rare moments of joy, of being accepted and accepting ourselves as children of God, that form the center — not the periph-

ery — of Jewish spiritual awareness. These moments must be cultivated for their very specificity, difficult though that may be as Reb. Zalman notes. They may not be transcended or superseded by other practices, though such other practices can be a path to Jewish spiritual joy.

As a traditional Jew who has expounded a theology of protest,⁹ I must say that most religions deal better with joy, submission, and love than they do with frustration, anger, and rage. Why is it better to deal with anger through reaching a deeply spiritual understanding of its ego-rootedness and, hence, its insubstantiality? Pain hurts, and we must have some way of expressing that hurt. Anger is a positive human emotion; so is rage. The expression of our rage against our fellow human beings is limited by state and religious or moral law. The expression of rage against God and the cosmos is limited by liturgical and theological constraints. But both are there; both are legitimate ways of relating to our social and spiritual reality. How would the Jewish/Buddhist authors deal with the deep spirituality of *Psalms* 44 and other such prayers of protest? How would their Buddhist mentors deal with the legitimate need of individuals and groups to express their anger toward the cosmos/God? I think a dismissal, even if it is profoundly spiritual, has missed the point.

Finally, colleagues tell me that there are other Buddhist traditions that incorporate violence within the search for righteous political leadership. Such leadership seeks to alleviate suffering, as well to support old and new feminist traditions, which regard motherhood as a fully legitimate path to enlightenment. I cannot judge these matters for lack of scholarly competence. However, it seems to me that our authors, perhaps because they came to Buddhism through certain meditative streams within the tradition, have not paid sufficient attention to these other currents.

Notwithstanding these objections, this is a very good book. As one who has spent most of his life trying to live a spiritual Jewish existence and to educate and encourage others to do so, it is a breath of fresh air to feel the tangible Presence in these essays. Their autobiographical style forcefully brings home the spiritual potential of cross-traditional study and practice.

For a cross-traditional experience with Islamic sufism and Christianity, see Yossi Klein Halevi, At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden, William Morrow- Harper-Collins: 2001; reviewed by Blumenthal in Reviews on Religion and Theology, forthcoming. The bibliography is also very helpful.

Footnotes

1. H. Kasimow, J. and L. Keenan, *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*, (Sommerville, MA: Wisdom Publications: 2003), pp. 115.
2. Kasimov and Keenan, *Beside Still Waters*, pp 202-03.
3. Kasimov and Keenan, *Beside Still Waters*, p 50.
4. Kasimov and Keenan, *Beside Still Waters*, p 255.
5. Kasimov and Keenan, *Beside Still Waters*, pp 259-60.
6. Kasimov and Keenan, *Beside Still Waters*, pp 162-63.
7. Kasimov and Keenan, *Beside Still Waters*, p 170.
8. *Psalm* 83:5.
9. Blumenthal, David, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press: 1993).