

Where Buddhism and Judaism Meet



by [Clarke Fountain](#) (March 2022)

In Judaism, aside from the teachings in the Torah itself, there are teachings and practices (*mussar*) that help you to really do what you intend to do. So, for instance, you're told not to bear false witness in the Ten Statements (Ten Commandments). But how do you do that? When you're put on the spot, how do you keep from doing what you'd never do otherwise? And how do you do the extension of not bearing false witness and avoid lying as much as possible? Sometimes it might be ethical to lie, but those cases are somewhat rare. Usually, we do it because it's the easy way out of a situation. But how do we avoid taking that easy path? We have to develop habits that make that less likely. Mussar teachings are about developing ethical muscle. These were codified in (I

believe) the late seventeenth century from earlier Jewish teachings and were extended greatly by Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzato and those who worked with him.

And why would we do the commandments? Is there a vending machine full of goodies so that if we put in the right amount of “money” (good deeds) we get something nice? No. We do them because they are there to do. We do them because what else are we going to do? How do we make our lives meaningful? *Mitzvot* is a term for following the commandments. There are many categories of mitzvot. Not all of them are acts such as giving money, or giving someone a meal, or clothes or a job (though those are indeed *mitzvas*). Others have to do with how we live a good life (for instance, by taking proper care of our animals, treating our relatives well –including our spouses– and so on). Some of them have to do with things that are designed to build ethical character. These include studying Torah, attending festivals and services and praying at them, saying our daily allotment of prayers and so on. Mussar is like that: it’s full of techniques for reducing the possibility that you will harm someone in an outburst of anger, for instance.

So, Buddhism? Most Jews don’t learn enough about their own religion to know that the whole wealth of Jewish history has anything in it one might want: ways to attain higher states of awareness and closeness to God, ways to meditate and attain inner peace, ways to develop ethical muscle, to become a *mensch* and much more. As a result, Jews often get involved with other religions that seem to offer tools for living a better life. Chief among these is Buddhism. The goal of a lay Buddhist is to become a good enough person that, should he attain levels of realization, he won’t misuse that realization or waste it, which, sadly, often happens. You can get drunk on meditation (I’ve seen it), and it can swell your ego and give you a sense that you can do no wrong, which is the opposite of the intention of Buddhist meditation. To forestall such an

event, all lineages of Buddhist teachings have vast numbers of techniques to help their adherents become ethical human beings. Simply coming in off the street and meditating is not how Buddhists in Asia go about it. Modern people think that the whole thing is meditation, but when have we moderns ever grabbed the right end of the stick?

The three main foundations to Buddhist teaching are: refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, without which you can't be considered to be a Buddhist of any kind. These are very like the foundations to Judaism as taught by Maimonides, though of course they are expressed very differently.

Refuge in the Buddha represents enlightenment and the possibility of it; the possibility of ceasing to be awful and becoming wonderful, a blessing for others and incidentally for yourself, to put it very simply. The Dharma is the teachings about how to accomplish this goal; only some of which are about meditation as we moderns define it. Finally, the Sangha is the community of learned and realized people who have gone before, who have trodden the path and continued the teachings, and in a general but lesser sense it is even the community of other Buddhists who have taken refuge.

Also, an issue many people consider to be the central one in dharma teachings is that of "emptiness" or *sunyata*. Westerners are sometimes attracted to the idea of emptiness because it appears to be a "religious" approach to nihilism, the expression of "to hell with it all" we sometimes might feel. "Voidness," "emptiness" and so on considered as pure categories of nonbeing. But what is Buddhism really teaching here? The word "emptiness" is not enough. If I may be so bold, Buddhism's teaching on emptiness asserts that we suffer under the illusion that we are entirely separate beings who can do whatever we please, as, for example, with Raskolnikoff in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. If you examine yourself and your life very carefully, you will discover that you can't find a spot anywhere in the universe that separates you

completely from your parents or your friends, or the trees, buildings and sky that you discern. Look all you may, and you won't find that separateness. There is a deep and persistent connection between us and all things. Everything you think or do has consequences, some of them far-reaching, most of them beyond our capacity to imagine. In Zen this is called *innen* or "everything connected to everything else."

Things are empty of being what they appear to be, starting with ourselves. That's the core of the emptiness that Buddhism teaches. That's a start in correcting the record. Buddhism is the opposite of nihilism, even though too many Western experts conclude that it is exactly that. So, beware! If you start practicing this path you might develop a conscience.

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