



Image (right) from a painting by Dorit Bat Shalom

A JEWISH-BUDDHIST ENCOUNTER

Professor Robert Thurman and Rabbi Ezra Finkelstein explore the value of those quiet moments of reflection in life and leadership, and whether there can be 'spirit in business.'

The quiet moments Buddhists call meditation come by another name, according to **Ezra Finkelstein**. He conversed with **Robert Thurman**, at the Spirit in Business conference in New York in April. Later, session moderator **Jonathan Rose** told how he melds the traditions of Buddhism and Judaism in the way he runs his business.

RABBI FINKELSTEIN "As I understand it, to meditate is to divorce one's mind and spirit from the concrete realities that are about one. To me, this is related to an activity, which I practice with regularity: it is what I call prayer. For most people, prayer is identified with petition, asking the divinity, God, to respond to one's needs. As a colleague of mine once said, 'The answer can sometimes be NO.'

"The practice I engage in is called *tefilah*, a Hebrew word for prayer. It comes from a root that means many things, one of which is meditation; another is to judge oneself or to turn to God as judge. I think that's what I do: I analyze myself in the process of prayer against the standards of my belief. There is a distinction between my tradition and that of Robert Thurman in that his tradition does not understand a divine creator, and mine is based on the premise that we are created in the image of God.



"Therefore I should be what God wants me to be, and the question becomes, 'How do I know what God wants?' One way is to look to the authority of the tradition and its teachers and be guided by them. There is a passage in the fifth book of the bible, Deuteronomy, which says, 'Ask your father and he will inform you, your elders and they will tell you.' It is paralleled by passages in the Book of Job, which is one of the deepest books of the Bible. The basic texts of my tradition contain any number of commandments. The tradition itself lists 613: 248

positive and 365 negative. There are more things not to do than to do! To try and understand all of them would take longer than we have to live, let alone the time we have to speak at this session.

"The tradition is distilled down to two very simple texts: one is a tripod-type text which is taken from the book of Micah. 'It has been told you, a man, what is good and what the Lord does require you to do: justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' The other is a brief phrase: 'The righteous man lives by his faith' (meaning righteous man or woman).

"Therefore the function of the human being ultimately becomes to live a righteous life. You are supposed to spend part of each day studying what it is you are supposed to do. The rules are supposedly rational and comprehensible. That is not always true. Some of the statutes are incomprehensible. Some are

"... Some of the (Judaic)

statutes are inapplicable to the contemporary world and some of them may even be irrational. But there are enough of those which are rational and comprehensible to study to attempt to fulfill in one's lifetime. How they are applied enables one to resolve the contemporary problems one faces."

— RABBI EZRA FINKELSTEIN

inapplicable to the contemporary world and some of them may even be irrational. But there are enough of those which are rational and comprehensible to study and to attempt to fulfill in one's lifetime. How they are applied enables one to resolve the contemporary problems one faces.

"An employee of a wealthy man named Rabba Babba Khanin, who lived in tenth century Babylonia, dropped and broke one of his master's barrels of wine. Rabba, seizing the cloaks of his workmen, went to the arbiter of law at the time and demanded that the garments should be taken from them. The arbiter said, 'Give them back their cloaks.' Rabba said, 'Is this the law?' And the arbiter said, 'Yes, not as a legal statute but a moral one. Because it says in the Book of Proverbs that you may walk in the way of good men.'

"Rabba returned the cloaks to his employees, who then turned to the arbiter and said, 'We are poor. We have toiled yet we have no wages.' The arbiter said to Rabba, 'Pay them,' and once again Rabba asked, 'Is that what the law requires?' He said, 'Yes, for it is written: keep the paths of the righteous.'

"The responses in both cases indicate that while the law may have allowed him to penalize his workers for their carelessness and not to pay them to cover his loss, the moral responsibility, which is much more demanding, does not give him that right. Sometimes the law is not a sufficient guide for human behavior and one has to go beyond it.

"A real life example: a colleague of mine took on a position in a new congregation of around 500 families with high hopes of increasing his personal wealth and being able to perform his work effectively. At the end of the second week, when time came to be paid, he was told there was not enough money in the bank to cover all the paychecks. 'But you'll get yours,' he was told by the office manager. He turned to her and said, 'If no one else gets paid, I don't get paid.' He knew the office manager was a single mother raising her children on her salary. He represented a couple earning two incomes with a house provided by the congregation. It was the last time the congregation was unable to pay the check. They understood it was their responsibility to pay everyone on time.

"We all deal with business and spirit, they do coincide. We don't always recognize them, but all the actions we perform in

life pertain to both. Buying a newspaper on the stand or paying a fare on the subway, we are all involved in the economics of life, and every action we do has a moral component. Whether we do what's right, or fail to do what's right, we can train ourselves to judge our actions through meditation, study or prayer, no matter what discipline we follow."

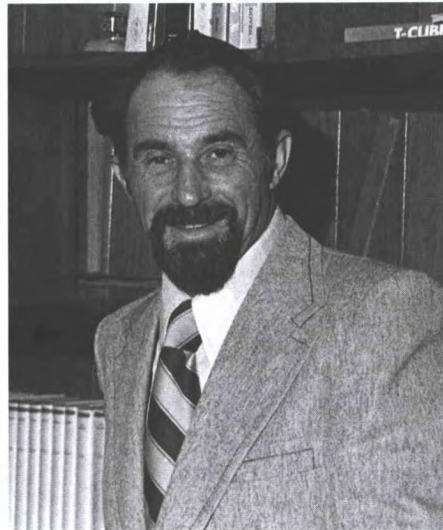
ROBERT THURMAN addressed the question, 'How does inner work relate to action, especially in business,' by telling how, when Buddha had just attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree in the forest near Bodhgaya, he announced, in an ecstatic state, that he was not going to teach anyone because it would be hard for them to understand and better to just take a break in the forest and enjoy the nectar of his new insight.

"That statement had a kind of coyness on the Buddha's part because, in India at that time, there was a dominating God, Brahma, who was believed by many to be the creator. Buddha had met that God already and had a conversation with him. He appeared in a golden cloud in a chariot in regal imagery. In that conversation, God disclaimed sole responsibility for the creation of the world and said that everyone was mutually responsible, people too, and that there were deities and angels of various ranks in an elaborate

spiritual hierarchy they still have in India. God told Buddha, 'When you understand the nature of things – and being God I have a good idea that you are going to – I want you to teach people. In particular, I am sick and tired of them blaming me for everything that goes wrong.'

"But Buddha knew that if he went out proclaiming and teaching it would be considered presumptuous, so he waited for Brahma to come and encourage him again. Brahma brought him the Wheel of Dharma to use in the teachings.

"A caravan loaded with silks got stuck in the mud nearby and while the merchants were waiting to be released they saw a glow in the forest. It was Buddha, glowing because he was in such a good mood. The merchants said, 'Oh, he could probably do with lunch.' They offered their finest this and that, and it is said that different deities brought precious gold and silver bowls which all fused into



Rabbi Ezra Finkelstein





one, a simple stone monk's bowl. Buddha accepted the lunch, but he did not tell those businessmen anything about the Four Noble Truths or suggest that they withdraw from their lives. He said that as long as they fed people who were seeking a higher spiritual life, they would prosper and their businesses would do well. He blessed them for dishing out the key to the whole Buddhist movement for thousands of years. Then he gave them a mantra and he said, 'If you want to stay away from mud holes in the future, say this mantra and you won't get stuck,' so they went off very happily.

"Buddha was born into the warrior class:

classes were quite well divided in

ancient India, perhaps not as

much as later Brahmin histo-

rians like to maintain, but

the warrior or military

class was the royal one,

which ruled the country.

Buddha renounced his

role in that class to seek

the purpose of life. He

became a spiritual teacher and

organized a huge monastic move-

ment, invented monasticism I believe

we can say, and never went back to the military

class.

"The class that most supported the monastic order, and was interwoven with it, was the merchant class, not the military class. I believe that the Buddhist tradition has a history of shifting the locus of power in ancient civilization from military to merchant, a process which is not yet complete if we take a brief look at the federal budget and the current rulers of our country, who use the military to try to co-opt the business class, so this struggle still goes on.

"In business there is an exchange. Parties to the exchange try to get good deals, but they don't usually wipe the other one out. The military style is to wipe out the other side and take everything they have. But if you destroy the other side, you can't trade with them in the future. They are no longer productive partners in developing wealth in general for everyone. So business is a definite step forward as a means of creating wealth in a society, instead of military predation on neighbors, which thrived then and still does today.

"Buddha believed that the shift of power from military to business was an ethical step forward. He didn't tell the

merchants to drop out and become yogis, he praised them and indicated they would do well as long as they supported the possibility in society for people to develop themselves spiritually. That would be *their* mode of spiritual development.

"In principle I think the best framework for looking at how the inner tradition in Buddhism relates to action in the world is to look at the famous Eightfold Path which is the fourth of the Four Noble Truths. In a sentence: The essence of the Buddha's discovery was that selfishness and its root, which is a misperception of the nature of the self, is the source of all suffering: the source of greed, hatred, folly, envy, pride, the poisons

of the mind which cause people to mistreat each

other and mistreat themselves actually.

Therefore everything in the

Buddhist tradition is predicat-

ed on the human need to

find fulfillment by over-

coming egotism.

"We then under-

stand that there is a very

important educational

component to Buddhism, if

not more than religious educa-

tion, because you cannot get rid of

your egotism by someone saying 'you

must.' This only makes you feel guilty on top of

being egotistical. And it might make you refuse that religious

commandment type of thing. Although it might help you

restrain yourself to some extent, it is impossible, in the

Buddhist psychological point of view, to overcome egotism

just by thinking that you should. You can restrain its manifes-

tations by thinking that you should, and that's good, but the

ultimate goal is to discover that egotism is self-defeating and

is based on a delusion about the nature of the self, thinking

that the self is some isolated separated thing and therefore it

will do well by grabbing the world toward it. What you are is

actually all of your interactions with everyone else, and if you

live egotistically and harm others you are going to have a bad

life and you are going to be unhappy. Even if you grab a lot of

wealth and win a lot of victories, you are never going to be

satisfied. You'll just want more wealth, more victories.

"This could be seen as different from the theistic traditions

in India or in the West, if one takes those theistic traditions to

mean only that people should obey certain commandments. But

if you follow the 'image of God' idea, then one should become

more God-like – and presumably God is wise, compassionate

"...even though we

Buddhists do not believe in any

omnipotent creator, we do believe

there are beings who are more powerful

than humans who are shepherding

and trying to take care of us."

— ROBERT THURMAN

and unselfish and so forth – then there is a kind of yogic or educational component in those traditions as well. At the ground level, maybe for the person with little education in a peasant society in ancient times, then just obedience to commandments is at least a restraint of previous tribal bad habits, we could say.

“So the differences may not be as huge as it may seem.

“The methods to become free of the delusion of self-centeredness include three of the points in the Eightfold Path: ethical, meditational and intellectual. This is very important because people tend to think Buddhism is just about meditating – the Rabbi was talking about prayer and making the assumption that Buddhists withdraw from the world and meditate. That is incorrect.

“The first point on the Eightfold Path is ‘realistic view,’ some call it ‘right view.’ ‘View’ means an understanding of the nature of the world and from that flows realistic intention. With realistic view you recognize that causality applies; the world is interwoven by causality and therefore you have an obligation to try and develop positively. If you don’t there will be consequences to developing negatively.

“For someone who believes that there is a version of creation and someone else is responsible for causation, that you can go scot-free from the consequences of what you do, those kinds of views are very debilitating because (a) the person cannot develop positively, and (b) they have a license to be irresponsible because they believe they can do things that are without consequence: Either because they are nihilists like modern American materialists who think their soul doesn’t exist and they are just nothing at death, or they are the type of theist who believe that, even if they behave badly, God will pull their disconnected soul out of the mess later. That’s also very destructive. It’s an abrogating of the responsibility to causality and the consequences of what you do.

“If you don’t have ‘right view,’ your meditation will actually lead you to become more irresponsible, to become more self-aggrandizing. We’ve already noted in the experience of Buddhism in the West, someone can meditate for years and years, they become very good at it and they jump up and down and say, ‘Wow, I’m the greatest,’ because they have never dislodged the

delusion that we are all born with, that we are the center of it all. They have become more egotistical and reinforced by meditation.

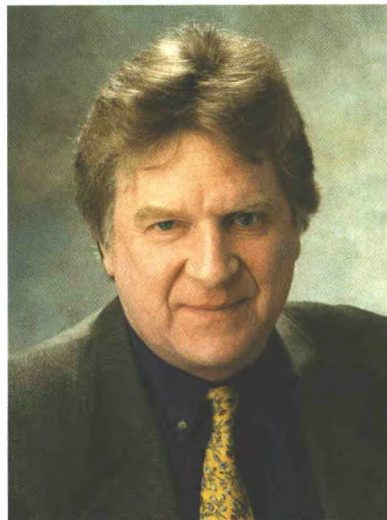
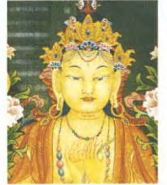
“Right livelihood and right ethics are considered essential prior to meditating. If you try to meditate when you are living unethically, like killing people every day or robbing them or being too extractive in your business practices or being nasty to your relatives or too stressed out, then when you try to calm your mind there will be this turbulence of bad interaction with other people and bad consequences coming back at you and you won’t be able to meditate anyway.

“So ethical behavior is the foundation. Actually it is part of what are not commandments, but what are called ‘positive and negative paths of action,’ and where Rabbi talks about 365 negative and 248 positive commandments, Buddhist monks and nuns have hundreds of precepts like that. Laypeople have the Tenfold Path, which is similar to the Ten Commandments – and seven out of the ten are the same, which is fascinating. In ancient views of ethics, we were obviously interconnected. Don’t kill, don’t take what is not offered, don’t commit sexual misconduct (defined

according to circumstances and culture, not in one rigid way.) Four verbals: Don’t lie, don’t bear false witness with a view to depriving others of their relationships, don’t speak harshly and don’t speak frivolously; and three of mind: don’t be malicious, greedy or hold false view or deluded view of the nature of the world. Because there is no God, there is no ‘don’t have another belief other than in God,’ other than be realistic in your views, so they are very similar.

“That foundation of not living by killing affects businesses dealing with, say, nuclear weapons. In that industry you might have trouble meditating unless you were withdrawing your awareness from reality, a type of meditating which is not an important type in Buddhism. Most types of meditation in Buddhism are designed to increase your awareness of reality rather than diminish it.

“After establishing ethics, you apply authentic mindfulness, authentic spiritual effort, which is concentration, the ability to develop a mind which can really focus very powerfully, and that’s where meditation comes in – at the end.



Robert Thurman

Photo: Steve Haag



"Although, of course, ultimately, they say, in order to really be ethical you have to have such a concentrated mind; in order to really have a realistic view, you have to have such a concentrated mind; in order to have such a concentrated mind, you have to be ethical to have a realistic view, so in a way you have to fulfill all of them together to become enlightened or to be liberated from suffering.

"So that answers the question as to what inner work is, how it relates to action and business leadership and therefore the hope of whether spirit and business can come together. I don't think it is a vain hope. I think it needs a way of reviewing world history along the lines of my friend Gandhi's famous statement after one of those massacres by the British and the violent riots in response. He was asked if he was depressed and discouraged, and he said he did not allow himself to be. They asked how, and he said that, when something terrible happens, you have to look at the bigger picture of humanity on the planet. He said that 300 people massacred in the Punjab and 40 policemen killed in riots in Calcutta, and this particular protest or strike, are all very terrible things. But three billion people did not massacre each other, millions of police in different cities were not murdered and there were no riots or police station burnings, and many people helped an old person get some water, helped them across the street, helped someone with some task, human kindness goes on. The fabric and network of that is so much greater and more powerful than these dreadful things that happen that we must not let ourselves become totally focused on that and become desperate and add to the dreadful behavior.

"In that light, business defined as the attempt to live in an interactive mutually enriching exchange with others is what long term business has been and will continue to be, not like Enron who just rips everyone off and tries to get out before the destruction hits. People appreciate a business conducted in a spirit of recognizing that everything, every piece of clothing you have, every dollar in your pocket comes from the kindness of other people, other animals, of reality, of providence, so it's not just yours. Life is a constant exchange between people, and so

business is spirituality in that sense. It is the way in which wealth is created, the way in which human beings who have a primary spiritual goal have evolved from a Buddhist perspective.

"We commonly exchange with other people, we do business at home with our siblings, we do business with our parents, parents do business with their children and no one tries to be too rapacious and destructive, or neither one will prosper.

"Eisenhower talked about the 'military industrial complex' and too many of us leftists, hippies from the '60s, thought that meant both military and industrial are bad. Industry in the West with its machinery and factories is a little crazy, no doubt, in that machinery and other inventions can magnify people's bad attitudes too powerfully. But industry also means human creativity – making things of use to others and exchanging them for other things is something natural to humans, and by itself is something positive.

We need things. We couldn't all make our own clothes, we couldn't all do everything, and exchanging is part of life.

"So it's not a question of, 'Is there hope?'

Business and spirituality are together. People who do business have a spiritual responsibility.

People who are spiritual have a responsibility to encourage fair and free and ethical exchange and creativity amongst people; and to acknowledge that they themselves, even monks and nuns, do some sort of business among themselves.

"The questions, rather, should be, 'Is there hope that we can control the military, who don't like fair business and don't like spirituality, unless they can convince people that spirituality gives them license to conduct their violence, by some God or some meditation or some theory legitimating them? Can we get them off our backs in time before the power of the weapons that they wield destroys the place of business and the place of spiritual development for all of us?'

"Those are the questions, I believe. Is there hope of that? Impossible, if we were only left to ourselves, but even though we Buddhists do not believe in any omnipotent creator, we do believe there are beings who are more powerful than humans who are shepherding and trying to take care of us. Human life form is so valuable for the beings who have it to develop their

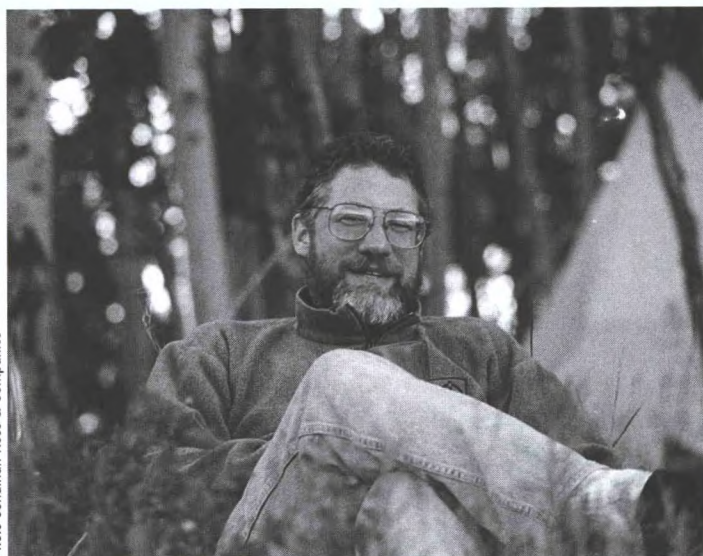
"... the interconnected-
ness of all beings and all things
which we believe is the essence of all
spirituality is a function of the world.
It's not a question of, oh we are going
to create more interdependence or
not, it just is a precondition."

— JONATHAN ROSE

spiritual reality that if these 'angels,' shall we call them, or gods if one can conceive of them as non-omnipotent gods, hadn't been intervening here and there we'd have destroyed ourselves long ago.

"That might surprise the Rabbi that a Buddhist would say there are higher powers that therefore give us hope. They don't take all the responsibility for us, no way. I don't care what you call them, even if you say omnipotent, if you say we're in the image of that, we are supposed to take responsibility for our own power which can be massively destructive as we have seen today as well as extremely creative, as we can also see if we don't read the current crop of newspapers and watch the TV reports which only concentrate on how destructive everything is to make us more terrified, to make us not resist their insane militaristic descriptions."

Photo: Jonathan Rose & Companies



Jonathan Rose

JONATHAN ROSE ended the session by explaining how he brings value into his own real estate business.

"We work with communities round the country to repair the fabric of those communities. There's a Jewish phrase, *Tikkun olam*, which means just that, to repair the fabric of the world, and we do this by building everything from housing for the homeless and for people with AIDS, to libraries and community centers. We do this with four core values, which underlie all our projects:

"Diversity, in that we actually increase not just racial and social diversity, but also biodiversity, age diversity, continuing to look at how our work makes the system richer.

"Environmental responsibility. I believe there is nothing much we can do as humans that will improve the earth, but we can lessen the negative impact. In the modern materialistic Western world, most of the things we do have a negative impact. So we look at every project to reduce the negativity, and if we can create the positive then we do that too

"Livelihood. So much about economic development is about creating jobs. We use a different phrase which is

livelihood – the full integration of the individual in the community to their own personal path and the community around them

"Recognizing interdependence, the interconnectedness of all beings and all things which we believe is the essence of all spirituality.

It exists. It is a function of the world. It's not a question of, oh we are going to create more interdependence or not, it just is a precondition. In our work we try to become more conscious of understanding it and the decisions we make. You often hear about unintended consequences, that simply comes from not understanding.

"What happens when you make these explicit? How often, particularly in large corporations, people hide their beliefs because the corporate culture has another belief. We have found that when you establish

principles, and make them clear (actually they are in our brochure and on our website, our people can tell you this,) it attracts other people and projects that resonate with us. We are a thriving business in contact with other people who are turned on by this.

"Once you are clear about the world you want to create, and the values you want to do that by, it puts it out there. How are we going to counteract the media negativity? Well, each one of us is going to do it by being a voice for what we believe." ☸

Ezra M. Finkelstein is Rabbi Emeritus at Midway Jewish Center in New York. He served as spiritual adviser to the Millennium Peace Summit of religious spiritual leaders at the UN in 2001 and is ethical adviser to the global communications company of Ruder Finn.

Robert Thurman is the Jey Tsong Khapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University. A former Tibetan Buddhist monk and close friend of the Dalai Lama, he is a prolific writer and translator.

Jonathan Rose is a director of Jonathan Rose & Companies LLC, a network of award-winning multidisciplinary planning and development firms with primary practices in New York City, the Hudson River Valley and the Rocky Mountains.

