

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

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Brandeis University
September 2012

Additional Materials about Joseph Goldsetin

Biography

Joseph Goldstein, born in 1944, is one of the leading vipassana meditation teachers in America and co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS), one of the oldest meditation retreat centers in America. Joseph was born to a Jewish family in South Fallsburg, NY, a small town in the Borscht Belt of the Catskill Mountains. After graduating from high school, he attended Columbia University and obtained his bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1965. Upon graduating from Columbia, Joseph applied to a Peace Corps and was assigned to teach English in Thailand, where he first encountered Buddhism. During the Peace Corps and for several years afterwards, Joseph spent time studying in monasteries and meditation centers throughout Southeast Asia. Joseph practiced meditation under well-known teachers from India, Burma, and Tibet, including Anagarika Sri Munindra, Sri S.N. Goenka, Mrs. Nani Bala Barua (Dipa Ma), the Venerable Sayadaw U Pandita.

Joseph returned from Asia after seven years and met Jack Kornfield at the Naropa Institute in 1974. Shortly thereafter, they- along with Sharon Salzberg and Jacqueline Schwartz- founded the Insight Meditation Society (IMS), the first vipassana meditation center founded by non-Asians, in Barre, MA. Vipassana, characterized by its practice of mindfulness, has become one of the most popular meditation practices for Western Buddhists.

Joseph helped found the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in 1989 and has been the resident guiding teacher at IMS and leader of meditation retreats worldwide since. Although Joseph does not currently practice Judaism, he still identifies with its cultural aspects and sees Judaism as a part of who he is and where he came from.

Joseph is the author of numerous popular books on Buddhism, and the majority of his books introduce westerners to Theravada concepts, practices, and teachings. Some of his works include: *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism* (2002); *A Heart Full of Peace* (2007); *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom* (2003).¹

¹ Sources include:

Gross, Amy. "An Interview with Joseph Goldstein." DharmaWeb Interview. 05 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.dhammadweb.net/interview/view.php?id=5>>.

"Joseph Goldstein." Dharma Rakita. 08 Aug. 2012. <<http://dhammarakita.net/DPicture/Goldstein.html>>.

"Joseph Goldstein." Insight Meditation Society. 09 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.dharma.org/joseph-goldstein>>.

Sigalow, Emily. "Interview with Joseph Goldstein." Personal interview, 3 May 2012.

Video

Joseph Goldsetin does not say much about his personal experiences in his talks. We invite you to pick a talk and listen to a short piece, just to hear his voice and teaching style.

<http://dharmaseed.org/teacher/96/>

Interview Excerpts.

This interview was conducted by Emily Sigalow in May 2012

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Emily: Can you tell me a little bit about the story of your upbringing, not everything, of course, but I'd just like to hear a little bit about your childhood, where you were living, who was important to you in that chapter of your life?

Joseph: I grew up in the Catskills in Upstate New York, right in the heart of the Borscht Belt. My grandparents actually had a summer resort there, and so we lived there all year round... This was a bungalow colony, but it was quite large, about 130 families would come for the summer, and so I grew up that the town was very Jewish oriented, so I grew up in that milieu. My family was not particularly observant, but they were socially observant, not religiously observant, although I did go to Hebrew school for quite a few years, before my Bar Mitzvah, so I had kind of a regular Jewish training, I guess. And my father died when I was 12, so that I think that had some major impact on my life, and my questioning.

Emily: And did your family have any special Jewish rituals that you think back on that are meaningful to you?

Joseph: I wouldn't say Jewish rituals; I'd say Jewish food. [Laughter]

Emily: Okay.

Joseph: Yeah. My grandmother.

Emily: A good cook?

Joseph: A great cook! [Laughter] At her funeral, that's what all the eulogies were about what a great cook she was.

Emily: And if you try to think back about how your family would have understood Judaism, would you say what they would have thought about it as a religion, a culture, a people?

Joseph: Well, certainly a culture. My grandmother on my father's side was more religious, so I think she took the religion aspect.

Emily: Were most of your friends growing of Jewish background?

Joseph: Mostly. Yeah.

Emily: And I think you mentioned before that you went to Hebrew school all the way up through your Bar Mitzvah? Were those good memories, or not so much? [Laughter]

Joseph: It was kind of boring for a young kid.

Emily: Was it rigorous?

Joseph: No....Basically, they were teaching us to read Hebrew, not to understand it, just to read it, to be able to read the prayers, and I don't remember much. I'm sure there were other things they taught; I don't remember much else.

Emily: If you had to think back about how you thought about Judaism growing up, would you have thought about it in terms of a culture, or a religion, or did you identify as being Jewish?

Joseph: Yeah. I definitely did, yeah, but I would say more culturally than religiously. In high school, there was this big questioning of whether God exists, doesn't exist, or just that whole question, and which carried on through my freshman year of college. I remember for a couple of weeks in college I was obsessed with the question. I was tormenting myself, and then I can't remember how I resolved it, unfortunately. But somehow it just dropped from my –

Emily: If you think about Judaism growing up, were there things that were troubling to you?

Joseph: Not so much at the time, just really when I got interested in Buddhism then, first it's non-theistic, and it's really just about understanding the mind, so it's not tribal in the sense that Judaism is. And that appealed to me more than Judaism.

Emily: And then at that time it raised questions about what you had been taught?

Joseph: By that time, I never had the strong religious belief, so it wasn't that I was actually giving anything up, and that's why. It was just very easy; it kind of fit right into my philosophic frame of mind, yeah.

Emily: It wasn't necessarily a falling out, then, or anything like that?

Joseph: No, no.

Emily: Was there anything about Judaism at large that was special to you growing up?

Joseph: I think the holidays; they were definitely special. We had these two big Seders at Passover with lots of people, and lots of food, and we did the whole program, and it was one of the highlights of the year. Yeah, and Hanukah was a big thing. We did that.

Emily: Light the candles?

Joseph: The candles, but also my family made it the Jewish equivalent of Christmas, so decorating the house, and lots of presents, and –

Emily: Oh, wow! And have you had any, or maintain any Jewish practice throughout your adulthood? Have Passover Seders that you go to, or anything that –

Joseph: Not really. There's the commonality of Jewish culture, among many of my friends. So, like that's a shared just Jewish humor, and so that's in there. That will always be in there, but not in terms of the holidays anymore, or particular observances.

Emily: And in terms of that shared Jewish culture, apart from the humor, what are the other, I guess, shared aspects of that culture?

Joseph: It's a little hard to pinpoint. I think the basis of the humor is what it's about, and it's just kind of a worldview, and I don't know how it could be described, but it's sort of taking a somewhat; I guess it could be condensed in the humorous expression of "oy." [Laughter] And it's just that, applied to life in the world.. It's a little hard to describe. It's just a certain way of looking at things, I guess, that brings; maybe it has to do with the self-deprecating humor; that's part of it.

Emily: And were there any moments or events that marked a shift in your relationship with Judaism? I'm thinking perhaps in terms of death, or something like that, that might have caused you to think about things in a different way, or perhaps not?

Joseph: I mean that experience when I was young didn't; it had an impact on me, and I was interested in thinking about things, but it wasn't vis-à-vis any Jewish beliefs, particularly. It was just kind of what it meant philosophically. Now, the biggest shift, I think, came when I started to connect with the Buddhist teachings, and it was just such a good fit. But as I said, it's not that I felt like I was giving something up, because I really didn't have a strong religious belief, Jewish belief. So, it was just kind of an easy slide into kind of a different system.

Emily: And if someone were to ask you if you're Jewish, do you still identify as such?

Joseph: Yeah.

Emily: Has that changed over time, or been pretty constant?

Joseph: No, I think it's been constant.

Emily: And when you think about that now, what does that mean? How would you –

Joseph: Well, I think it's the cultural aspect. You just grow up in a certain culture, and that's just part of you; I mean depending on who asked me, I might clarify that it's not a particular religious belief that I don't identify in that way.

[Break]

Emily: When did you first learn about it, or your first exposure to Buddhism? So, that

happened in the –

Joseph: In the Peace Corps, yeah.

Emily: Can you walk me through that, if you don't mind?

Joseph: Yeah. I was teaching English in Bangkok, and right down the block from my school was a famous temple called the "Marble Temple," and there was an English Buddhist monk, and an Indian Buddhist monk, who like had a group for Westerners in Thailand, so I started going to that, and I just became very interested. I also started volunteering at one of the Buddhist monasteries, just teaching English to the monks, but in this group at the Marble Temple, first I came with this background in philosophy, so I was asking all these questions, and I think people stopped coming, because I was going into things. I was one of these obnoxious, just a million questions, so one of the monks finally said, "Why don't you meditate?" [Laughter] I think it was really an effort just to kind of get me to be quiet. But I was 20-21-years-old. And it was all very exotic being in Bangkok, Buddhism, and so I just got the basic instructions, and I arranged all my pillows, and stuff, and I set my alarm clock for five minutes, because I didn't want to sit too long. But something quite amazing happened, even in that first five minutes, and it was just that I saw that there was a way to look into the mind, as well as looking out from it, and that was just amazing to me. Nobody had ever suggested doing that, or a way to do it, so I was very excited. I was just, "Wow, you know, one can actually look at one's mind." I was so excited I invited my friends over to watch me meditate.

Emily: Did it [meditation] feel like a spiritual, or religious practice to you?

Joseph: I would say more spiritual than religious, because I wasn't then, and I'm still not particularly into rituals or ceremonies, and that's not what draws me. It was much more just the direct understanding that became possible through the practice.

Emily: And when you describe it as spiritual, I guess I'm just wondering how you think about spiritual vis-à-vis religious?

Joseph: Oh, spiritual to me has a connotation of something – let's see? – I was going to say it has the connotation of something more universal, but on second thought, people could feel their spiritual within the context of a specific religion. So, maybe it's just a broader, maybe religious is a subset of spiritual? And for many people, in fact, probably for most people their spiritual life is in the context of a specific religion, but Buddhism in one way is not really a religion, so that's why, although divinely speaking, one looks at the world religions, Buddhism will be there.

Emily: And what would be the other way of thinking about Buddhism? If it's not a religion it would be a –

Joseph: It's really just a profound understanding of the nature of the mind, and what causes suffering, and where the freedom is. And so it's not a belief system, and I think that's what distinguishes it. And that's why it wasn't hard. It's not like I was converting from one belief

system to another; it's like Buddhism is really just a methodology, and framework for understanding.

Emily: When you first began to practice Buddhism would you celebrate any of the Buddhist rituals or holiday, any?

Joseph: Not really.

Emily: And what was about the rituals or the holidays that didn't speak to you?

Joseph: I guess I've just never been particularly; people have different temperaments, and some people are very devotional, have a devotional temperament, and so for that kind of heart and mind ceremony, and ritual is an important expression of it. Other people have a more you might say philosophic or wisdom orientation rather than devotional orientation. So, it's just different personality types, and are much more on that side, some of them just much more investigative, rather than devotional. And so I think that's why the ritual ceremonial part, whether in Judaism, or in Buddhism, but that's not what drew me, whereas, for other people that's really inspiring. But it's just a temperamental question.

Emily: And you mentioned before that your mother was very supportive of your practice, but how did your, at least at first, your family, and I don't know what kind of communication you had with them when you were in Asia, and they were in the States, but how did they react to your Buddhism?

Joseph: My mother was great, and my brother was too.

Emily: No conflict?

Joseph: – no conflict. Some of my aunts and uncles were more, “What are you doing? You're killing your mother.” [Laughter] Which I wasn't, but some of the extended family actually were more Jewish oriented, and I don't think they really understood what I was doing.

Emily: Was that [the fact that so many people of Jewish backgrounds were practicing meditation in Asia] talked about, or was it just sort of –

Joseph: I think it was commented on. That's where the expression Bew-ish came from.

Emily: Bewish? I've never heard of that one... Looking back on it, do you have a sense of why there were so many people who were of Jewish backgrounds, who were looking in Asia at that time, looking around, and studying with teachers there?

Joseph: It's a little hard to say. I think that most of the people at that time were not like observant Jews; they were more like me, and so it was less problematic; it's like I had some friends who grew up Catholic, and who at least for some time were really identified with that. It was much more a break from being Catholic to Buddhism, so I think it took a little more effort in a way, or whereas for most of us, there was no obstacle to overcome, inner obstacle, as

we were just following our own interests, and it wasn't like we were, as I say, it's not like we were converting from one thing to another.

Emily: Why would the Catholic obstacle be greater than the Jewish obstacle in your understanding?

Joseph: Yeah. I think it's just there's more Catholic dogma that one ascribes to as a Catholic. Even within the Jewish education there wasn't really much dogma, so it's not like I felt, "Oh, I no longer believe that."

Emily: And no one's ever asked you to believe anything anyway?

Joseph: Exactly, exactly.

Emily: And is there anything – I asked this about the Judaism, so I should ask this about Buddhism, too, but is there anything about Buddhism that's troubling to you?

Joseph: No. It seems just right... Yeah, it's the fit. And again, especially because it doesn't require belief; it lays out a map, and then encourages everybody to see for themselves.

[Break]

Emily: When you first began learning about Buddhism in the city, did you ever think about its relationship to Judaism?

Joseph: Not really. It was clearly different, because it's non-theistic, and it's like God is not a concept that's used in Buddhism. But I guess I wasn't thinking or comparing.

Emily: And did you feel any tensions at all?

Joseph: No. No tensions. [Laughter] Just so you know what the question was. [Laughter]

[Break]

Emily: I'm curious about how the ways in which you hold Buddhism and Judaism together. Do you feel like that they just are very separate; that one is a background; one is a chosen religion, or I guess I'm wondering just how you do that?

Joseph: Well, as I said, for me, I don't really think much about the religious aspect of Judaism, so that's just not part of what I carry, or hold. So, the cultural aspect, I think is just in my personality.