

## Multiple Religious Identities: The Experiences of Four Jewish-Buddhist Teachers

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### Additional Materials about Sylvia Boorstein

#### **Biography**

Sylvia Boorstein was born in 1936 in Brooklyn, New York to a Jewish family with roots in Eastern Europe. After attending public grade school, she received her undergraduate education at Barnard College in New York, where she studied Chemistry and Mathematics. Over ten years later, she received a Master's degree in Social Work from the University of California, Berkeley and began working as a therapist. In 1974, she received a Ph.D. in psychology from Saybrook University. Her dissertation was titled "Hatha Yoga as a Gentle Psychotherapeutic Tool." Sylvia lectured at the College of Marin in California between 1970 and 1984, teaching classes in psychology, Hatha Yoga, and, for the first time at the college, Women's Studies.

During the 1960s, Sylvia was very engaged with political activism, especially related to the Vietnam War. She described this activism as her "spiritual practice" of the time. She was a member of organizations focusing on peace, such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the Marin Woman for Peace.

As a child, Sylvia had very positive feelings about Judaism. She fondly recalls walking with her grandmother on Saturdays to synagogue, after which she would eat honey cake. She spent afternoons at Yiddish *folkshules* and spoke Yiddish as her first language. During the summer, she attended a camp organized by the Jewish National Workers' alliance, which she described as "intellectually modern." Sylvia faced anti-Semitism from her classmates in primary school, resulting in her transfer to a school with a larger Jewish population.

In the late 1970s, Sylvia's husband, who was experimenting at the time with several different types of spiritual paths, went on a meditation retreat and encouraged her to go on one as well. Sylvia's first retreat took place in 1977, sparking her interest in meditation. Sylvia's main teachers since that time have been Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg (her first teacher of metta meditation) and Joseph Goldstein. In 1985, Sylvia began teaching her own meditation classes. Sylvia is a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center where she teaches both vipassana and metta meditation.

In addition to her Buddhist practice, Sylvia is also a devout practitioner of Judaism. She sees her Judaism not in conflict with but rather as a complement to her Buddhism. In an online interview with Dennis Hughes, she explains that she thinks of herself "as a Jew whose life has been tremendously enhanced by my practice of mindfulness, by my understanding of what the Buddha taught. I would like to think that Buddhism and Judaism are both lineages dedicated to kindness and compassion."<sup>1</sup> Sylvia feels that Buddhism has made her a more passionate Jew and observing Judaism has made her a better Buddhist teacher.

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<sup>1</sup> On Buddhism, Meditation, and Mindfulness." Interview by Dennis Hughes. Share Guide Publisher. Available online: [http://www.nishmathayyim.org/boorstein\\_interview.php](http://www.nishmathayyim.org/boorstein_interview.php)

Sylvia is the author of several books, including *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist* (HarperOne, 1998). In addition to her teaching at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, she is also a founding faculty member of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and helped establish the Mindfulness Leadership Training courses at Elat Chayyim-Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center. Sylvia is married to Seymour Bernstein and has four grown children and seven grandchildren.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Video***

“How can a Jew do Mindfulness Meditation” (1:10):  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK1ZZpy-y4E>

### ***Interview Excerpts.***

***This interview was conducted by Emily Sigalow on March 27, 2012***

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Sylvia: The kind of Judaism that happened in my family was a happy kind of Judaism.

Emily: Was it a religious kind of Judaism or cultural?

Sylvia: It was an observant kind of Judaism. We had a kosher home. We observed all the festivals. I was in shul every Shabbos with my grandmother. But it seemed to be, if I could have called my parents, they were progressive before people were progressive. They made their own rules about if they wanted to visit their friends on Shabbos, whether or not they could ride in a car. So they were actually progressive before people were progressive. So I married, I had my children, and I had what I would call a regular life of a 1960s, 1970s California family of Jews. We belonged to a synagogue, which maybe you don't go to as regularly. I was quite active in the kind of activist movements of the '60s and '70s, and looking back I would say that was probably my religious practice at that time..... But the part of the story that I didn't tell you so far, because I told you I was happy with my family and happy with being a Jew, and happy with my profession, but I was a reasonably anxious person, or unreasonably anxious person, given all the facts that my life was in good shape. If I had had the words to say it, I would've said I had a certain amount of existential dread, but I didn't know how to say that at the time. Actually, I knew that there was a certain way in which my cup runneth over, and that at some point it could very well—it's always a very frail cup. It's still always a very frail cup. That cup is frail. At any moment, something could happen to somebody.

Sylvia: Your whole life have you been like that? Or is that an adult experience?

Emily: No, I think it started coming on particularly after I had children. I had a certain amount of angst in my life when I was a child because my mother had frail health, and she actually did

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<sup>2</sup> Sources: Sylvia Boorstein's website <http://www.sylviaboorstein.com/>; Sylvia Boorstein. 1998. *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist* (Harper One, pg 1-45); Emily Sigalow (2012 March 27). Personal interview.

die when I was 23. And I worried about that, so I think I had, to begin with, a little bit of a significantly anxious nature. I was always aware that something could go wrong. But then when I had my own children and I began to really get it that things going wrong is not a rare thing, it's quite normal to have things go wrong, I began to be quite preoccupied with that... I was going along, doing things, and then I went on retreat. It wasn't that the existential angst was so much relieved as it was normalized. The central message of Dharma was that life is complicated, and that everything that our security rests on is actually changing all the time, and you never know, really. Which, by the way, you can find in every religious tradition, including Judaism--you don't know, and in a certain way, there's a limit to what you can control. The message that I heard from my Dharma teachers, which I think is the message of all spiritual traditions, is that there's a way to have a mind that's grounded in peace, notwithstanding it understands that this is all frail. Fragile is better than frail, because it actually is quite tough, but fragile. And not that we can get magically saved or preserved, but really the lesson I think I had to learn was that we can stand it.

Emily: How did you first hear about the very first meditation retreat that you went on?

Sylvia: Actually, my husband went on a retreat, and he came home and said, "This is great. You should do it." So I did.

Emily: Did you have any other friends, at the time, who were going?

Sylvia: Well I know it was part of the zeitgeist. Everybody was. It was sort of the hip thing to do. I really didn't know what I was getting into, and even when I look back, it's very sweet, I really didn't know what I was getting into or what it was supposed to do for me. It was more like a trendy thing to do. I did not go with an intention of now I'm going to treat my existential angst. It was just a thing that people did, and I went and did it. I'm an accidental meditator, or whatever it is that I am... So that's how I got in, and I just was consoled by that particular message that I heard that peace was possible. I think it's the message in all religious traditions. When we say, "May thou which grants peace on all levels grant peace for us and all Israel, and all the inhabitants of the earth," it's an intuition and an invitation that peace is possible. But I don't know how much it comes out as emphasized as a goal of religious practice.

Emily: And did the sitting practice, in particular, speak to you? Or what was it about the practice of sitting that first spoke to you and continues to speak to you?

Sylvia: ... Sitting has become synonymous with developing peaceful, or peace filled, one-pointed concentration, or present moment concentration is better than one-pointed. Present moment. If I'm here in this moment and I sit still, and I close my eyes, thereby limiting the amount of stimuli from kinesthetic awareness cut off from visual awareness, the amount of stimuli processed is less. There's the rhythmic coming and going of breath, and all the things that happen in the mind—all the thoughts and the moods and impressions and awarenesses. But it's a seriously cut down amount of material to process. It turns out that the rhythmicity of breath, or actually the rhythmicity of walking, as people do walking meditation, seems to calm down mind activities. At some point in recent years, the neurobiologists have begun to talk about this in terms of brain waves. But way before, the mind seems to calm down because blood

pressure went down, their skin tension goes down, their respiration rate goes down. You feel better. You feel more relaxed. And in a certain way, people will spontaneously—who are sitting—I was just being with my breath, and all of a sudden I thought to myself, “That big problem in my life that I haven’t been able to solve, I’ll do it this way.” It just allows for intuition to arise. “I’ve been trying so hard to figure it out, and it didn’t come. But, huh, just like that. I should do it that way.” ... I think to myself the truth is that after a while I really tried to focus the attention on my breath just to have some really deeper and more profound states of concentration. But in the beginning, I wasn’t all that diligent. I just felt so reassured and held in a quiet space. It’s a relief for a person in the world with the level of stimulus input that we live at to have quiet time.

Emily: When you first began to practice mindfulness, did you think about its relationship with Judaism? Was that something that was in your mind?

Sylvia: I didn’t because it hadn’t occurred to me that it was in any way going to be a conflict. I didn’t think about that. If I went on a long retreat, they always had a place in the dining hall where, if you brought your traveling candlesticks, you could light your candles. A certain number of people lit, not communally. No out loud. You did it by yourself.... So people bring their own stuff, and they’re on their own timetable. And nobody said yes, and nobody said no. People just did. I discovered... that what the retreat did about my Jewish life... what happened is my blessing life became more active, just by itself. Let me see if I can remember how this was. There was probably a certain trajectory. This happens to me still, often, if I’m sitting in a big room full of people and it’s very quiet, everybody’s sitting, and I begin to feel good just because I’m sitting and relaxed. And I’m peripherally aware of the fact that there are all these other people sitting, and suddenly I’ll think, “Hine ma tov u’ma nayim, Shevet achim gam ya-chad.” - “We’re all sitting here together, and how pleasant it is. How good and how pleasant.” And it would start to play in my mind because it was already programmed in my mind from my whole life. And here I have a situation where, hey, “Hine ma tov u’ma nayim,” seriously, “Shevet achim gam ya-chad.” It’s great! So then I discovered, also, whereas it had not been my habit to say a *bracha* [blessing] before or after meals for some years, that I started to do it again. Because you sit down, you feel good, you look at the food, and you don’t think, “I should say a *bracha*.” ... I really began to appreciate, I got excited about the fact that the stuff that I knew already as practices, seriously they didn’t come out of thin air. They were seriously responses to actual life awarenesses, and they’re not rogue things... So actually, what happened is I noticed that my own life started to change around that, and I was enjoying that, and so far nobody said anything to me about, by the way, how are you integrating the Judaism and the Buddhism, because it wasn’t about that... “How is mindfulness making a difference in your Judaism?” would have been a better question.

Emily: Did you think of yourself as practicing Buddhism?

Sylvia: No. No but, you know, if I come in an airport and I’m carrying a zafu under my arm, and someone says, “Are you a Buddhist,” you say, “Yeah.” Why not? It’s a shortcut... But I never thought about practicing Buddhism, because I didn’t really actually know what that would mean. I practice mindfulness, I practice loving kindness, I admire tremendously the philosophy of the Buddha, the psychology of the Buddha. In terms of my being a therapist, I have a very

expanded, not completely replaced, but expanded view of psychodynamics, given that the whole Buddhist view of how the psyche works is completely different. And it doesn't obviate everything I know about Western psychology, but it's another lens to see things through, which the people that I work with seem to thrive through. So I didn't see it ever as problematic. I didn't think about it at all until I began to teach mindfulness... So now, all of a sudden, there's some attention on me, and people know I'm a Jew. So then they start to ask the question: "How are you integrating the Buddhism and the Judaism?" Because somehow the attention was drawn to me, as if, and it was like, "Wow, I didn't know about that."

Emily: Did that question make you uncomfortable?

Sylvia: Well, you know, I don't like to say I'm not a Buddhist because you like to give a certain amount of *kavod* [respect] to your teachers, and I really do admire what the Buddha said. So I don't have to say, "Well I'm just mindfulness, forget about the Buddha," because I'm really shaped by Buddhist philosophy. Not all of it seems relevant to me. There are parts of the cosmology that I don't find relevant to me. But there are a lot of parts that seem to be very valuable ways to explain the dynamics of suffering, especially the gratuitous suffering that we do with mind states. So I don't want to say, "No, no, I'm not a Buddhist." Besides, I'm apparently a co-founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center, so in a certain sense I'm certainly a student of what the Buddha taught, and a teacher of mindfulness meditation. So it was a disarming question. I wrote a book about that, and I got interviewed a lot by, I remember someone calling me on the telephone and saying to me again, "How do you reconcile being both a Jew and a Buddhist?" And I said something very articulate about many people, Jews as well as non-Jews, many Westerners, Jews as well as non-Jews, have found that studying the psychology that the Buddha taught and practicing the practice of mindfulness meditation, which is essentially enhanced attention, or paying attention, has enhanced their lives in many dimensions, including in their religious devotion. Something like that. And the person I was talking to said, "Oh, you said that very well." I probably said it better than I just said it, because I felt very, not very, but a little bit disingenuous because I had it on a card in front of me because so many people had asked that question. I didn't want to say, "No, no, I'm not a Buddhist," and I didn't want to say, "Listen, it's all right, it's not about Buddhism and it is about Buddhism." But that's really the truth. Many people, Jews as well as non-Jews, have discovered that studying what the Buddha taught and practicing the technique of developing clarity of mind, which the Buddha taught, has enhanced their lives in general. And in those cases where people had a religious tradition that they practiced, it has enhanced their participation in that tradition, as well, period. That's true. I teach this in other—I've taught it in churches. Essentially, the practice is not parochial. It doesn't require a belief system. It has a cosmology, but it doesn't require the cosmology.... I have a great respect for it [Buddhism], but it's not my religious lineage.

Emily: What lineage would it be, if you had to put a name to that?

Sylvia: I'm a Jew.

Emily: I mean, if Judaism is your religious lineage, what is Buddhism?

Sylvia: Oh, it informs me... It isn't a lineage, so much, that I've studied. I would say, what does it make you? A pragmatist, a realist. I'm a mindfulness practitioner. I wouldn't put that so much in a lineage as saying these teachings have enhanced my life, like psychology or yoga.

Emily: Are there times, I guess over the course of years, that you feel more Jewish, and there are other times you feel more Buddhist? Or do you always feel sort of both?

Sylvia: You know, I think it's more correct to say I never feel like I'm in the wrong place. That's actually true. I don't think about more or less. I feel completely part of the synagogue community that I'm a part of. Last week I was teaching a story about the Buddha to the sixth grade class because my granddaughter was in that class, and I generally get invited. I'm a local resource. And what did she say to me? She said, "Bubbe, I'm worried. Somebody who heard you were coming said, 'I heard your grandmother is a Buddhist priest.' Are you a priest?" I said, "No, no, relax, I'm not a priest. It's okay." And I had a wonderful time. So when I'm there teaching, I feel like me. I don't feel like a Buddhist who came to teach, or a Jew who came to teach. I feel like me. If I go to an international Buddhist teachers' conference, I feel like me. I don't feel like I'm in a wrong place.

Emily: Like you're wearing different hats in different places?

Sylvia: No, no, no. I don't feel in the wrong—I always feel like I belong there.... I just do not have any disjuncture about where I am. I know how to behave in both places.