FROM JUDAISM TO BUDDHISM: JEWISH WOMEN'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

From Judaism to Buddhism: Jewish Women’s Search For Identity
Master of Arts degree, 1997
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It is well known that disproportionately high numbers of Jews have become Buddhists in North America. (Kamenetz, 1994) This study is an exploration of nine North American Jewish women who have turned to Buddhism for their spiritual development. The two research questions explore why these women are attracted to Buddhism and the process of how they are integrating the two religions within themselves. I have used the Push and Pull model of conversion (McGuire in Selengut, 1988) to analyze why these women feel pushed from Judaism and pulled towards Buddhism. In analyzing the second question, my findings suggest that these women are not converting fully to Buddhism, but rather are integrating both approaches in different ways. This integration was often articulated by the women as retaining their cultural and ethnic identity as Jews, while practicing Buddhist philosophy and spiritual practices in their everyday lives.
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In memory of Blanche and Abraham Brodey.
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For the last eight years I have been travelling back and forth between India, Nepal and Toronto. The first two trips I spent working and travelling. The third trip, however took me on a journey that was the start of my awareness into the realm of the spiritual. This journey transformed my life.

When I left for Kathmandu in October, 1991 I sensed that this trip was going to be different from any other. I had just finished a contract working with Native women in Canada, where I learned many things from the women I worked with. The most important teaching for me was that I became aware of another reality, one that goes beyond the secular teachings I grew up with in the Judaism I experienced. I began to see myself as a spiritual being in relation to the world, part of an interrelated universe. This new awareness led me back to Asia.

I spent a month at Kopan, a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery, where Tibetan Lamas taught hundreds of “hungry” Westerners about the Buddhist Eight-Fold Path. It was a time of a great deal of questioning and reflection. Was this a viable path for me? Could I embrace this path, or would I feel conflict because of my Jewish background? What would my family think? At Kopan I didn’t commit to the Buddhist path but there was a seed planted. While I was there I couldn’t help noticing the disproportionately large numbers of other Jewish women and men participating. I was fascinated by this. Why are Jews attracted to Buddhism and other Eastern traditions? What kind of Jewish backgrounds do they come from? What aren’t they getting from Judaism? Will they leave Judaism or can they be Buddhists and remain Jewish? Do they feel a conflict about it? These questions remained unanswered in the back of my mind.
I continued to explore Buddhism after Kopan by participating in other meditation retreats from various Buddhist traditions, ranging from Tibetan Buddhism to Vipassana to Zen. Gradually over time, I found myself getting more immersed in the teachings. I was attracted to the experiential approach of Buddhist meditation and the emphasis on testing the teachings out for oneself. It is very direct compared to learning by rote at religious school. Sitting in my inner sanctuary was vastly different from sitting in a synagogue and listening to passages from the Torah of a male God which I couldn’t relate to. The central teaching in Buddhism, that there is suffering in life and that there is a way to end suffering, was very appealing to me since I was going through a difficult time in my life. This approach gave me a new lens through which to view my own suffering and the suffering of others, allowing me to be more accepting of my own pain and others’, rather than fighting it. As well, the teaching of the interrelatedness of all life resonated with me. I had learned the same perspective from the Native Wisdom teachings and was for me a powerful antidote to the patriarchal notion of understanding the world in terms of oppositions that has been inherent in the mainstream branches of the Judeo-Christian traditions: female and male, good and evil, human relationship to non-human nature, us versus them.

In 1993, I made a formal commitment to a Buddhist practice with The Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hahn. I felt connected to his approach to Buddhism which emphasizes mindful practice in our daily lives and in society in order to transform ourselves and our environment. Making this commitment was a big step for me and I struggled with what it would mean to be a student of Buddhism and a Jewish woman. Despite some conflicted feelings, I decided to dive in anyway. As I continued to learn and understand more about what it was I was committing to, I became increasingly interested in what Judaism as a spiritual path was, as well as thinking about the forces that caused me to seek outside of Judaism.
I come from a family of mixed parentage; my father is Jewish and my mother, an agnostic from a Protestant background. According to many Jews I am not considered Jewish, however I was raised as a secular Jew and was accepted into a Reform Synagogue as a Jew. Moreover, I identified myself as a Jew. I received a Jewish education from a Reform Synagogue and from a Hillel workshop for youth and their parents. Unfortunately, as an adult I retained very little knowledge and understanding of Jewish religion. My Judaism meant having a strong sense of family, history and of social justice and the remembering of the suffering that we as a people have endured. I don’t remember ever feeling connected to the religious aspects we were taught. For example, I couldn’t believe that God was a ‘he’. I can remember being in one of the classes and the teacher asking us to describe God. Many of the children talked about God being an old man with a big white beard looking down on us. I remember saying that I thought God was more of a presence or an energy all around us rather than a person. It was love. I don’t remember how the teacher responded, but I remember having difficulty relating to the concepts of God that the others spoke of. That is one of my more vivid memories. Mostly I remember feeling uncomfortable. I am unsure if this had to do with my general discomfort in classrooms and the rote style of learning or because I had a father who had very conflicted feelings about his own Jewish identity, particularly when it came to religion or because half of me was ‘WASP’ and I grew up in a non-Jewish neighbourhood. Perhaps all of the above is relevant in shaping my experience. In any case, my formal Jewish education ended when, much to my relief, I was fourteen with my informal Bat Mitzvah/Confirmation.

When I was twenty, I went to Israel alone to live on a Kibbutz for three months. I do not know if I was aware of it then, but I think I went there to find out about my history, myself, my identity. It was a spiritual pilgrimage of sorts. My experience there made me question many
things. When I went to the Wailing Wall I had difficulty relating to the religious Jews and understanding how I was connected to these people. As well, it was the first time that I was told that I was not Jewish because my mother wasn’t Jewish, which was very confusing and affected me a great deal. After I came home from Israel I began to call myself half Jewish with my new awareness that I didn’t totally belong anymore. Through the next several years, I articulated this feeling of not totally belonging, as being caught between two cultures, Jewish and WASP, and not really belonging to either. Perhaps that is why I travelled so much to far away places such as India and ended up making a commitment to a Buddhist practice. Interestingly though, I found the more I delved into Buddhism the more I wanted to understand what Jewish spirituality was about and since it was clear that my knowledge of Judaism as a spiritual path was lacking, I began to read about Judaism, hoping to understand more about Jewish religion.

I picked up books on Jewish history, Jewish meditation, Jewish religion looking for something. I eventually came across The Jew in the Lotus by Rodger Kamenetz. It was the book I was looking for. A Jewish poet describes an important meeting which brought together Jewish Rabbis from all the branches of Judaism and the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet to Dharamsala, India (home of The Dalai Lama in exile and a place in which I have spent a lot of time). They came together to exchange a number of interfaith topics, including Buddhist Tantra and Jewish Kabbalah as well as, the Dalai Lama’s request to understand the Jewish secret of survival since the Tibetans have undergone genocide at the hands of the Chinese and now are dealing with their own Diaspora. Another topic that was of great interest to me had to do with the discussion on the disproportionate numbers of Jews who had turned to Buddhism for their spiritual nourishment. Kamenetz called these individual’s ‘Jubus’ (Jewish Buddhists) or ‘Bujus’ (Buddhist Jews) depending on whether Judaism was given up or not. This book was the first
book I had found that I could identify with and it grappled with some of the questions I had been wondering about since my time at Kopan Monastery. It also opened up a Judaism to me that I had never been exposed to.

At the time I was reading Kamenetz’s book, I was thinking of dropping out of the MA program at the University of Toronto, as I was having difficulties finding a thesis topic that moved me. I was just finishing my last paper when I spoke to a colleague and told her about this wonderful book I was reading and how I’d rather be reading that than working on the paper. She asked whether there was a thesis topic in that book for me. Well, from that moment on, I knew my research had to focus on Jewish Buddhists. I soon decided to concentrate on Jewish women because I found in Kamenetz’s work, as I find in most works written by men, that women’s voices were lumped together with men’s in statements about Jews, thus excluding the uniqueness of women’s experience of their own spirituality.

In the past year I interviewed nine women about their lives as Jewish women and why they were drawn to Buddhism as well as the nature of their commitment, how they are integrating coming from a Jewish background and committing to a Buddhist practice, and whether they experienced conflicts. This thesis is about these women and this intriguing phenomenon. (A portion of this prologue was published in Canadian Woman Studies, 1997)
1) Background to Study

Since the sixties there has been an increasing interest in the traditions of the East, particularly, Buddhism. Since that time, it has been acknowledged by scholars, theologians, writers that a disproportionately large number of Jewish women and men in North America are not only involved in Buddhism, but have also become spiritual leaders. (Arthur Green, Zalman Schacter, Rodger Kamenetz, Emma Layman, Charles Selengut, Sheila Weinberg, ) Kamenetz in The Jew in the Lotus remarks that "various surveys in the United States show Jewish participation in Buddhist groups ranging from six to thirty percent. This is up to twelve times the Jewish proportion of the American population which is two and a half percent. As well, American Jews have founded Buddhist meditation centers and acted as administrators, publishers, translators, interpreters, and have been prominent teachers." (Rodger Kamenetz, 1994, pg. 7-8)

During the same time period as this experimentation of religions from the East, the womens' movement was becoming a powerful force profoundly impacting womens' consciousness. This change in consciousness began the revolution in Western culture which questioned the foundations upon which Judeo-Christian cultures were built. This has been articulated by the critique of patriarchal structures in society and in religion. Since the beginning of the womens' movement, women have been reconstructing and creating meaning for themselves, attempting to find a home where they are acknowledged as whole human spiritual beings. In Judaism, until the 1970s there were no women rabbis and in general women were
unable to participate in Jewish spiritual life in the synagogue. Until that time Women’s traditional spiritual place was in the home as wives and mothers, passing down tradition to their children and performing specific religious duties in the home. This left little room for women who were not traditional or conventional and for many women this role was irrelevant to their lives. This in turn would have left many Jewish women feeling lost and unable to relate to the patriarchal aspects of Judaism. Thus, evidence of this change can be seen by the numbers of Jewish women who have turned to alternative ways of envisioning Judaism from feminist perspectives and by those who have gone outside their tradition in search of more participatory, inclusive approaches to spirituality and religion. For example, it is well known that there are a large number of Jewish women involved in neo-pagan witchcraft (Wicca) (Aidan A. Kelly in Melton, 1990), as well as women involved in Eastern traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism. Although it is difficult to assess the actual numbers of Jewish women involved in Buddhism, since most studies have lumped women and men together, it is apparent that women are very much involved. (Kamenetz, 1994, Rapee, 1994, McCloy Layman, 1976, Melton & Moore, 1982)

2) Purpose

It is the task of this thesis to uncover some of the reasons why Jewish women are drawn to Buddhism by looking at the lives of nine Jewish women. In exploring this question, it is also important to ask why these Jewish women leave Judaism. As well, another purpose of this study is to investigate how these women integrate coming from a Jewish background and committing to some form of Buddhist practice. Lastly, I am attempting to shed light on my own personal process as a Jewish Buddhist.
3) Research Questions

1. What attracts Jewish women to Buddhist practice and/or thought?

2. How do these 'Jewish Buddhists' integrate the two religions within themselves?

4) Rationale

One important rationale for this study is that there are very few studies on Jewish Buddhist women. The research done on Jewish Buddhists is scarce and there have been no studies committed solely to Jewish women. The Jew in the Lotus (1994) by Karnenetz has been the first book to explore this phenomenon by interviewing a number of Jewish Buddhists (Jubus) and Buddhist Jews (Bujus) in India and North America. The phenomenon is also mentioned in some of the East-West literature (Emma McCloy Layman, 1976, Harvey Cox, 1977) and conversion literature (A. Maller, 1981, Charles Selengut, 1988,) and Jewish Buddhist spiritual dialogue literature (Sylvia Boorstein, 1997, Arthur Green, 1994, Nathan Katz, 1994, S. Rapee, 1994, Zalman Schacter, 1978, Sheila Weinberg, 1994).

Interestingly, there are no studies about Jewish women who leave Judaism specifically, although, Boorstein does write about her own personal journey into Buddhism as a Jewish women and her journey back to Judaism. There is some mention in Michael Lerner’s Jewish Renewal which includes a chapter on ‘why Jews left Judaism?’ that does mention some reasons why Jewish women leave. Also in Melton and Gordon’s Cults and the Jewish Community, 1990, Aidan Kelley’s article acknowledges the large numbers of Jewish women involved in Wicca. In fact most of the literature regarding conversion from Judaism (Jewish apostasy) is on Jews who join cults and new religious movements or who have become Christians. However, there is little written specifically about Jewish women’s apostasy. As well, generally in these works
women and men are generalized together, implicitly assuming the male normative and ignoring women’s experiences and voices.

In Jewish Feminist literature, it is well documented that Jewish women experience Judaism differently than men. This can be attributed to a number of factors including, the historical exclusion of women from religious study and leadership and their specific role as preserver of the Jewish home and passing down traditions to their children. Thus it is important to study Jewish women’s experiences with Judaism and why they might leave and be attracted to other spiritual approaches, particularly Buddhism, in this case. It is critical for Jewish communities to understand why it is that women can feel like outsiders in their own traditions.

This study contributes to furthering studies on the ways women integrate more than one religious system and raises some of the issues associated with integrating dual or multiple identities. This of course has implications for understanding new religious patterns in North American society. The research also opens up new areas of study on the Jewish/Buddhist relationship. Also, living in a culturally diverse society, it is inevitable that individuals will be influenced by the different cultures present. Thus, this research has implications for inter-cultural communications and dialogue.

5) Definition of terms

Conversion can be explained as an “interaction between a potential convert and a specific religious community which usually is a consequence of both push and pull forces.” (M. McGuire in Selengut, 1988, pg. 96) It often involves a “giving up of one ordered view of the world for another” (Lofland, Stark, 1965, 862), and is signalled by a “radical reorganization of identity, meaning and life.”(Travisano, 1981, pg. 242)
Integration is a process which describes the integration or blending of differing and possibly opposing symbolic systems and is used to understand in this case, how differing religious beliefs and systems are integrated in personal belief and practice.

Bat/Bar Mitzvah is the coming of age ritual for 13 year old Jewish girls and boys.

Chanukah is the festival of lights.

Halacha is the body of Jewish law.

Kabbalah is the esoteric teachings in Judaism.

Mikvah is a pool of water used for purification rites.

Shabbat, Shabbos is the Jewish Sabbath.

Talmud is the oral law which gives commentary and explanations of the Torah.

Torah refers to the 5 books of Moses, Jewish teachings.

Avatar refers to a Hindu God who is believed to have manifested in human form.

Buddha means ‘awakened’. It is an awakened or enlightened state of being. Historically, Gautama became a Buddha and was the founding teacher of Buddhism.

Bodhisattva is an “enlightened being who vows to help liberate all other sentient beings before entering Nirvana.” (Dresser, 1996, pg. 305)

Dharma means “truth, law, doctrine” and refers to the Buddhist teachings and the Buddhist path. (Dresser, ibid, pg. 305)

Mahayana Buddhism means “Greater Vehicle”; “a later development of Buddhism that emphasizes the Bodhisattva ideal.” (Dresser, 1996, 306)

Nirvana means “Extinction of desire; freedom from rebirth.” (Kamenetz, 1994, pg. 303)

Samsara is the “cycle of existence in the world, characterized by suffering.” (Dresser, 1996, 307)
Sangha is the community of practitioners who follow the dharma.

Sitting, Sit refers to sitting meditation.

Vipassana also called Insight Meditation means “penetrating insight and is a form of meditation practice that cultivates intuitive insight.” (Dresser, 1996, pg. 308)

Zazen means sitting meditation in Japanese Zen tradition.

Zen is the name for the Japanese school of Mahayana Buddhism.
6) Limitations of Study

This study looks at 9 Jewish women who have made varying levels of commitment to a form of Buddhist practice. Each woman tells a story that is unique and yet there is a common thread throughout that connects them all. A limitation to this study lies in not being more discriminating with the selection criteria in the sense that I interviewed women involved in different forms of Buddhism including: Zen, Vipassana, and Tibetan Buddhism. I acknowledge that these forms of Buddhism are vastly different and may have affected my ability to generalize. However, the common denominator was that the women identified with and practiced some form of Buddhism although they may not have labelled themselves more specifically than this. Among the women there is a great deal of variation in the depth of commitment and length of time involved. However, I acknowledge that being involved for a short period may have little bearing on the intensity of commitment.

Another limitation is that more time with each participant would have been desirable in order to glean a greater depth of understanding their experiences.

The fact that I participated in the pretesting of the interview instrument brings up questions of bias and the dangers of losing ‘objectivity’. I believe that my participation in the research has given me unique advantages. For one, being on the ‘inside’ has given me the advantage of knowing what questions to ask, having a sense of the important issues. Secondly, being an insider likely contributed to helping me find participants for the study as well as helping them feel more at ease in the interview. As well, having been through the interview process myself, I was able to empathize with each participant. Through the interview process and the data analysis it was necessary as researcher and as someone who is an ‘insider’ to maintain a constant awareness of not making assumptions and of letting the data emerge and speak for
itself. Lastly, my being an insider has grounded this study in my own experience, in contrast to
the traditional positivist dichotomies of objectivity/subjectivity and researcher/researched.

7) Theoretical Underpinnings

The decision to do research solely on Jewish women is informed by a theoretical stance
that is inter-disciplinary and firmly entrenched in a feminist perspective drawing from the fields of
anthropology, sociology, social psychology, religious studies, Jewish studies, Feminist studies
and adult education. My position attempts to be grounded in various approaches to social
change.

8) Sources for Literature Review

The descriptors used to undertake the literature review using databanks as compared to
books etc. were the following: “Jewish Buddhists”; “Jewish Buddhist women”; “Buddhist Jews”;
“Jewish women and Buddhism”; “Converts from Judaism”; “Buddhist converts from Judaism”;
“Buddhist converts”; “Buddhism and Judaism”; “Religious Conversion and Jews”; “Women and
Buddhism”; “Women in Judaism”; “East and West”; “Jews and cultural identity”; “Judaism and
Feminism”; Jewish identity.” I utilized the databases from UTlink, Wilson Journal Index, ATLA
Religion Database CDROM 1995, and SocioFile CDROM 1/74-4/95, Women’s Studies
Database; and Metrocat, the database at the Toronto Reference library. I also searched on the
internet in AltaVista under the descriptor “Jewish Buddhists”. As well, some of the literature
was recommended by Professors, colleagues, friends and some participants in this study.
9) Overview of Thesis

The thesis explores and analyzes two research questions: 1) Why are Jewish women leaving Judaism and becoming attracted to Buddhism and 2) How are they integrating the two religions. The research questions are explored through interviews with women in Canada, in India, and in the United States. Conclusions are drawn from the interviews in order to shed light on this emerging phenomenon of Jewish women who are not converting to another religion, but are rather combining two religions in their own unique ways.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Ilene Serlin's Story

At the age of 16, I left Judaism for several years. I had been longing for a female model who was strong and spiritual: a model of someone who searches for meaning and whose life is disciplined and deliberate-like the Buddhist female warriors.... The reform Judaism that I knew cultivated the mind, not the body - the latter being only something upon which to lavish too much food or clothing.... I yearned too for a religion that appreciated feminine ways of knowing which were grounded...in relationship, intuition, receptivity, and in all the emotions of the body. I loved silence, contemplation, and 'being'. But Judaism did not help me either. So I left.... I explored Tibetan Buddhism, anthropology, Jungian analysis the Goddess religions, and modern dance. As a practicing Buddhist...I learned about silence, deliberateness and focus. What a surprise then, at age 30, I suddenly felt new pangs, an inexplicable new yearning. I was homesick for Judaism; for my tribe, my own family, roots, people. I began to feel that claiming my Judaism was something about which I had no 'choice'.... Ironically, I felt homesick as well, because I had never been home. That is, my childhood Judaism was the highly diluted suburban brand, not the 'real thing'-so I needed to search for "outer answers"- gurus, countries, philosophies - to make the paradox hit me: that the answer was within. [After searching for the spiritual in Judaism]...I began to realize what I really needed was Both, noise and silence, simplicity, and complexity, letting go and memory, the coolness of Buddhism and the warmth of Judaism. [After a few years] I have begun to celebrate Jewish rituals and
holidays, to take part in a Jewish community. I combine this with Buddhist practices, which remind me of open space, lightness and letting go. I still meditate regularly, and practice the discipline to see things simply as they are. (Serlin, 1996, pg. 23-24)

1) Jewish Social History in Europe and North America

Judaism in North America has changed drastically from the Judaism of premodern Europe. Historically in premodern Europe, Jews lived in “small, self-contained, highly integrated communities.” (Davidman, 1991, 34) The governments of that time limited where Jews could live as well as where they could work. This exclusion from mainstream Europe served “to reinforce Jewish identity... Jews were, and were conscious of being, a people apart... External circumstance matched internal self-definition. Jews scattered and dispersed, saw themselves as a nation in exile, heirs to a covenant that had predicted their wanderings and foretold a future return to their land. Their persecutions and expulsions, their isolation, all served to confirm their religious self-understanding.” (Sacks, 1991, 3)

The role of Jewish women during this period was to support their husbands studying Talmud, raise their children, run the family business and to ensure “in every practical and active way, the economic and cultural survival of the Jews.” (Rich in A. Baker, 1993, 36)

With Emancipation, Jews were granted full citizenship in many European countries after the French revolution. This enabled mostly Jewish men to participate in the various “occupational, educational social and cultural spheres.” (Davidman, 1991, 34) Women at this time “were expected to reduce themselves to perfecting the full-time mother-housewife role already invented by the gentile middle class.” (Rich in Baker, 1993, 36) These changes and opportunities impacted the Jewish religion, causing many young intellectuals to begin reforming
Judaism to make it more “suitable for modern life” (Davidman, 1991, 35). This was done first by reforming Jewish education to include secular subjects. There was a call for liturgical change and later on the reformers “pressed for a re-evaluation of the Jewish tradition and advocated major change in Jewish belief and observance.” (Dan Cohn-Sherbok, 1994, xv) A list of Reform principles was formulated after a series of Reform synods in Europe and the United States, some of which were to impact women’s position. In 1845, the Conference of the German Rabbis stated:

One of the marked achievements of the Reform movement has been the change in the status of women. According to the Talmud and the Rabbinical code, woman can take no part in public religious functions, but this conference declares that woman has the same obligations as man to participate from youth up in the instruction of Judaism and in the public services and that the custom not to include women in the number of individuals necessary for the conducting of a public service (a minyan) is only a custom and has no religious basis. (Priesand, 1975, pg. 31)

Over time, in North America, reforms were modified even further, transforming traditional practices and doctrines such as: “kashrut (the dietary laws), sabbath observance, the idea of the divine origin of the bible, the belief that the Jews were the ‘chosen people’, hebrew language services” and the segregation of men and women at worship. (Davidman, 1991, 35)

Conservative and Reconstructionism were two other forms of Judaism developed in the early nineteen hundreds that were responding to modernity. Conservative Judaism split from the Reform branch reacting against its disregard for tradition, although it too was not committed to
strict observance of traditional Jewish law. The idea behind the creation of Conservative Judaism was to offer a combination of tradition and change (Davidman, 1991, 36) that would attract Orthodox and Reform Jews.

Reconstructionist Judaism founded by Mordecai Kaplan in 1922 broke away from Orthodox Judaism to form a new congregation in which, "outdated doctrines were eliminated such as supernatural revelation and divine 'choosing' of the Jews." (Davidman, 1991, 36) However, in contrast to the Reformers, he was interested in maintaining many of the traditional rituals, ceremonies and festivals. These were to be continued not because they were "divinely ordained" but rather, "they provided rich opportunities for spiritual experience." (Davidman, 1991, 36) This form of Judaism served more as a social function which viewed "Jews most centrally a people, not a religious group." (Davidman, 1991, 36)

These three new forms of Judaism represented a dramatic departure from the 'Jews of the ghetto'. Now the only forms of Judaism that resemble Judaism of premodern Europe, with their strict observances of Jewish laws and their resistance to modernity are the various forms of Orthodoxy.

Jonathon Sacks believes that in the past, "Jewish identity had been a total one...in short, a complete culture woven out of religious cloth. Now it was to become a mere segment of a more complex totality." (Sacks, 1991, 4) He points out how this dramatic change in Jewish history from an integrated worldview to a fragmented one created an "identity crisis from which Jewry has not yet, two centuries later, fully recovered." (Sacks, 1991, 4) He continues: "Jewishness had been transformed from a state of being to a role, and from destiny to a conscious choice. In the neutral public place of a secular society, a Jew could for the first time choose to be something
else without converting to another faith. Jews could, quite simply, disappear, and many of them did.” (Sacks, 1991, 4)

In this new world there was civil equality for the Jewish people, however prejudice had not disappeared as the world witnessed the horrors of the Holocaust. Religious hatred was replaced by racial anti-semitism causing the loss of one third of the Jewish population in the world. (Sacks, 1991) The formation of Israel created a Jewish nationalism which for some replaced religion with secular zionism and certainly strengthened ethnic identity.

During the postwar years, Jews began to prosper in the United States and Canada. Rick Salutin, a Canadian journalist writes:

The proportion of Jews in trade fell quickly after the war, while the proportion in the clerical occupations - and especially, in the professions - increased at a rate far greater than that of the general population....For the first time Jews ranked highest in average annual income; this trend has continued ever since. By 1961, in Toronto, Jews made up only about 4% of the workforce but they accounted for 18% of the doctors, 23% of dentists, 35% of pharmacists, and 19% of lawyers. (Rick Salutin, 1984, 224-225)

This occurred as a response to the racist hiring practices that were prevalent in society. This professional development however, profoundly effected Canadian Jewish communities over time leading to the “Bourgeoisification” of the Jewish community which was, according to Salutin, reflected in the lack of concern for international politics, trade unionism, and other left-wing matters of which, at one time, the community was concerned with. (Alan Borovay in Salutin, 1984, 228-229) Salutin believed the victory of the six day war in 1967 compounded with all the
social developments of the century led to a “conversion of the Jews, geographically, socially, culturally and politically.” (Salutin, 1984, 229) This development led to an exclusivity in the Jewish community which concerned itself more with Israel and raising funds for Jewish foundations, than involving itself with social problems outside the Jewish community. Jewishness now appeared to be more tied in with the support of a political system than with a spiritual system. As a result, there was a “strengthening of identification”, which led for example to Jewish studies in Universities, an increased attendance in private Jewish day schools, and “a new centrality of the synagogue in suburban ghettos”, and in general a preoccupation about Jewish survival and Jewish identity. (Salutin, 1984, 225) Arthur Hertzberg viewed these social occurrences as symptoms of a ‘crisis of faith’. He explains: “Synagogue building and belonging have become a form of acculturation and our contemporary sects have failed, without exception, to produce either an answer that compels the perplexed to believe, or a source of emotional power that touches their hearts.” (Hertzberg, 1979, 84) The meaning of this modern social transition is that the traditions that are presently transmitted have become mere community observances, robbed of their personal sacred and transcendent meaning.

This process led many to fall “away from Jewishness” (Salutin, 229) whether through assimilation, intermarriage, or a turn to a new religion. In the literature regarding Jews leaving Judaism, some of the specific reasons given for leaving were: the concept of the Jews as “chosen people”, Jewish pride and particularism (Kamenetz, 1994); conformity and intolerance of dissent especially regarding Israel (Lerner, 1994); rampant materialism and spiritual emptiness (Kamenetz 1994, Ilene Serlin 1996, Arthur Green, 1994).

During the twentieth century, as North American Jewry has become increasingly assimilated into North American culture, Judaism became more secularized in terms of religion.
This has coincided with the decline of other mainstream religions in North America, and has been part of an important debate in the sociology of religion as to whether religion is actually declining or not. Although it is not my purpose here to go into any length on this debate, the literature shows evidence supporting all sides of the debate depending on how one defines religion. (O'Toole 1985, Hewitt 1993, Bibby 1993, Davidman 1991)

In terms of Judaism, the increase in participation of Reform through the twentieth century does support a move towards secularization, in the sense that it became a ‘watered-down’ version of traditional Judaism with its “role specialized and its organizations routinized.” (Bibby in Hewitt, 1993, 68) Charles Selengut explains how secularization is not only “seen in low rates of regular synagogue attendance and ritual observances as well as in high rates of intermarriage, but perhaps more importantly in the removal of religious elements from religious rituals themselves.” (Selengut, 1988, 106)

2) Jewish Feminist Critiques

People participate in multiple, more or less discrepant, universes of discourse; they construct different, partial and simultaneous worlds in which they move; their cultural construction of reality springs not from one source and is not of one piece. (Frederik Barth, 1989, pg. 130)

Men have long dominated the manufacturing of Jewish culture in the ‘public’ domain. Their cultural constructions have always been given official recognition skewing women’s perspectives and alienating women. Historically, according to some Anthropologists (Starr, 1989, 130).
Sered in Davidman and Tenenbaum, 1994) Jewish women have always had their own sub cultures or ‘alternative realities’ constructed by their ‘inferior’ placement in and outside society.

In the last twenty years, Jewish Feminists have been vocal about their critiques of Judaism, exposing the multiple ways in which women have been silenced through the centuries. These critiques are varied and diverse. Some are theologians who expose the patriarchal and sexist aspects of Jewish religion (J. Plaskow, 1994, Priesand, 1975, Koltun, 1976, Doris Setel, 1986), while some are reconstructing a Judaism that is more inclusive for women (Goldstein, Elyse, 1987, Levi Elwell 1993), others are historians who may examine women’s role in the family. For example, one historian, Paula Hyman has discussed the relation between family and assimilation. (Hyman in Davidman and Tenenbaum, 1994) She has been specifically critical of how Jewish leaders have “constructed a gendered vision of assimilation by accepting the values of the larger society and its expectations of women’s roles.” (Hyman, 128) Hyman explains how in North America the home became the “primary site for Jewish cultural transmission, where the mother was deemed the primary agent of the survival of Jewish culture and identity”. (Hyman, 128) As a result, with assimilation increasing through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jewish women were blamed for their children’s intermarriage, assimilation and conversions. This blame, according to Hyman, eventually led to the negative stereotype of the controlling, guilt-inducing Jewish mother in Jewish popular culture. This criticism reveals a change in the family structure and in child-rearing practices, since historically socialization was a responsibility of not only the mothers, but also the fathers, extended family and the communal institutions. (Hyman, 1994)

Jewish Feminist Sociologists, Lynn Davidman and S. Tenenbaum have criticized the “lack of gendered analyses in sociological studies of American Jews due to a preoccupation
with the effects of modernization on Jewish continuity." (Davidman, Tenenbaum, 1994, 141) They state that “many scholars have contributed to women’s invisibility by generalizing for all Jews studies based only on men and ignoring the salience of gender as a factor that affects all aspects of social life.” (ibid. pg. 143) They also point out how social scientific studies have “failed to examine how gender shapes Jewish identity.” (ibid. 143) They write:

When we begin from the standpoint of women we are led to an even more fundamental critique of the modernization paradigm - one that goes beyond the failure to incorporate gender as an analytic category. The dominance of this paradigm has led to a failure to ask meaningful questions about women’s experiences, the role of gender in shaping all aspects of Jewish life, and the power hierarchies that result from the gender distinctions in Jewish religion and culture. (Davidman and Tenenbaum, 1994, pg. 152-153)

The critiques and observations considered by some of these Jewish Feminists are helpful in order to appreciate the extent to which Jewish women have been excluded and how that might explain their alienation from Judaism. These theories and perspectives also provide a lens and framework through which to view this phenomenon.
3) Buddhism in North America and the West

Buddhism has been changing and growing in many directions and ways since its inception. It spread throughout Asia and has recently come to the West. Although North America had contact with Buddhism from the nineteenth century on, it was not until the late 1950s that Buddhism became popularized. It was the ‘Beat’ writers such as Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg that began the trend of a ‘turn east’ (Cox, 1977). Allen Ginsberg was a “self proclaimed ‘Buddhist Jew’ who made his personal quest for wisdom, influential, even paradigmatic, for a generation.” (Kamenetz, 1994, 8) Alan Watts and Ram Das were also important figures who influenced North Americans with their popular books, including The Way of Zen and Grist For the Mill.

In the early 1960s a number of Buddhist teachers went to the United States. Some were refugees from Tibet who escaped in 1959. Lama Yeshe, Kalu Rinpoche and Chogyam Trungpa were the most well known, and they popularized Tibetan Buddhism and made it accessible to Westerners. This wave of teachers coincided with the 1960s decade of rebellion. The youth of the 1960s generation “rejected all the major values of their parents—from organized religion to politics to fathers know best.” (Reginald Bibby in Carey, 1996) Thus, many of these young adults might have been attracted to Buddhism, initially for its exoticness. Many of these individuals would have moved on, but a large number did stay behind and made serious commitments to Buddhism.

In the mid 1970s, some North Americans became important Buddhist teachers. Quite a large number of them came from Jewish backgrounds. For example, the successful Buddhist teaching institute, Insight Meditation Society was founded by four Jews, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield and Jacqueline Schwartz. (Kamenetz, 1994) Kamenetz also names a
number of Jewish women and men who are scholars of Buddhism and has cited that they make up 30% of the total faculty in Buddhist Studies in the United States. (Kamenetz, 1994, 9)

In the 1980s and 1990s, with the coming of the ‘new age’, a response to the alienation felt as a result of living in an individualistic, materialistic consumer culture, Buddhism has continued to gain popularity. Buddhist masters and practitioners including, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet and Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hahn are part of an important movement growing in Asia and the West known as ‘Engaged Buddhism’ which has been appealing to those who are concerned about the crisis of modernity. I am referring to the current global crisis which has been based on an individualism that is deeply entrenched in the Western understanding of self-fulfillment and freedom and reinforced by the exploitation and destruction of the earth. Buddhist thinkers state that we have become alienated from a concept of true self. In Buddhist psychology there is no self as is defined in Western psychology. According to Timmerman, a Buddhist practitioner,

Buddhist understanding is of a world in which personal fulfillment is found in interdependence and not independence, where the self is temporary and non-essential, rather than the centre of the universe; where infinite spiritual development is possible within a physical existence that is understood and accepted as finite. (Peter Timmerman, in Batchelor, Brown 1992, pg.74-75)

Buddhism emphasizes ‘mindful’ practice in our daily lives and in society. It means to be engaged in the present moment. To be mindful is to look into one’s “body, feelings, mind and objects of mind.”(Sulak Sivaraksa, Seeds of Peace, pg 64) A common misunderstanding in the
West is that Buddhism is only interested in meditation and personal transformation and not nature and the outside world. Sivaraksa, an engaged Buddhist responds:

To speak of Buddhism in this way is to ignore the Buddha’s doctrine of no-self or interdependence. Buddhism is primarily a method of overcoming limits or restrictions of the individual self. It is not concerned just with private destiny, but with the lives and consciousness of all beings. This inevitably entails a concern with social and political matters, and these receive a large share of attention in the teachings. (Sivaraksa, 1992, pg. 66)

Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of how meditation practice is not for oneself, but for all living beings. It is “not to get out of society but to prepare for a reentry into society.” (Thich Nhat Hahn, 1987, pg. 45) If one goes to a meditation retreat with the idea that they are escaping everything with the purpose of searching for peace within themselves, this is an illusion as there is no such thing as an individual in Buddhism. (Thich Nhat Hahn, 1987, pg. 45) He goes on to say that, the kind of suffering that you carry in your heart, that is society itself. You bring that with you. When you meditate, it is not just for yourself, you do it for the whole of society, for the world. You seek solutions for all of us. (ibid pg. 47)

There are many examples of Buddhist communities, organizations and movements today in Asia and in the West who are practicing this kind of engaged Buddhism. One example is the Tiep Hien order, founded by Thich Nhat Hanh. The words Tiep Hien have been translated as Inter-Being. This term means that no being has a separate existence. The order was founded on
a reformulation of Buddhist precepts or Mindfulness Trainings into fourteen guiding statements designed to address social justice, peace and ecological issues of our times. (Sivaraksa, “True Development”, DharmaGaia Badiner, ed. 1990, pg. 177) The first of the fourteen Mindfulness Trainings is: “Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are committed not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings should be considered as guiding means for the practice of looking deeply, aiming at the development of Understanding and Compassion, and not doctrines for which to fight, to kill and to die.” (The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing) This first Mindfulness training is an important statement. In the turbulent crises of our modern world, “the self”, in order to transform, must be free from all past ideologies.

4) Why The Attraction To Buddhism?

Since the sixties there have been a number of studies on North Americans attraction to Buddhism and other Eastern traditions. Emma McCloy Laymen did a study in the 70s on ‘Why Americans are attracted to Buddhism’. She interviewed Americans who had made a commitment to Buddhism for at least one year. Although it was conducted in the late 1970s, and it is about Americans in general, I think the reasons she outlines are still relevant for the 1990s, for Jewish women and they most certainly shed light on what attracted North Americans in that first boom after the 1960s. She found ten reasons why Americans were attracted to Buddhism:

1) The intellectual, scientific appeal...and its non-theistic approach to creation; 2) Buddhism is attractive because it makes sense as an approach to the elimination of war, poverty, racism, prejudice, environmental pollution, intemperance, and drug abuse; 3)
Appeal of pageantry, symbolism and the esoteric; 4) Do it yourself appeal...{which} assures one's own salvation through one's own efforts without having to trust in a supernatural being and without having to depend on anyone other than oneself; 5) Wish to transcend the ordinary; 6) Need for a wise and benevolent authority figure; 7) Need to rebel against establishment; 8) Need for relief from suffering; 9) Need for richer, fuller, more effective life: many are attracted to Buddhism because they feel it will open up new dimensions of experience for them, enrich their lives, give them more energy, and generally make them more effective persons; 10) Seeking For Truth. (McCloy, Layman, 1976, 266-270)

Harvey Cox also studied the "turn East" for North Americans in the late 1970s. He also acknowledged the high proportion of Jews involved in Eastern religions in general. Cox studied the motivations and attractions of Americans turning to Buddhism as well as other Eastern traditions and found that many persons were attracted for many different personal reasons. He organized these in terms of six clusters. Some of these correspond with the attractions in Laymen's study such as a quest for authority, the desire for direct experience, the rebellion against established religions, and the concern for the health of the earth. (Cox, 1977) He also identified a few other reasons for the attraction not mentioned above. One was the need for friendship and a connection to a community. The other reason, given mostly by women, was to "get away from the total male domination of Western religions." (Cox, 1977, 99)

In more recent research, Joseph Tamney (1992) has written more extensively about women and Buddhism and has noted that women are attracted to Buddhism for its “contemplative and experiential spirituality” (Tamney, 1992, 91) He also states that women are
attracted to Buddhism because it is less male-biased than Christianity and Judaism. Although women are well aware of many of Buddhism’s patriarchal practices, “women have found in Buddhism, a variety of understandings of human nature and cosmology that are meaningful.” (Wessinger, 1993, 138)

In the last twenty years, a new form of Buddhism has been forming, inspired by many women and some men that involves a practice “that positively uses the body and that stresses ‘interdependence and healing rather than conquering or abandoning.’” (Kornfield in Tamney, 1992, 95) Many of the women Buddhists are deeply involved in social activism, especially in the peace, ecological and animal rights movements. (Tamney, 1992) This activism has become an important component of this new form of Buddhism and is inspired by the Buddhist concept of co-dependent origination, which accepts the interconnection of the whole planet.

Catherine Wessinger has also noted the “significant attraction” to Buddhism for women. She attributes this in part to the growing opportunity for women to function in important leadership roles. (Wessinger, 1993, 125) She has also observed that “American women who become Buddhist are more consciously feminist.” (Friedman, Boucher in Wessinger, 1993, 136)

Rodger Kamenetz’s The Jew in the Lotus, is an important work since it is the first piece of literature which concerns this phenomenon of Jews becoming Buddhists. He discovered that one of the common attractions for Jewish women and men was the need for “direct contact with a teacher since all interviewees had found Jewish mysticism inaccessible.” (Kamenetz, 1994, 148) Another important aspect Kamenetz found was the accessibility of the Buddhist teachings. “The fact that the early stages of the Buddhist path are experiential and that you don’t have to be converted to Buddhism to meditate” was an attraction. (Kamenetz, 1994, 149) Direct experience of Buddhism versus following someone else’s experience was an attraction, as was the social
compassion approach to Buddhism, which was compatible with the social movements which provided spiritual solace and purpose during the 1960s. The fact that one could test out teachings and approaches for oneself was very important, as the baby boomer’s tended to reject authority (Carey, 1996) Another attraction was named by a formerly Jewish, Buddhist nun: “The special thing in Buddhism is we are given methods of development. We are not just saying to have compassion for others, but how to train your mind for compassion.” (Thubten Pemo in Kamenetz, 35)

Sheila Weinberg, a Rabbi who has been one of the organizers of the conferences in the United States that brings together Jewish Buddhists and “mystically-inclined Jews inside Judaism” (Weinberg, pg 1) writes in her essay about the attraction of Eastern Spirituality for Jews. She attributes five reasons for the attraction. The first being that because there is no personal God in Buddhism and thus there is an appeal for modern secular Jews who have problems with God. (Weinberg, 1994, pg. 1) Another attraction Weinberg notes is related to the experiential methods of Buddhism which are accessible and do not require a great knowledge of Buddhist theology. A third attraction she attributes to how the experience of deep meditation through spiritual training “brings us closer to ourselves”, and to the understanding of the interconnectedness of all life and the non-separateness of things. Weinberg believes that this can be also be ‘frightening’ to Jews since “so much of Jewish thought and practice has been dedicated to keeping Jews separate.” (Weinberg, 1994, pg. 2) Fourth, Buddhism has many examples of very powerful teachers who are models of personal transformation and who live what they teach. Finally, Weinberg believes that Buddhism provides a culturally neutral practice which is appealing for those Jews who may have had difficult memories associated with being
Jewish. (Weinberg, 1994, pg. 2) Weinberg’s essay is very useful but it again places men and women under the blanket of “Jews”.

Sheryl Rapee’s thesis on spirituality and Jewish identity interviews ten Jewish Buddhists and ten Rabbis about their spiritual lives. Her research is relevant to this study as there is so little research on Jewish Buddhists. Rapee states that her focus is not on gender differences, but she does often identify the gender of the speaker in her discussion. Of the Jewish Buddhists she interviewed she found that most of them felt a “spiritual void in the Jewish world in which they were raised,” (Rapee, 1994, pg. 14) believing that it did lead those who came of age in 40s, 50s and 60s, to an “exodus exploring other spiritual paths”, including Buddhism. (Rapee, ibid, pg. 18) She also found that many of them were practicing some aspects of Judaism along with Buddhist practices. All of the Jewish Buddhists in her study “agreed that they maintain a sense of Jewish identity.” (Rapee, ibid. pg. 34) She writes: “Some of them have integrated Jewish practices into their Buddhist lives, some are Jews with Buddhist practices, and some just feel Jewishness in regards to themselves.” (ibid. pg. 34)

Rabbi Arthur Green (1994) also takes this phenomenon of Jews interested in Eastern traditions seriously. He uses a fictional case study of a Jewish woman interested in Eastern philosophy and other approaches to discuss the ways in which modern Judaism has failed her and why the attraction to these other approaches. He attributes her push away from Judaism in part, to the loss of religiosity and the heterodoxy of Judaism as well as due to “the realities of postmodern living: the anomie and rootlessness of modernity now aggravated by the tremendous increase in pace at which humans are expected to live,” (Green, 1994, pg. 7) and the rejection of modernity as a result of “interpersonal complexities” and the desire to do something about the state of the environment and social crises. (Green, 1994, 8) Green then uses his case study as a
springboard to suggest a more “radical theology” in Judaism for the postmodern age that would transform Judaism as it is presently understood by non-Orthodox Jews.

Sylvia Boorstein, a Buddhist teacher and a practicing Jew has written a book on how it is possible to be both a Buddhist and a Jew. She writes:

My pleasant childhood experiences have everything to do with why I am a Jew and nothing at all to do with why I am a Buddhist. Some of the early Jewish-Buddhist dialogue linked—erroneously, I believe—bad experiences of a Jewish childhood stories to this is what attracted me, as an adult to Buddhism stories. Linking one set of stories with the other creates extra confusion. It’s like drawing random lines in a connect the dots book. No clear image emerges. Probably the idea that unfortunate Jewish experiences created an interest in Buddhism and that the interest in Buddhism therefore reflects poorly on Judaism is what has added to Jewish concern and to the intensity of the dialogue. (Boorstein, 1997, pg. 10)

Boorstein raises an important point of the difficulty of finding causal links which does need to be kept in mind in this project. It also points to the mysterious elements of this phenomenon that can not be easily explained.
5) **Compatibilities between Judaism and Buddhism**

In terms of theological compatibilities Kamenetz notes that Mahayana Buddhists (Tibetan Buddhism) and Maimonides, a twelfth century philosopher, both “advocate following a middle path, balancing between extremes of behavior”. (Kamenetz, 1994, 140) In the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides “advocates”, in the same way as Buddhists have, specific practices for “curing the ills of arrogance or anger”. Maimonides wrote:

If one is irascible, he is directed so to govern himself that even if he is assaulted or reviled, he will not feel affronted. If one is arrogant, he should accustom himself to endure much contumely, sit below everyone, and wear old and ragged garments that bring the wearer into contempt, and so forth, till arrogance is eradicated from his heart and he has regained the middle path, which is the right way. (Maimonides in Kamenetz, 1994, 140)

Another area of compatibility is in the Buddhist practice of generosity and the Jewish laws of ethical discipline (Geshe Sonam Rinpoche in Kamenetz, 1994, 122) which both espouse the cultivation of love and compassion. As well, both religions come from scholarly traditions that have emphasized rigorous study and debate. Even the Sabbath has been compared to the Buddhist concept of mindfulness. (Cox, 1977)

Nathan Katz in his article, “Contacts between Jewish and Indo-Tibetan Civilizations Through the Ages”, also draws some affinities between Judaism and Tibetan Buddhism. He remarks on the similarities in the ‘theology of exile’(Katz in Kamenetz) by comparing the
Jewish Diaspora and the more recent Tibetan exile. As well he has noted similarities between some of the legends of King Solomon and the Buddha.

In terms of socio-cultural compatibilities, there are two elective affinities that could be important. The first one is: the awareness of Jewish history led to an appreciation of the Buddhist ideas about suffering. (Kamenetz, 1994) The cornerstone of Buddhism lies in the First Noble Truth which states that "life is suffering", which for Jews has been an undeniable truth. Secondly, the Jewish commitment to social justice and ethical action, summed up in the concept Tikkun Olam ("repair of the world") is also compatible with the Buddhist concept of "compassionate action", with its commitment to social action and active engagement in the problems of the world. As stated earlier, women have been actively involved in reshaping a new Buddhism and some have been attracted to Buddhism for this social action component.
Chapter 3

Methodology

1) Research Design

I used a qualitative method of research utilizing in-depth interviewing (Seidman, 1991) as my approach. Seidman states:

The purpose of an in-depth interview study is to understand the experience of those who are interviewed, not to predict or control that experience. Because hypotheses are not being tested, the issue is not whether the researcher can generalize the finding of an interview study to a broader population. Instead the researcher’s task is to present the experience of the people she/he interviews in compelling enough detail and in sufficient depth that those who read the study can connect to that experience, learn how it is constituted and deepen the understanding of the issues it reflects. (Seidman, 1991, pg. 41)

As well, I attempted to use a feminist approach by interviewing in a way that “built connections”, lessening and hopefully avoiding alienation of myself as the researcher from the researched. (Bev James in Reinhart, 1992, pg. 20) This was done through allowing time to explore new questions as they came up in the interview and not just rigidly following an interview schedule. Interviewing as a method “offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is particularly important for the study of women because learning from women is an antidote to centuries
of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women.” (Reinharz, 1992, pg. 19)

2) Data Sources

I conducted interviews with nine heterosexual, Ashkenazi Jewish women. All participants were asked to fill in a brief questionnaire prior to the interview (see Appendix A). The interviews lasted between 1-3 hours. The criteria I used to select participants was that they were North American born Jewish women ages 24 and over who have made some form of commitment to a Buddhist practice. I initially used the time period of being connected to Buddhism for at least one year but I did make an exception with one of the women.

I was interviewed by a Colleague from the University of Toronto as a pretest along with one other Jewish-Buddhist woman, and got feedback on the questions. As a result, a few questions were added to the interview schedule (See Appendix B). I felt satisfied at that time that the questions I was asking were going to help me with the exploration of my two research questions: 1) What attracts Jewish women to Buddhism and Buddhist practice? 2) In what ways do they integrate the two religions? I also found it was a good experience to have been interviewed myself and found the process helpful in understanding how it felt to be interviewed. I think it may have contributed to being more sensitive as an interviewer than if I had not gone through the process. As well, later on, when interviewing the other participants, it seemed to ease some of their initial fears of the interview when I told them that I had gone through the interview process myself. I have included the data from the other pretest as part of my final analysis.

One of my decisions in doing this research was to conduct some of the interviews in Dharamsala, India. I chose to go to Dharamsala because that is where The Dalai Lama resides.
He is the spiritual leader of Tibet and is world renowned and deeply respected for his extraordinary peace efforts, having won the Nobel Peace prize in 1990. He is also revered by Buddhist communities from all over the world. Dharamsala is a very important centre for Tibetans. It is the headquarters of the Tibetan government in exile. In 1959 many Tibetans fled Tibet from the Chinese invasion and went to India and other countries. Since that time the Tibetans have been dealing with cultural genocide that threatens their very survival. Dharamsala is therefore a critical cultural center which has been working to preserve Tibetan culture which is dying in Tibet. It is also an important center for Buddhist scholarship and study. Every year, The Dalai Lama holds annual Buddhist teachings for two weeks at his Monastery, which last approximately six to eight hours per day. Tibetans come from all over to receive his teachings, as well as, Western Buddhists and potential Buddhists. The numbers of Westerners attending are in the thousands so that there is even translation in several languages. Most people sit outside on the ground, rain or shine. The value in finding participants in Dharamsala is that many of the people who go for these teachings are serious students of Buddhism. Therefore, I felt it was an important place for me to find participants for my study.

Shortly after the pretest, I went to India, where I spent two weeks in March of 1996, in Dharamsala. I had made posters advertising my study and put them up in local restaurants and the Tibetan library when I first arrived. I also met some friends who were instrumental in helping me locate willing participants! Altogether I interviewed 5 women, 4 of them were American and one Canadian. The interviews were conducted in local restaurants, and guesthouse rooms. The participants decided the time and where they wanted to do the interview. The interviews went well. I received a lot of positive feedback about this project and about the interviewing process.
The remaining four participants were found in Canada and one in the U.S between April-June 1996. All were interviewed in their homes with the exception of the American woman whom I interviewed over the phone. The participants in North America were found through connections with other Buddhists, through friends of friends and two are personal friends of mine and another, an acquaintance. All the interviews were tape recorded and all participants signed a written consent form (see appendix C). I have selected pseudonyms for each of the participants to ensure confidentiality.

3) Data Analysis

I approached the data analysis initially by preselecting 3 themes which I felt would be useful for organizing the material. The themes were: (a) push factors, (b) pull factors (c) integration. I then read through all the transcripts several times allowing codes to emerge in an organic way. Once the codes became clearer I organized the material under the three themes stated above which worked very well. Over time, certain codes became more important than others and so there was an elimination process that occurred, while other codes seem to fit and merge with one another in new ways.
Chapter 4
Profiles of Participants

Hannah

Hannah is a Jewish woman from California who is deeply committed to understanding and studying the nature of her own mind. At the time of our interview in March of 1996, she was a 24 year old single, 4th generation Jew, raised in a Reform Jewish background. Her Jewish identity appears relatively strong expressing her Jewishness through her strong ties to her family and to cultural aspects of Judaism, while having very little connection to or understanding of the religious aspects of Judaism. She is committed to helping others having a strong sense of social responsibility and social justice. She has completed a BA in social work and works with youth who suffer low self-esteem. Her interest in Buddhist philosophy began when she read a book called *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior* by Dan Millman at age 13. After that time Hannah read a lot of self help and books on Buddhism. Her appetite for learning more about Buddhism led her to Dharamsala, India, to study the teachings from The Dalai Lama. One of the purposes of her trip to India was to find out if she could adopt Buddhism as a religion. Prior to her trip to Asia she had very little exposure to the religious aspects of Buddhism. Her exploration of Buddhism, along with other Eastern philosophies, including Krishnamurti has been ongoing, while maintaining a curiosity about her own Jewish tradition, desiring to learn more about and participate in Jewish traditions. Hannah has expressed that she does not feel a conflict between her Buddhist exploration and her being Jewish since she does not feel a strong bond to Judaism as a religion.
Sarah

Sarah is a 35 year old, third generation Jewish woman from Toronto. She is currently in a committed relationship with a non-Jewish man. She is an only child raised by her mother and has from her father’s second marriage a half sister, 3 step-sisters and one step-brother. She grew up in a Jewish neighbourhood and was raised in both a Reform and Conservative Jewish setting. She feels a strong connection to the historical and cultural aspects of Judaism. She has expressed some confusion as to how to express her Jewishness as she has problems with certain parts of Jewish religion, particularly the traditional notions of God as well as feeling alienated from the Jewish community she grew up with. Sarah was exposed to Buddhism through her work and travels in Asia. She also had a ‘partner’ at that time that was considering becoming a monk in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and partially in wanting to understand why he was undertaking this decision, she studied for a month with a Tibetan Buddhist monk in Nepal. At the end of the course she made a commitment by ‘taking refuge’. She felt an instant connection with Buddhism feeling it to be her spiritual home. Since that time, she has been a committed Buddhist for the last 10 years and has studied with a number of different teachers and participating annually in retreats. She identifies herself as a Jewish-Buddhist. She currently works in the field of refugee law as a lawyer and is very active in her work and as a volunteer on human rights issues. As well she holds an MA degree and is currently completing an LL.M in Law.

Rena

Rena is a 27 year old, American 2nd generation Jewish woman who is from California but who is currently living in Dharamsala, India, with her partner who is non-Jewish. She was raised in a Reform Jewish family where she is the youngest with two brothers. The area she grew
up in was predominantly Jewish. Rena has a strong connection to her Jewish cultural roots, although she doesn't feel much of a spiritual bond to Judaism as a religion. She became interested in eastern philosophy in high school where she was introduced to meditation by her high school teacher. Later on she began reading some of The Dalai Lama's books and eventually went to India two years ago with her partner to attend The Dalai Lama's annual teachings. She has been living in Dharamsala since that time working as a co-director of a global student cultural exchange program. She has made some formal commitments to Buddhism in the last two years such as taking refuge and the Boddhisattva vow, but is not committed to a particular practice. She does not label herself a Buddhist, but rather, sees herself as “deeply studying” Buddhism while identifying as a Jewish American culturally. Rena has completed a BA in Psychology and has worked as a cultural and environmental educator in the school system in the States.

Ruth

Ruth is a 35 year old, single, 4th generation Jewish American woman from Massachusetts. She grew up in a secular Jewish family in a non-Jewish neighbourhood. She is the oldest with two younger sisters. From a young age she was interested in religious matters and took religious school very seriously even though she called herself an atheist. Her experiences in a Jewish camp and a trip to Israel strengthened her Jewish identity. As a young adult, while in Israel she had what she called a spiritual crisis which resulted in coming to believe in God. She became a practicing Jew and participated in Jewish renewal groups and communities in Israel and in the States. Some years after, she was introduced to Buddhism through a Buddhist Vipassana mediation retreat which she attended due to an emotional crisis. She found the Buddhist perspective extremely helpful in dealing with her suffering. I met her in Dharamsala
where she had come to the annual teachings of the Dalai Lama. She does not label herself a Buddhist but has a sitting practice and attends retreats, while being a devout Jew and praying to two different Hindu Avatars (manifestations of God in human form). She works as a physiotherapist in Massachusetts and has been active in the Peace movement in Israel and in Rosh Chodesh groups in the States and Israel, which is a movement of women’s groups that meet for the new Moon ceremony.

**Adrienne**

Adrienne is a 25 year old, 3rd and 4th generation Jewish American woman from California. She was raised as a Reform Jew in a non-Jewish area. She is the youngest and has one brother. She identifies as Jewish in a cultural and ethnic sense but does not relate to the religious aspects of Judaism. She was introduced to Buddhism through her ‘partner’ who is non-Jewish in the last year, who was living and studying in Dharamsala. Adrienne went to Dharamsala with him and has been there for about 3 months. Through her time in Dharamsala she has been studying Buddhism and has recently become serious about her studies and trying to practice what she is learning. Most recently she has been attending the two week teachings of The Dalai Lama. She does not label herself a Buddhist and although she is in the initial exploratory phase she feels a commitment to the core teachings of Buddhism and to practicing them in her daily life. She has not taken any formal commitments. Adrienne is staying in Dharamsala for an undetermined period of time and is a dancer, choreographer and dance teacher in California with a BA.
Rachel

Rachel is a 29 year old, single, 2nd generation Jewish woman from Montreal. She was raised in a Reform Jewish family and community. Her neighbourhood was 25% Jewish. Her father was one of founders of the Reform Synagogue in their area and the family was very involved. Her mother came from an Orthodox background of which some of the traditions were carried over. For example, when Rachel was young they kept kosher (separation of milk and meat), which changed over time. Rachel is the youngest child with three sisters and one brother. Rachel has a strong Jewish identity in terms of her roots, history and upbringing but she is not connected to the religious aspects of Judaism. She became interested in Buddhism as a teenager through reading books on Buddhism on her own and in Cegep (College in Quebec) she took a course and studied Zen Buddhism. Then she went to Japan to work and to learn about Buddhism. She eventually met a Zen teacher and lived with the community and studied with this teacher. Since leaving Japan, she still has contact with the teacher and whenever she goes to Japan she stays there. Rachel does not label herself a Buddhist and doesn’t like labelling herself anything, but Buddhist philosophy informs her daily life. Rachel lives in Kathmandu Nepal where she is running a business and teaching business to Nepali women. I met Rachel in Dharamsala, where she was attending the teachings and taking a break from her work in Nepal.

Susan

Susan is a 52 year old, 3rd generation Jewish American woman who now lives in Ontario. She was raised in the Reform tradition, growing up in a Jewish neighbourhood in New York. She is the oldest daughter and has a younger sister. She is married and has a son from a previous marriage. Growing up she found Jewish religion too intellectual, feeling that “spirit
was missing” causing her to feel alienated. She was searching for something but could not seem to find it in Judaism. Then she came into contact with Buddhism ten years ago when she met her current husband, who was a Jewish Buddhist and a Buddhist teacher. It was through her connection with him that she was introduced and learned about Buddhism. Soon after, she felt “at home”. Although Susan does not label herself a Buddhist, her philosophy and way of life is “Buddhist inspired”. She is strongly committed to “truth and inquiry”, to meditation, Sangha and to participating in retreats. She no longer considers herself Jewish, although she does acknowledge her Jewish conditioning and she does participate in family functions, such as attending Bat Mitzvahs etc. She is currently working as a homeopath and manages meditation retreats in Ontario and in India.

Anna

Anna is a 32 year old, 2nd generation Jewish woman originally from Montreal. She is married with two young daughters and lives in Vancouver. She is half Jewish with a Jewish mother and a Catholic father. She is the oldest of three with a younger sister and brother. Her mother went through the war in Hungary. Her mother was secular and did not pass on any of the Jewish religious traditions, however, Anna was aware of a Jewish identity but denied it for the most part, feeling that she could not call herself Jewish. Anna was baptized as a Protestant and did not have a religious upbringing in any religion. As a teenager, she became interested in her Jewish roots and read many books and took up Israel folk dancing, which was the beginning of taking on a Jewish identity. She eventually married an Israeli and it was with him on a trip to Asia six years ago that she encountered Buddhism. While in Nepal, she participated in a ten day retreat at a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery, which she says changed her life. After that point, she
began a regular sitting practice and attended other retreats in Canada. Since having her children she has not continued her meditation practice but she feels a deep connection to the core teachings of Buddhism. Her Jewish identity has become stronger through the years, although not in a religious sense. She refers to her approach to spirituality as “eclectic”, incorporating elements of the Jewish Renewal movement, Buddhism, Native American spiritual and Feminist traditions. Anna is currently raising her daughters and has worked in social science research projects and is active in environmental and left wing political organizations. She has an MA in Library Science.

**Nadine**

Nadine is a 50 year old, 2nd generation Jewish American woman from New Jersey, who now lives in Massachusetts. She is remarried to a Jewish Buddhist and has two daughters. She grew up in a Conservative Jewish family. Her mother came from an Orthodox background, and her father was raised in a Jewish orphanage. She is the oldest of three, with two younger brothers. Growing up, she was a religious child whose needs were not met spiritually. She found Jewish education “pretty mechanical” and started reading philosophy and religion books as well as visiting churches as a teenager. At University she took a course on Oriental philosophy and felt connected to the philosophies of Buddhism and Taoism. She studied and practiced yoga with a teacher for many years and when she became disillusioned with her teacher, she went and began meditating at a Vipassana Buddhist center. Later, she met her Zen teacher, who led a therapy weekend. Ever since, she has been studying with him. Nadine has been a committed Buddhist for the last 16 years. She meditates daily and attends retreats on a regular basis. She identifies as a Jewish Buddhist and is raising her children with both traditions. Her Jewish identity
is connected to the cultural/ethnic aspects of Judaism rather than the religious aspects. Nadine teaches yoga and is involved in Feminist and Peace actions.
Chapter 5
The Push

1) Research Question #1

What attracts Jewish women to Buddhism and to Buddhist practice? There are two parts to this question: a) Why do Jewish women leave Judaism? b) What attracts them to Buddhism? In order to explore this research question I am using the “push” (leaving factors) and “pull” (attraction factors) model of religious conversion as a tool for analysis, which is explained as an “interactive process between a potential convert and a specific religious community which usually is a consequence of both push and pull forces.” (Meredith B. McGuire in Selengut, 1988, 96) With my decision to use the push and pull model as an analytical tool, I am aware that this approach may be reductionistic, and serves as a potential lens through which to view this material. In studying what makes an individual convert from one religious system to another, I realize the complexity of this issue, and that causal explanations are limited, and only give a vague and partial picture of the phenomenon I am exploring. I have also found myself struggling with whether I should use this approach, as I wish to find a more holistic method. However, I have felt that it has proven to be a useful, if limited, approach.

In the interviews a significant theme emerged, namely the way in which the women perceived themselves as being excluded from Judaism. The following themes explore in more depth the various ways these women experienced exclusion, due to the issue of gender, and their gradual disengagement from Judaism as a result.
2) Theological difficulties

Sarah

Yeah, I did believe in God when I was little. I definitely believed in a God that was out there that I could talk to, that would listen to me, that when I prayed to, He listened, it was a male God, because I remember thinking that was how I grew up, being taught that God was a man...I realized that well, maybe it wasn't totally decided. At age 19 or 20, I realized I'd been like a totally self-described atheist for 5 years, but I hadn't really thought this out clearly and I realized that I really do have some connection to spiritual values, maybe I'm not really an atheist...I didn't relate to the definition of a Jewish God, the way that it was presented and so then I went back to being more of an agnostic, undecided and remained in that limbo until I was about 26, and that's when I had my first contact with Buddhism and it really helped clarify what I thought about things and I felt like I was finding a label for the things I had been feeling for my whole life, about the importance of spirituality, but it not being tied to this notion of a Creator... And I finally felt like I found my spiritual home, a place where there was room for spiritual outlet without being tied to this whole God thing, which was really problematic for me in Judaism.

In Jewish Feminist theological literature there is much written on the Patriarchal and sexist aspects of Judaism, and how women have been excluded in the Torah, in Halacha, the Jewish body of law, and in other liturgical writings. One of the central arguments is that of the "normative character of maleness" (Plaskow in Davidman, Tenenbaum, 1994, 68) inherent in the Jewish writings and laws, which assumes to speak for both men and women. A woman in
this context “is not simply a Jew but always a female Jew, always the one perceived as ‘other’ in relation to a male norm.” (ibid, 69) As well, male images of God are part of this larger pattern. As Plaskow observes:

Torah constructs a world that orders and makes sense of Jewish experience, but the world it constructs places men at the center. It is the written record of those with the power to keep records and to interpret and define the meaning of Jewish existence. In creating a particular vision of reality, it disguises alternative Jewish realities that may have co-existed alongside. (Plaskow in Davidman and Tenenbaum, 1994, pg. 78)

In the interview, Sarah articulates the problems she has with this pattern of envisioning God as male, and the process of how she came to reject this notion of God over time quite clearly. Her early acceptance of God as male is an indication of what was being taught. Some of the other participants also described their early notions of God as a male, and how that shifted. One interview participant Nadine explains:

I think it was when I became 11 or 12, that it became very important to me to find out what God was and I read a lot of philosophy books. I think pretty early I had rejected that notion of some guy in the sky... It didn’t make sense to me and when I was 18, I became a philosophy major, that’s what I did in College. So I very early started studying Buddhist texts and God became more like you know, sort of like another superstition or a construct for me. So I think probably when I was very young, you know certainly, I was
scared of God and God is all powerful or and I prayed to God, but I think that ended somewhere around 10 or 11. I think that’s true, somewhere around there.

Nadine and Sarah’s comments suggest that as children they were taught these kinds of images of God, which were being passed down to them. Even though, technically referring to God as an image would be considered idolatrous, God has been imagined as male, which perhaps says more “about our social arrangements” than the “fullness of God’s reality which is ultimately unknowable.” (Plaskow, in Davidman & Tenenbaum, 1994, pg. 69)

In recent years, there is much more discussion of a female concept of God referred to as Shekinah, that is present in the Kaballah, the Jewish mystical teachings. However, up until this time this notion was not accessible to most Jews in the mainstream, and thus the women in this study were not raised with any knowledge or awareness of this alternate conception of God. Kamenetz explains why Jewish mysticism has been so inaccessible, stating that the “mystical and esoteric were suppressed by the more liberal branches in Judaism”, particularly with the beginning of the reform movement in Germany, in a social climate where rationality was the dominant paradigm, and where anything that was associated with superstition was removed. (Kamenetz, 1994, pg. 150)

Some of the women described perceiving different notions of God that seemed to go beyond the patriarchal form. For example, Rachel said:

If I question myself on this character called God or and the way it was taught to me in the Jewish religion and in the Catholic religion, I’ve just never been able to visualize it...And I think I feel God in a different way...something that is all around me and it is me, myself
and everything I come into contact with and maybe the pain? also stems from the Jewish religion in some way, but it wasn’t the way it was really presented to me.

Anna described her notion as “I believed in some kind of power that was greater, but not in a traditional God.” Similarly, Hannah said:

I don’t believe in God, in the one figure. I think, and maybe that’s a term that some people give to what I call ‘That Force’ and they just see it as a force, they call it God. I think there is something but I don’t give it that term, that label.

When I asked Susan about her sense of God, she described her difficulty connecting to the God that she was exposed to in her family and community, but then identified a sense of spirituality through a feeling of connection to nature:

S: Oh I struggled with that! I struggled with that because I wanted so much to feel a spiritual connection with something, and I tried very hard to fit into the Jewish idea as it was transmitted to me, of God, and I couldn’t and

D: And how was it transmitted to you?

S: Well kind of in an intellectual way and certainly not the great father of us all, it wasn’t that, it was more sort of truth or justice. It was more almost by, what it wasn’t then what it was. Like we didn’t sit around and have great theological discussions and I wanted
something and I remember once, as a teenager going on some kind of Sunday school weekend thing and being outdoors, in the summer and seeing the stars and that was the first time I ever had any idea of a spirit and I remember feeling so excited like oh yeah, I can believe in God now! But it turned out that for me that wasn’t the Jewish God and I don’t know I still don’t have it, I still don’t believe in it. But I didn’t see myself as an agnostic or an atheist either. I didn’t know where I fit?

Perhaps Susan’s confusion around where “she fits” and the doubt she experienced points to how there has been a tendency, historically, of women not trusting their own spiritual experiences having been socialized and conditioned to accept the spiritual realizations of men instead of their own. (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991, 17) However, her experience in nature seems to point towards seeking a non-Patriarchal notion of God.

Others did not know what they believed but articulated what was problematic for them. One participant, Adrienne had a strong reaction when I asked her about God:

Oh,(laughs) It’s a tough one! Well I think that the word God has always given me the Heebeejeebees! I, about a year ago I was talking with a father of friend who is Jewish and he goes, ‘oh ya’, we are talking about the word God, he goes, ‘the word God when people say it? What they are really saying is, I’m right!’ Which I think has a lot to do with why it has given me the willies, you know. Because I went through school where Christmas songs were sung until one Jewish kid went to American Civil Liberties Union with his mom, just a little 7 year old saying we have to have Jewish songs represented also and this is a non-denominational winter concert not the Christmas sing! And so we’d
sing these songs that had the word Jesus in them and I felt like I shouldn’t say the word, I would mouth the word. And I don’t know where I got that from? You know nobody was telling me that Jesus was an utterable bad word. I just picked up and I didn’t really have a sense of what God was in the Jewish, in Reformed Judaism and I just, I don’t know? I just never had a good feeling about it or any kind of formed feeling about it and, to this day, I have a really hard time with the word. I can’t say the word without shuddering inside somewhat. I think I associate it with division between people so much. You know, okay what’s the definition? Well mine is this and yours is that, oh we can’t be friends. That’s what it has meant.

Adrienne’s experience in public school seems to show how the dominance of Patriarchal Christian ideas of God permeate the dominant society, even though religion is supposedly separated from the State. The fact that she says she did not have any formed feeling about a Jewish God but that it gives her the “heebeejeebees” points to a common reaction amongst secular Jews whose beliefs are more aligned with rational, scientific thought, and of being deeply “embarrassed by any expressions of spirituality” (Kamenetz, 1994, pg. 152) which also includes believing in God. (Weinberg, 1994)

Ruth, another participant, grew up in a secular Jewish home and was also raised with rational values which she accepted as a young child, but began changing as a teenager:

I was an agnostic. I think I might have said I was an atheist when I was 8 or 9, you know precocious 9 year old!... I didn’t believe in God, but I would say I was an agnostic because I wasn’t certain that God didn’t exist, but I didn’t pray to God, but I did, from
the time I was, I don’t know, 9, I did wish on stars, and I did look out the window and I had a ritual, like a twenty minute or half hour ritual every night of wishing on a star and I had a very long ritual I went through with it so... from the time I was 13, as I said when I used to go to the synagogue and you know everyone else went home and I, and my family went home and I stayed all day. I think at Yom Kippour I fasted all day even though my parents started eating at noon. I was searching for God, like I would read the liturgy. Like what are they talking about? Like these words don’t make sense, but I was like striving to understand.

Later, Ruth went through a spiritual crisis which eventually led to her belief in God as a Jew. She is the only participant that became more spiritual in a Jewish way. She has now become engaged with Jewish Renewal groups that emphasize: “trying to get out of the Patriarchal ways of understanding God”.

Rena says she does not know what she believes but then, clearly criticizes the Patriarchal notion of God:

I never knew whether I believed in God when I was growing up. I like, I think when I was really young I was like, ‘Oh there’s a God? That’s great you know!’ (laughs all around) And then I think I got to the point where I stopped just blindly accepting what people told me. And not that there wasn’t a higher power out there, but what this God thing was, this mighty exalted King and all that, and this one God thing as well, okay, I could realize why you wouldn’t want to work with that as an idol, but, on the otherhand that’s if your mind is just worshipping a material object instead of the spirituality of it.
It appears that many of the participants had problems with a Patriarchal conception of God. Some struggled with God issues such as the notion of a God or God-like figure, a separation from nature, or the notion that a concept of God separates a person from other people who have other notions of God. These concerns took them through a process that often created conflict and longing, searching for a notion of God that fit into their worlds and not being able to find it. This led for many, to a rejection of the Jewish conception of God as it was presented to them. A few others were uncomfortable with any notion of God. Many of them ended up as nontheists, which means they have a strong sense of being spiritual in a spiritual universe, but also do not believe in a figure of God.

3) Practice and Rituals

In terms of Jewish law and practice, woman is seen as the “peripheral Jew”. (Adler, 1973) This is due to women’s exemption from a number of “positive commandments”, some of which for Orthodox Jews, include: putting on a prayer shawl or phylacteries, saying prayers three times a day, hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashana. (Adler, 1973, 77-78) Thus women were unable to “participate in those positive symbols which for a male would inform both his myth and his philosophy.” (Adler, 1973, 78) Instead, traditionally, women were responsible for “reinforcing the lifestyle of the community and the family, such as keeping kosher in the home, lighting the Shabbat candles, going for mikva (ritual bath every month after menstruation), but they were not to cultivate the relationship between the individual and God.” (Adler, 1973, 79) This was evident also in the separation of women from men at worship, physically or in the words of the Torah or Talmud; their inability to count in a Minyan (prayer quorum which requires ten men to function)
even if a woman is a Rabbi; and their limited access to study. Thus, the gender roles and images of females are very different from that of males in Jewish law. "While men perform most of the religious duties and are free to worship and study, women were to tend the home, prepare food, and socialize the children". (N.Goldenberg, 1979, pg. 7) Barack Fishman attributes this gender differentiation to the "sexual depictions of women within Jewish laws and literature". (Barack Fishman, 1993, pg. 101) She explains:

For much of Jewish history women were denied access to the intellectual life of the community, which centered around the study of sacred texts...and they were denied a public role in Jewish worship. These exclusions were based on certain assumptions in rabbinical law about the nature of women. The rabbis assumed that, as a practical matter women would be absorbed in domestic responsibilities for most of their adult lives. They also assumed that men as a group were easily inflamed into sexual thoughts, and that a woman's uncovered hair, her arms or legs or even her voice could...distract a man from such sacred tasks as prayer or study. One of the rationales for the exclusion of women from study and public worship was that women's physical attractions were perceived as a sexual snare for men. (Barack Fishman, 1993, pg.101)

All of the women in this study have come from Reform, Conservative or secular backgrounds, where many of these traditions have been removed or have been altered. Nevertheless, it is necessary to understand the roots of inequities for women in Judaism. The Reform and Conservative branches of Judaism have 'officially' attempted to make Jewish practices more egalitarian, however there has been criticism that suggests that sexist practices
continue to exist and to alienate women. (Lerner, 1994, Barack Fishman, 1993) Lerner interviewed Jewish women and men who have left the Jewish fold. He found that sexism was an important factor. He writes:

So many of the women I spoke to could now articulate the anger and the rage that they had experienced when discovering that their sex was the reason they could not share in the same experiences as boys. Now decades later, they still were angered, because even though officially Reform and Conservative Judaism had made a place for them, it still felt like a begrudging place. And the more these women began to grapple with the tradition, the more they found that sexism was deeply entwined with some of what was best in Judaism. (Lerner, 1994, pg. 9)

A significant aspect of the sexism was in the actual removal of many of the ancient rituals and practices for women. Most noted is the tradition of the Mikvah, the ritual bath after menstruation and before resuming sexual relations, used for spiritual cleansing and purification. (Klem, Y. in Weiner, k. & Moon, A. 1995, pg. 126) Even though the traditional practice of the Mikvah has been criticized by many Jewish Feminists as being offensive to women and anti-feminist, others feel it has been misinterpreted (Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, 1990, Klem, Y. 1995). There are a number of women who are taking back this ritual, finding new meanings and ways to make the ritual relevant for women today. But some of the women in this study came of age with little or no specifically Jewish female rituals that were comparable to the Mikvah.
Other women in this study participated in a new ritual for girls which was established formally in the 1970s, the Bat Mitzvah, which is a coming of age ceremony for girls and a female counterpart to the Bar Mitzvah. The participants who had Bat Mitzvah’s, which was the majority of the women age 35 and under, had different experiences of this ritual. Sarah saw it as a positive experience and part of how things were changing for girls and women. She explains:

I know it was an interesting time to be a Jewish girl because it was just at a time when, women were taking a more active role in Judaism and in fact I think the Conservative movement decided to allow girls to have Bat Mitzvahs maybe 1 or 2, 3 years at the most, before I actually had my Bat Mitzvah and I had that sense of being on the cutting edge of a new role for girls in Judaism. I know that in terms of being among my peers as a girl, I was one of the, you know, small number of girls that chose to get my Bat Mitzvah and then continue on for a few more years in my level of ability to speak hebrew and my knowledge of....the actual education background that I had were quite strong and I had a sense of that as not being necessarily typical because I knew other girls whose family didn’t put the same emphasis on them doing those things...So I had a sense, I guess, of possibilities that as a girl you could do things and you could make changes, you didn’t have to necessarily be relegated to the backseat like in how the Orthodox communities were. So that was a good thing!

Both Rena and Adrienne remarked on the positive aspects:

R: My Bat Mitzvah struck me with a lot of meaning. Yeah, it was pretty high. I got to say a bit about family and so it was aligned with what I believe.
A: Oh my Bat Mitzvah was a huge deal. It was very meaningful. I slaved over my speech, getting the Haftara stuff down and the to go back to the previous question. My parents both wrote things about me that they read at the Bat Mitzvah. Everybody was crying!

Hannah seemed to be more neutral about her experience. She mentions in passing that she went to Sunday school, “Just training for Bat Mitzvah and then after that, I no longer went to Sunday school or I wasn’t concerned…”

The women over age 40 in the study did not have Bat Mitzvahs and therefore were excluded from a coming of age ritual and female rituals in general, which is significant. For the women who did participate and found meaning, it may explain more about what keeps them from leaving Judaism entirely.

The Bat Mitzvah is generally seen as proof of an advancement for women in Judaism. However, it may be significant that the Bat Mitzvah is actually copied and adopted from the male Bar Mitzvah ritual, putting into question the authenticity of this new ‘female’ ritual for girls who are coming of age. It may be also significant to note that no female rituals have been copied or adapted for Jewish boys. Of course since the Bat Mitzvah it is relatively new in the history of Judaism, it remains to be seen what the actual impact the Bat Mitzvah will be on 13 year old girls over time.

Another significant reform for women in the Reform and Conservative branches was the ordainment of women as Rabbis. This advancement occurred in 1972, which means that the older participants in this study grew up in a time when women could not be rabbis and spiritual
leaders. Although there was no mention by these women of the lack of female spiritual teachers or role models, I think it may be relevant to understanding their ‘push’ outside, especially in light of the impact of feminist consciousness that was raised beginning in the 1960s. Certainly there are a number of Buddhist teachers who are Jewish women of those generations. The younger women did not necessarily benefit from women being allowed to become Rabbis in the 1970s, simply due to the fact that a very small number of women became rabbis in those early years.

Even now, according to Nora Gold, few women are taking leadership roles, despite access to these roles. She has found in her study of women in egalitarian congregations that the “expansion of opportunities has not necessarily resulted in increased participation by women in the leadership of services.” She writes:

At the egalitarian Synagogue that I attend (egalitarian here meaning that identical leadership opportunities are available to women and men), out of 250 adult members (mostly in their 40s), we have only 4 women who, on any regular basis, lead any aspect of the service. The rest chose, for one reason or another, not to exercise this option. Discussions with Jewish women from all over North America confirm that this situation is typical. It appears that, contrary to what many Jewish Feminists might like to believe, the “revolution” is far from underway for the great majority of Jewish women... (Gold, N. in Weiner, K. Moon, A. 1995, pg. 55-56)

Many reforms which were intended to make women feel more included did not prevent the alienation of women. Although it is true that a number of participants in this study did not
attend synagogue regularly, many attended during the High Holidays and went to Bat/Bar Mitzvahs. Rena describes how she felt in Synagogue on the High Holidays:

I did feel as though I was receiving you know the High exalted Kingdom of God and it seemed very patriarchal and it seemed very much not compassion based, I don’t know, it is because at some point you give a lot of thanks when you say ..just thanks to God I’ll even die in Mount Sinai so we can be together and that was, you know, but (laughs) I would say it never struck me deeply.

Susan talks about her difficulty being in the Synagogue for a Bar Mitzvah as an adult:

I was sitting in the temple and I hadn’t been in a temple in years because I lived in Massachusetts and my family home was in New York, so I didn’t go back for Jewish holidays and here I was sitting in a temple again and I’m sitting there and I’m thinking, like I’m hearing the words, yeah, I knew I didn’t like the words then, now I know I don’t like them! This has no meaning for me! And it was a very strong image of having been born, you know I was just born into a Jewish family and I don’t belong there and it was a feeling of taking off a coat that someone had handed me at birth and just leaving the coat! And I felt totally liberated! It was like, right, I don’t have to try any harder. This isn’t me and finished. Absolutely finished. There was absolutely no ambivalence to me. I was always looking for something and when, and the more I heard about Buddhism, I just felt at home.
Another ritual which women have been excluded from is the recitation of Kaddish or the ‘public prayer’ after the death of a parent or relative. This ritual was not discussed by any of the participants. Perhaps this is due to the fact that all of the participants parents are still living.

A common response regarding how they felt about rituals and practice was of not having a deep connection to the practices, even though many enjoyed some of the rituals above. For many participants ritualistic practices were thought of primarily as going to Synagogue, lighting Sabbath candles in the home and the celebration of the Jewish holidays. Nadine explains when I asked her about what rituals were meaningful for her:

That’s a hard question, because I don’t think any of it was very meaningful to me. My mother didn’t light the candles for Shabbas, I don’t think, I don’t remember that, we did, so we celebrated Chanukah, but it was mostly presents, you know it was just like Jewish Christmas...and you know everything else was pretty Synagogue based, not too much in our home. So and a lot of it was have to’s. We had to go for High Holy Days, you know...there was a social scene. My friends were there, but it had nothing to do with meaningful tradition...it was just boring and it was never and I was never given any understanding of what it was about...it was one big, ‘have to’.

Sarah seems to echoe these ideas:

I didn’t get a sense that there was any creation of a Jewish home... So when I say that I didn’t feel that there was a Jewish home, I mean, when I visited my father years after he
married my stepmother, they celebrated Friday night dinners there, with the lighting of the candles and drinking of wine and there was a real sense of Jewish ritual to Friday night, it was Shabbat, my mother and I never celebrated Fridays that way, so we didn’t, there wasn’t that feeling at home.

Rachel spoke of enjoying going to synagogue due to feeling a sense of community but, didn’t have a deep feeling about the traditions: “The traditions I’ve never developed a big understanding of them...I mean, I know what were celebrating or what we are remembering....But it doesn’t really hit me deeply....”
A few of the other participants did not grow up with many Jewish rituals, therefore spiritual practices were not relevant as push factors for these women. Anna did not have a Jewish religious upbringing and did not experience any Jewish rituals. While Ruth enjoyed the rituals she was exposed to. Ruth observes:

...my family wasn’t into ritual. So it wasn’t like I felt that I was forced to go through meaningless rituals because they were less interested in it than I was. I didn’t have that problem. That’s probably why I’m more into Judaism than people who were raised like that.

For the other women, it appeared that the longer they were involved in Buddhism, and the longer they were engaged in Buddhist practices, that were deeply meaningful to them, and/or the older they were, the more articulate they were about what they saw were difficulties and discrepancies in the practices they grew up with. For the few women that still lived with their parents, it appeared that they were less critical about the practices they were raised with. For many, however, a lack of meaningful spiritual practice along with the sexist aspects seems to be significant factors that contributed to the push to look for meaningful spiritual and non-sexist practices elsewhere.

4) Exclusivity of Judaism

In the literature on why Jews leave Judaism (Lerner, 1994, Kamenetz, 1994, Salutin, 1984), Jewish particularism has been discussed as a contributing reason for turning Jews away from Judaism. Jewish particularism is the concept that Jews are the “Chosen People” , and
that Jewish identity creates a unique and exclusive place in the world vis a vis other cultural
groups. Kamenetz writes of one respondent, Joseph Goldstein, a Buddhist teacher who is a
Jewish Buddhist who spoke about his problem with Jewish particularism:

One reason I don't feel connected, and this may be a totally exoteric dimension of
Judaism, but I was never comfortable with its nonuniversal aspect. It seemed separatist
to me. The whole notion of the chosen people. This is true of all Western religions.
They are not talking so much about the universal nature of the mind, but rather a belief
system. If you believe, you are part of a certain group. If you don't, you're outside of
that. (Goldstein in Kamenetz, 1994, pg. 150-151)

This notion of Judaism being exclusive was discussed in different ways by some of the
participants. Nadine speaks about the dangers of exclusivity caused by separatist thought when
describing how she felt listening to prayers at a Bat Mitzvah:

Oh, it was so tribal, it was so, you know, 'the lord our god', you know, 'we are the
chosen people', I mean sort of looking at it from an anthropological place, I can
understand. You know, 5000, or 4000, 3000 years ago that's how people lived and
thought, but I think we have available to us a consciousness as human beings of a
connectedness to all beings and that we don't need to be quite so tribal and I think tribal
mentality and also the dualistic mentality that separates people from people and people
from some kind of positive god is actually quite dangerous and I think, I mean this may
sound like a really far flung thought, but I mean to me I think it’s the root of nuclear bombs, you know that we have to create weapons to defend ourselves or attack...

Nadine raises the problem of dualistic or separatist thinking within Judaism. Nadine also came of age during the antiwar movement and was influenced by the prevailing ideas of that time, of universal peace and love, which would have contradicted Jewish particularist ideas. Popular culture at the time of her coming of age was emphasizing themes of integration, cross-cultural relationships of all kinds, and social concerns outside of one’s own community. Rick Salutin believes that a new kind of Jewish community emerged after the Six Day War, which resulted in a “strengthening of identification” and an emphasis on Jewish interest and less concern about the social issues outside of the Jewish community. (Salutin, 1984, 229)

Lerner writes about the “parochialism of Jewish suffering”, saying that his respondents who had left Judaism believed that “too many Jews acted as though nobody else had suffered and that the uniqueness of the Holocaust was then used as a way of dismissing all the pain of everyone else.” (Lerner, 1994, pg. 7)

Another participant, Sarah, speaks about her difficulties with the conception of Jews being ‘chosen’: “Any sense of the divine has to go beyond a conception of human beings. There couldn’t be a divine force that prefers one group of people over another. It’s the ultimate racism...”

Nadine also referred to racism, but in terms of issues with Israel. She explains:

You know it is very painful to me. It’s not, I’ve never been there and maybe if I went it would have more meaning. Many people have said that to me, that it is very powerful to

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go there, but, for me there is a lot of racism in that area of the world against Jews, against Palestinians, and it just seems like an open wound and whatever chauvinism is there Jewish or otherwise, feels very painful to me and that there is so much violence, I don't know that if having a homeland for Jews creates more violence than peacefulness, I don't know?

Susan shares a similar view when I asked her about Israel:

It actually has quite a negative connotation to it. It's exclusivity and I certainly can understand anyone, everybody needing a place where they feel safe and secure, but when it's when somebody else has to pay with losing their freedom, than I see that as hypocritical and destructive and quite opposed to the whole initial idea and this whole notion of if it's Jewish or if it's Israel, it has to be right, I have great difficulty with that and anything that encourages the divisiveness between people and not unification.

Susan raises some important issues. One being the idea that anything regarding Israel is “right”. It has been noted in the literature that Jews have been taught not to question policies regarding Israel. (Baker, A. 1993, Lerner, 1994, Salutin, 1984) As one Jewish Feminist, Julia Bard explains: “Zionism is the acid test, the one issue on which all Jews, whatever their other differences, are supposed to agree. If they don’t, then there is no place for them in the community; they are no longer entitled to...make political statements as Jews.” (Bard, in Baker, 1993, pg. 211) Secondly, when Susan talks about the human rights issues of the Palestinians,
she implies the hypocrisy of persecuting others, when historically, Jews have been persecuted for centuries and most recently, suffered the loss of six million Jews during the Holocaust.

Ruth who has lived in Israel also acknowledges this problem of division, but as someone who wants to live there says:

I feel that, Israel, after 2000 years, that were back there, is very significant, and I feel that it is an incredible opportunity to live there when Jews have wanted to be there for so long and politically, it is very problematic. You know I feel that if I were to live in Israel, there’s a lot of important things to do there, one is to work on Jewish-Arab relations, another is to work on religion, bringing the good aspects of religion to the secular Israeli society because its divided Secular and religious. And I want to bridge that gap.

Another participant, Rena, echoes the other participants’ sentiments regarding this notion of division and separation:

I really always heard, when I was young the big topic in Sunday school was peace in the Middle East and that there wasn’t any, so I never really particularly felt like going there because I felt like they were fighting there and still to this day I have such feelings because until they can get it together and start accepting each other I feel like, its a hard call, I’d like to go, but I don’t think I’d like to go as a Jew, like I’d rather just go as a human being, because I just can’t handle what I’ve heard as my partner has been there and you know there’s a lot of separation. Unnecessary separation.
The significance of Rena stating that she would rather go to Israel as a human being also suggests the importance of a more universalistic, inclusive perspective for her.

It appears that these participants all criticized Jewish exclusivity whether it was regarding exclusivity tied into being ‘chosen’, or with Israel and its policies. Their views seemed to show an interest and attraction to more inclusive, universal values. This yearning for inclusivity may in fact reveal Jewish values that have been buried beneath the surface in modern mainstream Judaism, although they may not see it as such. (Kamenetz, 1994) As Kamenetz notes: “It appears that some JUBUS (Jewish Buddhists) left Judaism because of their Jewish ideals”, such as social justice issues. (Kamenetz, 1994, pg. 150) As well, the participants in their testimonies, seem to have feminist perspectives relating to the oppression of women, as they criticized some of the oppressive aspects connected to the male exclusiveness found in Judaism. Perhaps this is related to being able to “identify with oppression as women and as Jews”, (Baker, 1993, pg. 210) creating a sense of responsibility to expose social injustices.

5) Jewish Education

The majority of participants in the study, with the exception of one individual, had several years of formal Jewish religious school education as an adjunct to their public/private school education. Many of them felt dissatisfied with their experiences. One participant, Susan explains:

It was useless. It was not challenging or stimulating and I would say we learned the basic information about the holidays...which was repeated over and over and over again. I know very little about the history of the Jews. It was taught in a very perfunctory way
and the books were dry and horrible and everything was from an intellectual point of view, there was no, spirit was missing, there was no spirit. The only time I enjoyed any of it was when I was confirmed in 10th grade. There was a young Rabbi there and he gave practice and that was very interesting. I can’t tell you what I remember from it but somehow it was more meaningful. And then the next few years, I mean I went to Sunday school through grade 12 and the last 2 years were more of a social thing and also we got to do things like write our own service and I remember that was very interesting and that that might be the only thing I remember as having touched me in the whole 12 years... But nothing that challenged my perception of myself or the world or encouraged me to think deeply.

Another participant, Sarah, compares different experiences she had in two different religious schools:

I think I got a lot out of the Jewish education I had at the Reform Temple. I was fortunate to have had some really good teachers. It gave me an appreciation for Judaism and Jewishness and also I think the education department at the Temple in those days was headed by a very innovative educator who valued teaching method as well as content and I mean I remember very clearly that I had teachers that were inspiring and that made me think and made me ask questions and appreciated that. So I felt like I learned a lot in those years. I felt like when I switched to the Conservative Synagogue, my appreciation for Jewish education really spiraled downward. It was a much more traditional environment where their ritual and sort of Hebrew and tradition was emphasized over any
spiritual content and any pedagogy. The teachers were for the most part quite poor and the classes were unruly...and the talks we got at the Conservative Synagogue were all guilt trips about why people should contribute more to Jewish funds and how they better support Israel or the Arabs are going to get us! And I never felt connected...

Nadine felt her needs were not met at religious school and found it boring:

You know for me I was a very philosophical kid, at a very early age, like age 11 and 12, I started reading philosophy and I started visiting a lot of churches and studying religion. So, even though I went through the mechanics of Jewish education, it was pretty mechanical, and it didn't really meet my needs as a very curious, pre-teenager and teenager...mostly we studied Hebrew and grammar and some holidays and when I was older, I think in the Confirmation class, we started studying some Jewish history and I liked that. It was more interesting to me. The literature, I liked and that was far more meaningful because it put it all in context. We could have discussions and that was interesting. The stuff before that had all been very rote. We had to memorize.... So, I feel like when I was little, I just didn't get met, you know in Jewish education, I wasn't met! You know, what I needed wasn't given.

A few other participants did not feel they learned “anything”, nor did they retain all of what they were taught. Adrienne had this experience:
I don’t remember learning much...I know nothing about the old Testament really. I mean they would have like, little kids’ storybook versions when holidays would come up of what the story was behind the holidays, but I don’t remember much at all and I’ve always been a really diligent kind of student and I would even get frustrated that we weren’t learning anything.

Rena described her experience similarly, “I think I forgot most of it. (laughs)Like it hasn’t been since I was 13 right?...It didn’t really strike me personally enough to really stick with it....My interest dwindled...I never had an enlightened Jewish teacher. If I had one maybe I’d be more attracted in that way. “

Ruth did not enjoy her experience at religious school for social reasons:

Well, I didn’t particularly like it...because I didn’t like the kids that much... well there were a few kids that I liked, but I didn’t... they weren’t the kids that I hung out with outside of Sunday school... In Sunday school I took it seriously, like I said I took everything seriously, but I didn’t particularly enjoy it.

Hannah reflects on her dutiful experience of religious school: “Looking back on it, it wasn’t like I had a strong religious conviction, it was more, my family wanted me to go.”

The participants articulated a number of reasons for being unhappy or neutral about their Jewish education. A common theme noted by some participants was the lack of spirituality in the educational programming, with an emphasis on traditions, culture and history. Most of these
same women were critical about the rote teaching pedagogues that they called “dry” and “boring”, and therefore not meeting their needs.

Barack Fishman (1993) has been critical of Jewish educational curricula, describing the studies as not relating to the needs of young women. The fact that some mentioned their boredom and their inability to retain what they were taught may suggest that the content, teaching and method may not have been relevant to their lives as women.

Many of the women felt they did not delve into the in-depth teachings of Judaism as a religion, code of ethics and philosophy. For example, when I asked Ruth about having a theological background she replied, “No, they didn’t provide that...We learned history, culture, Holocaust.”

Hannah’s statement: “I know more about Buddhism than I know about Judaism”, and Rena’s statement of not having an “enlightened Jewish teacher”, points to certain needs not met and in their Jewish education.

Overall, it appears that Jewish education failed, at least on some levels, most of the participants in this study. Lerner (1994) also acknowledges this failure of Jewish education for Jews who have left Judaism. He observes: “Most of them looked back on Hebrew school as an ordeal that they went through to please their parents, and once they were free to make choices of their own, they ran from the Jewish world as fast as they could”. (Lerner, 1994, pg. 1)

6) Jewish Identity Issues

So, what does it mean, being Jewish? The answers come from many perspectives, for the Jewish identity is a complex interweaving of religious and ethnic elements. At its
core, too, is a shared history, a collective memory of periods in which Jews suffered prejudice and persecution and of periods of wandering and resettlement in new lands. It is a history of migration in which two factors have given stability: religion and the family. And in more recent times, the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel have added extra dimensions to the sense of responsibility which being a Jew has always involved. (Baker, A. 1993, pg. 1-2)

For many of the participants, being Jewish seemed to be less about identifying with the religious strands of Judaism and more about identifying with a cultural and ethnic identity, although each woman had a different experience of what that meant. This view of their identity has profound implications for how they were to later merge Buddhism and Buddhist practice in an “integrative” manner into their lives. For most, these latter aspects of cultural and ethnic identity were part of feeling a sense of being “other”, being part of a minority distinct from the dominant society, which has been subjected to anti-semitism and a strong consciousness of the legacy of the Holocaust. For some being Jewish is not “a choice”. Sarah for example, explains:

I identify as Jewish because I believe it an ethnic identity, its part of my ancestry...its part of how I understand my family tree and my history, where I come from, who I am and also partly, how the world sees me which is very important because I’m not Christian and growing up in North America, not Christian means you are something else, you know, and I don’t feel its my choice to not be Jewish. I particularly feel that in light of what happened two generations ago in Germany, many people who probably had less identification with their Judaism than I did, may never have had 2 ounces of Jewish
education got rounded up and killed because they were Jews and it was their ethnic identity as Jews, not their practicing religion, not their spiritual connection, not any sign in their houses or their way of life in particular, it was the fact that they were Jewish and I have a very strong consciousness and awareness of that. Being born Jewish doesn’t mean that you have the freedom to renounce it because we live in a world where we can’t renounce it, you’re still Jewish.

There was only one participant who did not identify as being Jewish, although she does acknowledge her socialization. Susan explains: “I haven’t considered myself Jewish for years and years. I mean I am Jewish by birth. My family is Jewish and I acknowledge my conditioning but it’s not where my heart or loyalty lie or interest.”

Some of the participants experienced various forms of antisemitism, either directly or indirectly. Some had lost family during the Holocaust, while others were made to feel singled out in school. Some of the women went to Catholic schools and experienced racism from some of their teachers and peers. Others experienced some form of “internalized oppression.” Internalized oppression in a Jewish context has been defined as “the more subtle forms of anti-Semitism built into the social norms of society that make many Jews subconsciously feel that they are physically unattractive, socially gauche, or in other ways just not right to the extent they embody Jewish ways of thinking and acting.” (Lerner, 1994, pg. 14) Lerner believes that the decision to “play down or abandon one’s Jewishness has been heavily shaped by external social and psychological processes that have been internalized by Jews.” (Lerner, 1994, pg. 14) One
participant, Ruth expresses feelings of shame and self-hatred connected to her Jewish identity as a child:

I don't remember encountering any blatant anti-Semitism. I think that there was this kind of feeling until I went to camp, where everyone was Jewish and everyone was cool and everyone was singing, you know certain folk songs and talking about Israel too and it was, you know, prior to that, I think there was some shame, I mean there was some, it wasn't because of any incident I can remember but there was some shame somehow around being Jewish.

One participant came from a mixed marriage and describes how she felt about her Jewish identity. Anna explains:

We were aware of our Jewish identity but we did not practice any of the holidays. Once in a while we gathered with other people and it was kind of exotic...It wasn't our religion. But we were very aware of the identity and certainly of my mother's identity...I took on the Jewish identity when I was a lot older....As a child, she never really talked about us as being Jewish, although I know myself and my sister mostly, we kind of instinctually identified. I read a lot of Ann Frank kinds of things, I always identified with that and identified very much with the war because I knew my mother had gone through the war and she would talk about it...and when I was a teenager I took my mother to a French class at the Jewish community centre and there was folk dancing happening there and right away I got into it...I knew that was the beginning of taking on a Jewish identity...It was more the secular thing and I think I also denied my Jewish identity as
a child. On one hand, I went towards the Jewish experience, I was interested in that, especially as it was part of my history and I always liked Jews but I often, I didn’t go so far as to say I was myself a Jew, and it was almost denial as well because I didn’t want to be a part of it, yet I was a part of it and I also wanted to be part of it. It was a split....One thing because I was baptized as a Protestant and my father was Catholic and my mother was Jewish, I was always fond of saying that I’m not really any of them. I was all of them and not really any of them....And I developed a fascination with Israel as well and then I met my husband who is Israeli and so with him, I guess through him and by doing a workshop, I did an unlearning racism workshop about 4 years ago and in that it was kind of my coming out. For the first time I could actually say I am Jewish in front of a group of people and feel good about it....Deep inside I felt I was Jewish, but externally, when I was young it was inconsequential...I always felt like I was one of them and not one of them.

Anna’s observation of being “one of them and not one of them” has been noted in the literature. Barack Fishman (1993) writes: “within most mixed marriages the Jewish identity of the household is ambiguous. Children are raised in such a way that they feel themselves to be partly Jewish and partly Christian. The larger society, being predominantly Christian, tends to reinforce the child’s Christian identity....The success of mixed marriage households in transmitting Jewish tradition over the next generation is extremely unclear at best.”(Barack Fishman, S. 1993, pg. 29) Intermarriage has been a great concern in Jewish communities, the main issue being that of “Jewish communal survival”. (Baker, A. 1993, pg.172) In the Jewish communities the reactions to intermarriage have been conflicting. Baker reports: “the Orthodox inevitably view
(interrmarriage) in terms of an assimilation/disappearance scenario: to be avoided at all costs. At the other end of the spectrum are those who claim that ‘interrmarriage is likely to be a quantitative and qualitative gain for the American Jewish community.’ (Baker, A. & Goldsheider, in Baker, A. 1993, pg. 174) It is important to note that the Reform branch is the only denomination that will accept the children of Jewish fathers, since the children of a non-Jewish mother are not considered halachically Jewish. (Baker, A. ibid. pg. 172) This non-acceptance of the children of Jewish fathers’ by the majority of Jews may create confusion and conflict in terms of how an individual identifies. In either case, whether a child of a Jewish father or a Jewish mother, there is a chance that those individuals who experienced confusion regarding their Jewish identity, may look outside Judaism for other spiritual paths. In Anna’s case, she claimed her Jewish identity as an adult while seeking out other spiritual approaches.

For some of the participants, they described feeling a strong connection to their cultural identity and the meaning they derived from cultural expressions of Judaism. For example, Nadine explains:

I feel also clearly that I’m Jewish, you know that, I don’t know. I’ve thought this a lot through with my friends. You know about, you know the people that I choose to be with are Jewish, that’s who I feel most comfortable and excited by and interested with, aligned with, the foods I eat are Jewish, you know the Jewish calendar of holidays has meaning to me and I don’t know how much of that is just emotional history, it could be past lives. I have no idea, you know the very first time I heard Klezmer music I just jumped up and started dancing and I was already in my 30s or 40s when I heard it...But it just went right into my cells.
Rachel felt a connection to her identity through the values instilled by her parents:

Well, I think that through the Jewish upbringing and the values that were set forth in my life, like family values. I think that it’s given me a certain guideline of where I want to go in my life and I appreciate it. I feel very comfortable with that upbringing and I think when I approach any other situation and even in this Buddhist school, there will always be my Jewish nature coming through and I’m proud of it though, it’s who I am and I have a lot of appreciation also. I mean Jewish is one thing but just the general upbringing that I have had, I feel very privileged in my life and I think people can see that in me.

All of participants with the exception of one participant identified with their Jewish cultural identity. There was also one participant who identified as a Jew religiously as well as culturally. Identity for many of these women seemed to be connected to being part of a minority that has had a long history of persecution and anti-semitism. Some of the participants discussed how they experienced shame as children for being Jewish. Others had a sense of solidarity feeling that being Jewish is not a choice. For a number of the women, Jewish identity was also tied to positive experiences in their families and communities which resulted in finding meaning in Jewish cultural expressions and in a desire to pass on Jewish traditions to their children.

7) Gender Role Identity

Further evidence of women's invisibility in the records can also be seen by the lack of positive female role models in the texts. In the stories of the Old Testament,
women are depicted as being attached to men as wives, sisters and their daughters. (E. Goldstein, 1987, pg. 53)

We never hear of any stories about Sarah’s life apart from Abraham and if there are stories of independent women who are not attached to men, they are “considered dangerous.” (Goldstein, 1987, 53) Women’s invisibility in religious texts reveals an exclusion of women’s experience. It has taught generations of Jewish women what is expected of them and about their roles as women by virtue of being left out of important sacred stories. Even though we live in a secular society where religion has become compartmentalized from ordinary life, these ancient role models are deeply ingrained and impact all women to some degree. With the advent of feminist consciousness, these roles of invisibility have become inappropriate and too limiting.

It appears that the women who came from more “religious” backgrounds or traditional Jewish families, experienced some form of pressure to conform to traditional roles for women. Rachel, whose mother came from an Orthodox background spoke about some of her experiences growing up:

Well, something comes to mind because I think growing up a Jewish girl with a Jewish mother, there was a lot of pressure on me to have Jewish friends and especially as I got older and boyfriends which was a big issue in the house and this was not my choice...because I’ve always found again, like religion hasn’t been important to me in choosing my friends, and I’ve had some very good Jewish friends, but I’ve had very good friends from many walks of life, and religions, philosophies so. But growing up with that pressure where it was almost like if I had a friend who wasn’t Jewish it was harder to
bring this friend home to meet my family, to meet my mother especially. And boyfriends was out of the question if he wasn’t Jewish then you know there was just, I wasn’t even allowed to go see him and he wasn’t coming home.

Another participant, Rena talked about the values she was raised with and the roles and expectations she was expected to embrace:

Well, first and foremost I would say, you know, being Bat Mitzvah’d, raising Jewish kids, marrying a Jewish husband. Those are some of the main values, even though I don’t have one, a husband....My mother and father expect that if I have children they’ll be raised Jewish.

Nadine spoke about her role as a girl in her family:

Well I grew up in the 1950s and 60s and I think it was sort of that in between time. You know in some ways, I had all the traditional notions that I’d grow up and be a wife and a mother, but I was also encouraged to go to College. Girls were treated not equally at my Hebrew school, but probably more so than an Orthodox synagogue...

The expectation of marrying a Jewish man was common amongst those women whose parents were both Jewish, although this was not always the case with the participants who came from intermarriages.
Nadine, who came of age in the 50s and 60s, who had brothers talked about how her role in the family differed from her brothers remarked: “I did the dishes. I had to help clean and cook. When I became a teenager, my parents were very strict about curfews and who I went out with and how late I stayed out.” Rachel also spoke about how she was treated in relation to her brother: “My brother, first he’s the oldest and the son...{and} he was often like put up on a pedestal....” When I asked Rachel how she felt as a sister she spoke about how it did not affect her in the same way as one of her older sisters: “personally no, it did not make me feel any less than him, but I see how it affected my older sister.” These various perspectives point to how individuals in families have different experiences depending on “their position by gender and age.” (Jesse Barnard in Davidman and Tenenbaum, 1994, 160)

The women under 35 were raised during a time when the dominant cultural values had been revolutionized by the ideas of the women’s movement, which emphasized equality between the sexes. These ideas impacted family life and particularly, child rearing. The majority of participants in this study were raised in this climate. Although, some felt they were treated more or less equally in their families, some felt they were treated differently by virtue of their sex. Adrienne talks about how this value changed from her parents generation:

You know, my grandmother actually listens to my dad more than she listens to my mom, her daughter and also because he’s a doctor, and she always wanted a boy... She treats my brother and I pretty equally but in the generation above us she treats them different. But you know what? There are little traces of it and my mom catches it all the time which I think is also why I’ve been, kind of suffered from that sexism that she had. My mom has
done a pretty good job of making sure that we get equal, no matter what my grandmother unconsciously or consciously tried to do.

It seems that for some of these women, there was a set of limited and prescribed roles and expectations to follow. The expectations to marry and to marry a Jew was alienating to those who value other modes of relationship, such as remaining single, to not marry or to be a Lesbian. Regarding the notions of gender role identity, there were gradual changes over the three generations (grandmother, mother, daughter). With respect to the different treatment of the sexes, the main issue that emerged was the idea that the males were treated differently and more positively in terms of how they were valued in families, and this different treatment was observed by many of the participants. Another point which was not directly raised by participants but inferred is the notion that women’s spiritual life was confined to traditional roles for women. Kamenetz, in describing a Jewish Buddhist nun who grew up in the 1950s in the United States observes: “She knew no women rabbis or cantors. She had no access to spiritual life outside the traditional roles of wife and mother”. (Kamenetz, 1994, 134)
8) **Lifestyle**

Some of the participants in this study discussed their disdain for what they considered to be an emphasis on materialism in the Jewish community. This materialism has been acknowledged in Lerner's informal study on why Jews leave Judaism:

The Jewish world that they encountered seemed to be obsessed with money and power. Some reported watching their parents prepare for going to shul (Orthodox name for Synagogue) on the High Holy days. There was no spiritual preparation, but instead a major focus on getting fancy clothes, furs, jewelry....They argued, learning Hebrew and texts had proved to be little more than a way to feel comfortable in a community that embodied the same materialistic ethos that pervades (North)American society. The Jewish community, they felt, gives its real respect and highest honours not to those who are learned or spiritually or ethically developed, but to wealthy people who have no such knowledge or interests. (Lerner, 1994, pg. 3)

Similarly, some participants spoke of this same hypocrisy they saw in their communities and how painful it was for them. For example, Nadine explains:

I was a really religious kid and I saw people at Temple who’d really go there to see their friends or to show off their clothes or, it was very painful to me actually. So that’s why I started going to churches and reading books because I was really looking for something that I didn’t find at my temple.
Sarah spoke of her difficulties with the staging of "big Jewish events" such as Bar Mitzvahs and weddings which she found too overtly "materialistic". She explains:

I've often had a hard time feeling comfortable participating in those events. It's not so much the religion as much as the secular, cultural expression of a milestone in a Jewish person's life. But I don't like the way they are celebrated, so often I don't want to go, that's something I don't do.

Salutin has commented extensively on the shift and focus of the Jewish community from one of social activism to one of conspicuous consumption over a period of a few decades. (Salutin, 1984)

Sarah also discussed her feelings of alienation which was related to growing up around Jews that were of a higher social class than her family:

I think the Jewish community that was the reference point for me growing up was a very upper middle class community. All of the kids that I knew who were Jewish lived lifestyles that were very different from mine, they lived in bigger houses, their families had more money, they went on different kinds of trips and had different kinds of advantages handed to them on a silver platter, more or less compared to what my own experience was and it wasn't the fact of our Jewishness that was a divisive point because I wouldn't necessarily say that their homes were any more or less Jewish than mine, in some cases they were, some cases they weren't, but it was more, all the trappings around it that made me feel alienated from that. From the time that I was very
young...I was surrounded by people, from that strata...in the community I never felt comfortable there. I always felt like an outsider and I mean, I had friends, but I never felt like I was part of that....and in a lot of ways, I think it was unfortunate because I'm sure there are places in the Jewish community where things are very different and people are much more spiritual and less materialistic and it doesn't matter that you have like a 5 bedroom house in Forest Hill, but that was the kind of exposure I had and because of that it made me always feel like I was something other...it was very alienating.

The participants experiences of materialism in their communities along with the material values rampant in North American society clearly had an impact on them, creating a yearning for a more spiritual lifestyle.

9) Summary: Spiritual Longing

The longing for spiritual growth and new identities in a community of people who were also feeling a sense of exclusion and alienation results from many factors. Although there are undoubtedly more factors, these are the ones that most affected the women in this study. They include: theological difficulties, spiritual practice, the exclusivity of Judaism, Jewish education, Jewish identity within the dominant society, gender role issues regarding the role of women in the family and in Judaism, and lifestyle, particularly the lifestyle of materialism that emerged in the period of time the post-war participants experienced growing up. All of these factors, though experienced by the individuals in different ways, led to feelings of longing and gaps in spirituality and spiritual practice that became more important to the participants as they grew up and
entered adulthood, and which ultimately led to their desire to search for alternative values and paths.
Chapter 6

Point of Entry: Routes in

“During the liminal phase: when s/he is no longer what s/he was and not yet what s/he will be”. (Safer, J.F. Gill, F. M. 1982, pg. 87)

There were a number of ways that began each participants journey towards Buddhism. The participants named a total of eight different points of entry: 1) emotional suffering; 2) introduced to Buddhism via a friend/teacher; 3) travel or work in Asia; 4) reading Buddhist literature; 5) studied in school or university; 6) involved in other eastern practices; 7) went to a retreat or teachings on Buddhism; 8) met a Buddhist teacher. Each participant’s point of entry was usually a combination of these eight routes in. The following are each woman’s stories in their own words of how they came into contact with Buddhism.

Hannah

I read a book called The Way of the Peaceful Warrior. Its just a Western book based on Eastern philosophy and about finding yourself. I read that when I was 13 and I said, wow, this is just what I’ve been thinking for a long time. I didn’t think anyone else thought this way...the older I got I started finding out about self-help books which to me are a lot of it based on Eastern philosophy... I feel corny saying this, but I feel like I’ve always thought this way and then I read the book, and it kind of said okay Hannah you are normal, and I always thought god why do I care so much about, like, I feel like learning about myself is what I dedicate so much time of my thought to and its not like, so when I was younger and I was staring to question about like who you are and you’re 13 years old and you’re
going through puberty and I said god what’s wrong with me? You know I’m thinking about this and all my friends aren’t. So I read this book and I said maybe I am somewhat normal and then it encouraged me to continue on figuring out about myself... And then this is the first time being over here (in India), I’ve been here for 3 months. I’ve done a lot more investigation on Buddhism.

**Sarah**

Well, I had been from the time I was quite a bit younger, I had wanted to go to India. I hadn’t defined it as being Buddhism perse, it was just this real sense of wanting to go to India. India stood for magic and mystery and something spiritual and exotic and I don’t know, just it was a metaphor for something missing in my life, but I hadn’t defined it as Buddhism perse, it was a whole bunch of different things... but even on my first trip to India in 1984, I hadn’t made any special connection to anything Buddhist. I took pictures of Buddha’s but it didn’t really resonate for me on that trip as Buddhism, in fact I probably spent as much time being quite captivated by the Hindu community that I encountered and life in the Hindu Temples and learned yoga, but I think what it represented for me was an alternative vision of life, a place in the world that is very, very poor, but that is steeped in spiritual wealth and that presented a direct contrast to what I rejected about being Jewish in Toronto which was, you know, material, well-being and spiritual vacuum (laughs). So with India, it wasn’t Buddhism yet and it was my gravitation to that part of the world that ultimately put me in contact with Buddhism, specifically, an interest in travel to Asia encouraged me to sign up to work with Canada world youth and in other elements as well, in terms of being able to work with young
people and being involved in development education and I got placed in Pakistan which allowed me to go to India and Nepal afterward. And so with those circumstances of being in that part of the world that brought me to Buddhism... and also the fact that I was in a very emotionally unbalanced place when I found myself in Kathmandu in December of 1987 and when I had the opportunity then to take teachings from a Buddhist teacher.... It was a time of great emotional crisis.... and a time when I was feeling very vulnerable, alone, sad, depressed, and a lot of despair, and I think that was relevant because it was from that place of pain that the teachings I received about Buddhism really connected.... You know people classically turn to religion after the loss of someone, a death or whatever and I felt that that is exactly what happened to me. I was going through a very major emotional crisis and I was very ripe for the teachings.

Rena

First it was a teacher I had in high school who introduced me to meditation, and that was really poignant. She was an Indian American. She was a fantastic philosophy teacher, really brilliant woman. And she introduced me to Hinduism, Buddhism, all these things at the same time, but I really appreciated Buddhism a lot. Probably not more than any other but that was my introduction. Then I, not until many years later heard about the Dalai Lama winning the Nobel Peace Prize. In my class that I was teaching at that time we studied the Dalai Lama and we studied India and we were studying a lot of Asia....And then when I was coming to India I heard about the teachings. I read a book called 'A policy of Kindness'. This is about 1 1/2 years ago... Before that I think I had more of that influence coming in through fellow community members who had been in India...
college I took an Eastern Asian religions course and again, I really liked Buddhism. Everytime I looked at it I really liked it...Before I went to India, I had been teaching for several years and I needed a break and it felt like I could take some time to develop my curriculum, as well as to explore the world more and just take some time and figured that I’d go travelling indefinitely and see what I found. So that’s what I did! (laughs) And it wasn’t because I was really dissatisfied with anything at home, it’s just more that, in fact I felt always very fortunate that I wasn’t out there looking for something, I never felt like I was searching for something that I didn’t already have. Just more, being in the Himalayas with nice people, with mountain people or at least people with good hearts and I always felt and Chris, my partner too, to go to the places where people are Buddhist. The people are so nice and so peaceful and so aligned with what we’re thinking. So, of course we were attracted to all the places that Buddhists were at and pretty much we were almost only there except we went to a couple of other places. But it is mostly people that we were attracted to, and then we were not even going to come to India but it was because of the Dalai Lamas teachings that we just said we got to go to this one, you know (laughs). Like after reading everything that he has ever written, or whenever I’ve read anything he’s ever written, you know, this guy is aligned with, this could possibly be an enlightened being I got to go!...We ended up staying here ever since. (laughs)

Ruth

Well, I didn’t like come to Buddhism by reading anything. I went to a Vipassana course, Goenka style Vipassana 10 day course in November of 1993 in Amherst....I chose to do the course because I was just like needed something drastic because I was in a
relationship for 2 years and he was committed and I wasn’t committed, then I moved out and moved in to live with my mother... I just needed something radical for my brain. So I did the Vipassana course and it was very helpful and I still have hardly read anything about Buddhism...I also have a history of anxiety attacks... sometimes I thought I was having a heart attack, and I thought I was going to die and then around the time I was doing the Vipassana courses and prior to that I was having anxiety attacks and I was thinking that I was losing my mind and going crazy, literally. Vipassana helped with that a lot because you know more than a theology, it just is a practical you know, so I never said I’m a Buddhist, but what I learned through the Buddhist meditation practice is just how to deal with my own anxieties.

**Adrienne**

My partner, Andrew, has been practicing Buddhism for a while. He was here last year and then he came back and the whole feeling of being with him was really good. I felt all of a sudden when he came back to town, I felt more positive than I had for a long time, and very hopeful and very inspired and I didn’t even really know why. And he was saying like little things about like what the Dalai Lama would do when he got up in the morning. Like the first thing he’d do is ‘I’m alive! I could be dead tomorrow, I could have died in my sleep but I’m alive! I’m going to go for it!’ Which was kind of like, I’d never heard anything quite like it and was not doing very well personally at the time started to turn around pretty fast and Andrew.... was coming back here and I spent like 24 hours a day with him for the whole period that he was in the States, about 3 months. And then decided to come back here to Dharamsala with him and the whole time that we were
together his way of thinking was so different from anyone else’s I’d ever known. It was kind of a combination of Buddhist, worldview, Tibetan Buddhist worldview and other stuff from his life, you know, like positive influences, but it was Andrew! (laughs). We went on a road trip and he had this book that he was delivering to a friend, that was a printed version of a talk that the Dalai Lama gave on the Bodhichayya Avatara and the book, it’s called ‘A Flash of Lightening.’ When I began to read that it was totally over my head, all the terms, I’d just fall asleep after about 5 minutes (laughs), but then I’d open it again and try. And then I didn’t pick it up again till I got to Dharamsala and now I’ve been reading it diligently. In fact I’m going to finish it tonight. And began to read it, not just for reading sake or understanding, but like, I just started practicing what it was talking about, and I started reading it in earnest, doing all the visualizations and well, pretty much everything I could extract from it.

Rachel

I started reading books like Herman Hesse, Siddartha and just hearing the story of Buddha and...from what I could gather at that time, what Buddha was saying seemed very grounded to me and it became common sense to me, there was nothing really to question, it was fairly basic and easy to understand and then in one college, my last semester of College, I’d taken a course in Eastern philosophy and this was an alternative school system so we could direct our own course and everybody chose different philosophies to study, and my choice was Buddhism, Zen Buddhism and it was a good course because we were I think 5 or 6 students in the course and everybody chose a different philosophy to learn and as we learned our philosophies, we taught each
other...Then I went out to Japan, I mean my reason for going to Japan was really a financial reason, but, the interest in Buddhism was still there, so I thought, well this is perfect I’ll be in Japan and I can check it out and so, but that was my second reason for going out there. So, you know through being there and through meeting a lot of priests, and one woman priest as well actually, it was quite interesting, but again I saw that in many religions there is corruption and it deviates from where it originally came from and but I was seeing that side of it in Japan more than the side I was looking for, and then a lot of it was a business game, it was a money game, and the priest who did the ceremonies would make a big wad of money at the end. They’re working for the dollar and I guess I just wasn’t really finding the people that stood out. But then eventually I did find this one teacher, Nishigima is his name and just through his learning’s, I can’t even really say they’re Buddhist teachings, although they definitely, you know, his way of being is definitely along the Buddhist way, but he never talked to us about Buddha. He was living his life and we were allowed to live with him and observe what he was doing.

Susan

I knew nothing about {Buddhism} until I was in my early 40’s, around 41, 42 and I'd been divorced for a number of years and it was through a boyfriend who had travelled for 7 years around the world and had spent a lot of time in Asia and had been to Kopan and he called himself a Buddhist and I mean the very first time we talked, that he started talking about his travels and his life, it was like, Oh it was like looking through a magic door! And I just felt pulled, it was like ‘yes this is what I’ve been waiting for’!...it was
wonderful...I just never looked back. I was always looking for something and when, and the more I heard about Buddhism, I just felt at home.

Anna

It happened by accident while we were travelling in Asia. I think my partner always wanted to do a meditation retreat...I wanted to try it as I wanted to do some work on myself and he had heard of a Vipassana retreat in Thailand and he wanted to go but we found it was full. Then we found out about Kopan in Nepal and we did a retreat and it was one of the best experiences of my life. My partner and I were going through a lot of relationship stuff at that time and we both did this retreat and it gave us both a way of looking at the world...and how to talk about ourselves and the relationship stuff between us and working on our own stuff and me working a lot with stuff on my mother. It was phenomenal, it really changed things and we are to this day affected by that experience....It makes sense as a worldview.

Nadine

Well before I actually practiced Buddhism, I had studied it in College. It just happened that the College I went to had a very strong Oriental philosophy. There was one professor who offered this course and I just ate it up. It just made more sense to me than anything I’d ever seen. I guess it just matched my worldview, it just made sense to me. It wasn’t just Buddhism, it was also Taoism and all the Oriental philosophies just made more sense to me. Before I became involved in Buddhist practice, I had been doing yoga for many years and yoga meditation and...had become somewhat disillusioned with that teacher
because he was sleeping with his students there and then I started sitting at the place I
told you about in Barre...which is a Buddhist center and I really liked it there. The
teachers were more modern, I had spent 10 years with this yoga teacher who was very
traditional and old world, and here at IMS, I liked the Buddhist philosophy, I liked the
quiet sitting, and I liked that the teachers were very contemporary and applied Buddhist
wisdom to contemporary life and I sat there I think for 5 years before I met my Zen
teacher. When I met him, I was in crisis, I had just left my husband and I was just walking
down the street and I saw a poster that there was a weekend, like a therapy weekend and
I saw that one of the people leading it was a Zen teacher and I don’t know I was just
attracted so I went. I actually went for the therapy, I wasn’t going for the Zen...But when
I met him I, it was instant, there was an instant connection and I’ve been sitting with him
ever since.

In addition a few of the participants addressed an additional point of entry, the value
system of the religions of the East. Although this point was not elicited directly by many of
the participants, it appears to be relevant for those whose first contact with Buddhism was in
the East. For many, travelling to the East was exotic, as Sarah stated: “India stood for magic
and mystery and something spiritual and exotic.” Eastern religions were popularized in the 60s by
role models such as Allan Ginsberg, the Beatles and Leonard Cohen and became part of the
popular culture linking Eastern thought with the peace movement and the “new consciousness”.
Those travelling to Asia left the West in search of experiencing ‘otherness’. For some becoming
involved in Buddhism, at least initially may have grown out of an interest and desire to connect
to the culture they were travelling in and as a way to deepen the engagement with that part of
the world. These points of entry as articulated by the participants marked the different ways in which they were introduced to Buddhism.
Chapter 7
The Pull

Chapter 5 dealt with “Push Factors” which according to the women interviewees, pushed them away from Judaism. This chapter describes, the “Pull factors”, those factors which pulled the women toward Buddhism.

1) Buddhist Beliefs and Doctrines

In explaining what “Buddha” means, Thich Nhat Hahn writes: “The root-word buddh means to wake up, to know, to understand; and he or she who wakes up and understands is called a Buddha...The capacity to wake up, to understand and to love is called Buddha nature.” (Thich Nhat Hahn, 1987, pg. 13) Thich Nhat Hahn explains a very essential element in Buddhism which is that everyone has the potential to become a Buddha, to become “enlightened”, it is attainable. A few of the participants discussed this idea of attainability. For example, Rachel explains: “Everybody is capable {of being a Buddha}...I think if we can realize our own capabilities then we are not so far away.” Rena observes: “Enlightenment, the whole idea, I really like it. So it seems really right to me. Its like after studying Maslow and actualizing yourself and I mean everything I’ve heard and felt completely rung true in my heart...” For other participants, the attainability of Buddhahood or enlightenment was not discussed. Perhaps this suggests less of an interest in an end goal and more of an interest in the process.

Connected to the idea that enlightenment is attainable is that the Buddha (the historical Buddha) taught the importance of testing the teachings out for oneself. Spretnak explains:
The Buddha admonished listeners not to believe anything he said until they had tried the practice for themselves. Spiritual teachings, he advised, should never be accepted merely because of the weight of tradition or respect for a teacher, but only if they are wholesome and effective. He discouraged speculation of all sorts, as it distracted people from experiential realization. (Spretnak, 1991, pg. 42)

Similarly, Thich Nhat Hahn explains: "Blind faith is not encouraged. We have to see, touch, experiment with, and verify things before we truly believe in them." (Thich Nhat Hahn, 1993, 180)

Some of the participants were attracted to this experiential approach. For example, Anna describes it in psychological terms: "It makes sense as a worldview...just in terms of working on yourself...first look at yourself." Similarly, Hannah articulated: "To me, Buddhism is taking on responsibility for your own mind, your own actions so you can benefit others." Rachel studying Buddhism in Japan said:

Without a discussion there was no telling us how to live, how to do anything...Everybody had the freedom to discuss whatever came out. It was just open discussion, exploring where each one of us was coming from...The students were taught to be independent, to learn ways in their own experiences, and not just relying on the teacher.

McCloy Layman (1976) also found this attraction in her study labelling it the "do it yourself appeal" which she explains as: "the appeal that one can assure one’s salvation through one’s
own efforts without having to trust a supernatural being and without having to depend on anyone other than oneself.” (McCloy Laymen, 1976, pg. 268)

“Buddhism is a non-theistic religion”. (Gross, 1993, pg. 137) Rita Gross, a Jewish Feminist Buddhist scholar states that:

Buddhist non-theism does not deny the existence of supernatural beings; what it denies is that such beings can confer enlightenment or save sentient beings from samsaric existence...There can be no vicarious enlightenment {since} there is no external saviour. Consequently Buddhism simply lacks categories that have so consumed the interest and energies of many other religions-Absolute Supreme Being, Creator, God...” (Gross, 1993, pg. 137)

Many of the participants in this study articulated their difficulties with Jewish conceptions of God and found Buddhism to be more theologically compatible with their notions of God and life. Sarah who had difficulties with male conceptions of God, finding it too patriarchal explains: “I finally felt like I found my spiritual home, a place where there was room for spiritual outlet without being tied to this whole God thing, which was really problematic for me in Judaism.” For others like Susan, who had an affinity with nature as a young girl and found the Jewish God “too intellectual” found Buddhism more compatible with her worldview. She describes this compatibility: “The oneness...the spirit is in all of us and everything and also just the whole idea of the changeability of things”. Similarly Anna describes: “There is a force outside of ourselves and yet it is also within ourselves. So that jives better with my sense of God and the world than God in the Jewish or Christian traditions”.

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Many of the participants felt at home with the Buddhist non-theistic approach. For some of the women they found a framework within Buddhism to articulate their own notions of God which had not fit in with traditional Jewish conceptions of God. Weinberg notes “Buddhist practice and theology minimize feminist issues Jews may have with God. True, The Buddha was a man, and there certainly are patriarchal residues in Buddhist culture{s}, but there is no personal God who is always called He, Him, Father, King.” (Weinberg, 1994, 2)

Buddhism is founded upon the Four Noble Truths:

suffering is with us throughout this life; the cause of suffering is desire (craving or aversion); the way out of suffering is the Eightfold path, the way beyond desire. The eightfold path consists of morality (right speech, right action, right livelihood), meditation (right concentration, right mindfulness, right effort), and wisdom (right understanding, right thought), each of which strengthens the growth of the others. (Spretnak, 1991, pg. 41)

For a number of the participants these aspects of Buddhist teachings gave them a way to understand and deal with their own suffering. Sarah explains:

It was a time of great emotional crisis...and a time when I was feeling very, vulnerable, alone, sad, depressed, and a lot of despair, and I think that was relevant because it was from that place of pain that the teachings I received about Buddhism really connected. I think you know when you talk about The Four Noble Truths and you can’t relate to the fact that there is suffering in life because everything is going great and you don’t see it,
then it doesn't necessarily connect... It was a time in my life when I really felt like I was suffering a lot and Buddhism gave me a way of understanding the suffering and putting my suffering into perspective and giving me a sense of hope again because I felt like there was a purpose to it, that I was going to grow from it, and that Buddhism gave me a sense of meaning about it all that helped me to survive that very difficult time in my life. So I think it was really important and I mean I guess a lot of people say they have to go through some kind of crisis before they realize that they need something spiritual in their life.

Anna spoke in terms of helping her with relationship difficulties:

My partner and I were going through a lot of relationship stuff at that time and we both did this retreat and it gave us both a way of looking at the world...and how to talk about ourselves and the relationship stuff between us and working on our own stuff and me working a lot with stuff on my mother. It was phenomenal, it really changed things and we are to this day affected by that experience....It makes sense as a worldview.... Each time (during a retreat) you never know what you'll be coming up against, but usually it was things with my mother and it has really helped me come to terms with...it really helped my relationship with my mother....It just brings in an overview of priorities into life....Even when dealing with issues with my daughter I try to remember that she has to go through her own stuff. It doesn't always work. but it is there...

Adrienne speaks about working with her mindstates:
Human negativity is a result of attitude and you really can change your attitude and you really can transform your mind and positivity isn’t something that you can be sometimes but its something that you can be all the time and what I’ve experienced from being around my partner {who is a Buddhist}.... who is, I mean I’ve never seen him be negative ever. It’s really had a big, rapidly changing, positive effect on me...I’ve begun to be able to see, to feel when I’m having the intention to sabotage myself. I mean before I felt like a victim of my, whatever circumstances. Just beginning to realize that feeling nothing is really an option and that I can feel good all the time and that feeling, feeling good like, like really good is, the effects of that, move outward like ripples and effect everything in my life and everything I do and everyone around me and positivity really does beget positivity as does negativity, creates more negativity and I’m really beginning to take responsibility for, more and more subtle levels of intention. You know of intention to be happy or intention to be a wreak...Just recognizing the difference between true negativity and true positivity is a huge positive addition to my life... It’s nice to actually know of a practice that seems to work really well for a lot of people.

Ruth discussed how her anxiety has diminished:

Before I did Vipassana, I mean I had Judaism which I loved and was getting a lot out of, but it wasn’t helping me have peace of mind....It helped me, I also have a history of right after my parents divorced, I started having anxiety attacks. I was having anxiety attacks all through my twenties, maybe two or three times a year, but they were, like I thought I
was having a heart attack, and I thought I was going to die and then around the time I was doing the Vipassana courses and prior to that I was having anxiety attacks and I was thinking that I was losing my mind and going crazy, literally. I couldn’t think, weird sensations, you know not being able to see straight, and I didn’t know what was wrong with me and Vipassana helped with that a lot because you know more than a theology, it just is a practical you know, so I never said I’m a Buddhist, but what I learned through the Buddhist meditation practice is just how to deal with my own anxieties, like when it would start to arise, like weird sensations and perceptions, I would just observe my breath, observe my sensations and it would calm itself down. And I would remind myself that none of this is real anyway. So I was able to prevent a lot of major anxiety attacks....

Sylvia Boorstein, a Jewish Buddhist meditation teacher also acknowledges being pulled by the Buddhist explanation for suffering explaining: “it recognizes that pain is a given in life, but still offers the possibility of the end of suffering (by ending the extra pain of struggling with situations beyond our control). The end of suffering, I learned was something I could bring about through my own practice”. (Boorstein, 1997, pg. 21) A number of the participants were attracted to Buddhism for its teachings and methods of alleviating suffering. For some they found methods helpful as a psychological process tool for personal growth while for others it was an all encompassing spiritual path that promises personal transformation through Buddhist beliefs and practices.

Central to Buddhist teachings is the teaching on Emptiness which explains the “radical interdependence of all phenomenon.” (Macy, 1991, pg. 60) Thich Nhat Hahn, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher explains:
We have to strip away all the barriers in order to live as part of the universal life. A person isn’t some private entity travelling unaffected through time and space as if sealed off from the rest of the world by a thick shell. Living for 100 or for 100,000 lives sealed off like that not only is not living, but it is not possible. In our lives are present a multitude of phenomenon, just as we ourselves are present in many different phenomenon. We are life, and life is limitless. Perhaps one can say that we are only alive when we live the life of the world, and so live the sufferings and joys of others. The suffering of others is our own suffering, and the happiness of others is our own happiness. The impermanent character of the universe, the successes and failures of life can no longer manipulate us. Having seen the reality of interdependence and entered deeply into its reality, nothing can oppress you any longer. You are liberated.” (Thich Nhat Hahn, 1975, pg. 49)

Some of the participants spoke about their attraction to the teachings of interdependence in Buddhism. Nadine explains: “For me to sit in emptiness is a clear expression everyday of honouring the preciousness of each being.” Ruth refers to her experience at a Vipassana meditation retreat: “And I thought, there is more to myself than what I’ve known until now. The energy of God and the emptiness they sort of merge. I mean in Vipassana meditation there’s no God. There is that emptiness, there is that ultimate truth, that ultimate reality that I have some sense of, I mean I really don’t know, but I have some sense...” Sarah reveals her attraction to this teaching while drawing a comparison between the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber’s concept of God and this notion of interdependence:
When I read Martin Buber’s book, I and Thou, a book recommended by Stephen Batchelor a Buddhist teacher, I felt incredibly inspired by the fact that this Jewish philosopher conceived of God in a way that was Buddhist. In a way that God was an energy, that existed in relationship and in relation and God with that which connected us and a vision of God as the interdependence of all people not as something outside of us that way.

Rena appreciated the values of interdependence and a sense of responsibility which were aligned with her values and her work:

Buddhism was a whole organized religion of 4000 years, but that was saying the same things that we were teaching in our environmental education classes. Training impermanence, you know, change is the ecological concept, impermanence is the Buddhist concept. Interdependence, dependent arising (same meaning as emptiness), its the same thing...if you take it on as a real belief, it really changes things.

When I asked Susan what drew her to Buddhism she replied “the oneness of everything. The interconnectedness, very simple”.

Rita Gross has written extensively about the issue of gender and emptiness stating that “‘male’ and ‘female’, like all other labels and designations are empty and lack substantial reality. Therefore they cannot be used in a rigid and fixed way to delimit people.”(Gross, 1993, 176) This is significant because although Buddhism is Patriarchal, its core teachings, like
interdependence are clearly not, which is a potential explanation for the attraction to this teaching for Jewish women. They are able to get beyond rigid gender definitions and roles that are not only prescribed in Judaism but also in mainstream society. Some participants acknowledged Patriarchal aspects but expressed that they still were able to feel comfortable. Sarah explains:

How I feel as a woman and also as somebody who is not very big into rigid patriarchal institutions. I mean I have the same problem as a woman in Buddhism that I do as a woman in Judaism. I don’t feel that Buddhism is the least bit more progressive, it’s not. The only difference is that as a student of Buddhism in the West one has an opportunity to some extent to recast the practice in a way that is more consistent with one’s own values because you really are in the process of creating something because taking Buddhism out of its cultural context and placing it in a brand new environment it has to shift and change and that contact with more contemporary ways of thinking, can be very beneficial in that respect because it opens up more space.

Nadine explains how she feels Buddhism is changing in the West with the influence of Feminism:

Well in my particular Sangha (community), there was some struggle around pronouns...but my teacher was willing to open up to Feminist thought and practice. Certainly the history of Buddhism is just as Patriarchal as any of them...but ultimately,
the philosophy of Buddhism is nondualistic, so ultimately if you follow that through, a non-dualistic philosophy will bring you to Feminism.

2) Spiritual Practice and Buddhist Rituals

One of the aims in Buddhism is the “dismantling the construct of a separate self and all the constraints that go with it”. (Parry, & Jones, in Claxton, 1986, pg. 177) One of the ways this is accomplished is through a strong meditation practice. In fact “all the teachings exist only to support the practice of meditation. Neither the therapeutic nor the cosmological realizations of Dharma can be experienced merely through the mode of intellectual description. That is why the Buddha discouraged people from accepting his words until they tried the process.” (Spretnak, 1991, pg. 53) Meditation can be done alone, in small groups or in community retreat settings. Some of the participants discussed the importance of feeling the support of a community. Some people spoke of Sangha in terms of the people they feel connected to as well as people to practice meditation and the teachings with. For example, Sarah explains: “My connection to Buddhism has affected who I can have a relationship with...I don’t feel a connection with anybody that doesn’t share that sort of spiritual sense whether it be Buddhist or something else...I also feel it is important to practice with a community of people and participating in retreats is one of the ways I do that.” Nadine articulates her commitment to Sangha and participating in retreats: “I usually do week long retreats with a community of Buddhists three times a year and some weekend retreats...so its a big commitment, its the most important thing in my life.”
Nadine also spoke of how she has involved her children: “Since they were very little we’ve always gone for this family retreat one week a year. It is a way for children to meet a community of other children whose parents do this funny thing...”

Anna values a sense of community also and relates her commitment to doing retreats: “I think I’ve done four ten day Vipassana retreats since coming back from Asia. Now with the children we have done a few little retreats but for the last year I haven’t done any and I’d love to...I plan to get back to it when the kids get older.”

Ruth speaks of how a community has helped her to practice: “I used to go and sit (with a community) maybe 2 nights a week, now I might go every 2 or 3 weeks. But I still have a few friends from the community. I don’t do it (meditate) too much on my own.”

Clearly, many of the participants practice in the setting of community retreats and were attracted to meditation which was articulated through a desire to participate in meditation retreats with a community to assist them with their meditation practice and to have spiritual friends to help support in their practice. As Thich Nhat Hahn writes: “In Buddhist practice, we stress the sangha. If you leave the sangha, it is said to be like the tiger leaving {her} mountain. A tiger that comes to the lowlands can be caught by humans and killed. A practitioner without sangha can lose {her} practice.” (Thich Nhat Hahn, 1993, pg. 197)

Chogyam Trungpa, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher explains the purpose of meditation:

In the beginning, the practice of meditation is just dealing with the neurosis of mind, the confused relationship between yourself and projections, your relationship to thoughts. When a person is able to see the simplicity of the technique without any special attitude toward it {she} is able to relate to {herself} with {her} thought pattern as well. {She}
begins to see thoughts as simple phenomena, no matter whether they are pious thoughts or evil thoughts...whatever they may be...When you relate to thoughts obsessively, then you are actually feeding them because thoughts need your attention to survive. Once you begin to pay attention to them and categorize them, then they become very powerful. You are feeding them energy because you have not seen them as simple phenomena. If one tries to quiet them down, that is another way of feeding them. So meditation in the beginning is not an attempt to achieve happiness nor is it the attempt to achieve mental calm and peace, though they could be by products of meditation.” (Trungpa, 1988, 46)

Many of the women in this study practiced a form of meditation. Some like Nadine practice daily: “Well I sit probably 2 or 3 hours a day”. Others have irregular meditation practices but participate regularly in retreats. Susan explains: “Meditation is very important to me but I don’t have an everyday practice...and there’s a sitting group that my partner facilitates once a week. I might sit or I might not. I would say there is more commitment to retreat than there is to meditation. Taking time away from the norm to reflect and be quiet. I think that is very, very important.”

Anna commented similarly: “My partner and I meditated regularly for a while...We were amazed at what we got out of it...It was the first time I’d been alone more or less without talking and I thought that was great...having the quiet time to think.”

It seemed that certain aspects of meditation like contemplation and silence were valued by these participants. Sarah also acknowledges how meditation has affected her life and how she values silence:
It's affected my life even in the way I listen to music. I remember when I was younger I used to listen to music all the time. I used to come home and the first thing I'd do was put on my tape and I never went anywhere without my tapes, you know, like in the days before my car even had a tape deck, I used to plug the ghetto blaster into the lighter so I'd have tapes in the car and now my life, even as busy as it is, there are so many more positives from silence. So many more times when I'm not wanting to fill up my life with noise or music even and those are things that I guess are all manifestations of the commitment...

Others discussed their attraction to meditation in terms of its calming and peaceful elements. Ruth discussed specifically how it helped her with anxiety:

Just as a result of the meditating, I just felt more at peace...It helped me, I also have a history of right after my parents divorced, I started having anxiety attacks. It wasn't because I was upset about the divorce per se, but it was stuff around it. I don't really, I was having anxiety attacks all through my twenties, but, maybe 2 or 3 times a year, but they were, like I thought I was having a heart attack, and I thought I was going to die and then... what I learned through the Buddhist meditation practice is just how to deal with my own anxieties, like when it would start to arise, like weird sensations and perceptions, I would just observe my breath, observe my sensations and it would calm itself down...So I was able to prevent a lot of major anxiety attacks.
Rachel explains her experience:

I think it's had a very calming effect. Through Buddhism and through the teachings that I experienced in Japan because in these teachings we were doing meditation everyday, and it was a big part central part of my day... It gave me a real sense of peacefulness that I needed to counterbalance with the daily grind of living and working in Tokyo... The more I was sitting in Zazen (Zen meditation) posture the more I was capable of, let's say, being on a crowded train and standing sandwiched between 50 million people and being able to do the same thing with my mind in order to deal with the situation around me.

Nadine notes the importance of applying meditation to her life:

You know sitting Zazen helps one, as my teacher says, sharpen the knife, but ultimately if you sit around sharpening all day, it will disappear. You have to apply it in your daily life and so that is the practical application. I feel like constantly, having to do battle with greed, ignorance, all those things, you know that are in us as human beings and I feel that continue to be emphasized in this culture. Which I resent you know. So I'm very grateful to Buddhist practice because to whatever extent I can reach that I have a lot more peacefulness. But it's easy to forget about that for me unless I have sitting practice. I can get caught up in the whirlwind of activities like anybody else.

Weinberg has also noted this attraction of meditation for Jews stating that the experience of meditation "brings us closer to ourselves" and to the understanding of the interconnectedness of all life. (Weinberg, 1994, 2)
Relationship with the Teacher

The tradition of passing experiential understanding from teacher to student has been all but forgotten here in the West...But once the link from teacher to student is broken it is difficult to mend, and experiential understanding is then hard to obtain. For although it is the natural state of mind, and there are thus rare occasions of contacting this awareness spontaneously, without a proper guide it is difficult to develop the foundation necessary to sustain, direct, and integrate such an experience into our daily lives. (Tarthang Tulku, 1977, pg. 156)

Since the 1960s, there have been a number of teachers from Asia and elsewhere that have come to the West, become well known, founded prominent retreat centres and Buddhist schools and attracted prominent Buddhist students and have brought with them this tradition of passing on 'experiential understanding' to students.

For many participants a connection to a teacher was a significant draw in attracting them to Buddhism. Rachel explains the nature of her relationship with her teacher:

What I liked {about my teacher} is what I learned from him. I liked the way he was such a composed person and very in touch with himself and mostly he was laughing, mostly he could find humour in just about everything and it brings out a very light side. I've seen him get angry, but when he gets angry, there is an anger that comes, he expresses what he wants to say and then that anger is gone after it. He doesn't hold on to it and I was impressed by that because I think that there is some truth in the fact that humans do get angry, there are situations that can aggravate us and being in touch with our own
emotions towards it and having an understanding of why we’re angry facilitates the way we can deal with it, instead of carrying our anger with us through our day to day lives. I was really impressed by that side of him and I was impressed also by his own personal history the life that he’s lived and his openness to discuss it and I felt that I have a lot to learn from just from his experiences and coming from a much different age group...I’ve seen the philosophy of non-attachment and I’ve seen how people can get very attached to Buddha or to the teacher and I think that in his teachings, he certainly taught a form of non-attachment and he didn’t respect any attachment to him but nonetheless there were students who were very attached to him, and I think he had his own sort of way of dealing with that as easing the attachment and teaching the students to be independent, to learn the ways in their own experiences, gathering their own experiences, and not just relying on the teacher.

Nadine speaks of her commitment to her teacher:

I met a Zen teacher who felt right to me, so that’s how I landed with Zen, I mean it was more personality than anything Zen. It was just this man that I met. So it still feels that way, I mean this is a lot of years later, and it still feels that it serves me.... Yeah I’m still sitting with him because I feel, I mean, I feel like he was my, he brought me up in a way.

Sarah has felt a strong connection with several teachers in India, Nepal and Europe and has been disappointed by her contact with teachers in her local area. She explains:
I've been on a periphery of a couple of different Buddhist communities in my area and I haven't felt very comfortable in any of them...I think the extent to which people are strongly identified with the group and the teacher, and its a whole sort of scene that I don't feel that great about especially because in many cases, the actual teachers that are here are not really people that are really inspiring. Not the same kind of teachers that I've been exposed to when I was travelling in Asia or you know even going to Gaia House in England where I really felt like, 'wow the teachers here are inspiring'- they were people you wanted to be in the same room with and learn from and just who inspired you. I haven't felt that kind of inspiration from anyone here.

A number of the participants whom I met at The Dalai Lama’s teachings in Dharamsala, India, expressed a strong connection to him. Rena for example said: “I'm really into His Holiness, The Dalai Lama really seems to make the teachings open and available that way? Like he doesn’t say, you don’t have to be a Buddhist to do this, if you want to do this, if you find something valuable take it on. You know but, if you don’t find it valuable then just refuse it (laughs). It’s so much less dogmatic.”

A number of participants began or have their relationships with teachers through the books they read. Rena had read books by the Dalai Lama before going to India. In general, Dharma Books are widely read and have had a huge impact on attracting large numbers of Westerners.

Kamenetz also found that “seeking direct contact with a teacher of wisdom” was an attraction for many Jewish Buddhists. (kamenetz, 1994, pg. 148) He attributes this to in part, the “inaccessibility of Jewish mysticism.” (Kamenetz, 1994, pg. 148) Rena agrees: “I never
had an enlightened Jewish teacher. If I had one maybe I’d be more attracted in that way…” In speaking of Jewish mysticism she continues: “It would be great if there were teachings on the Kabbalah…it was never talked about. And its only been recently since I’ve met international travellers and people from Israel that I’ve heard about it.” Kamenetz discovered that all of the Jewish Buddhists he interviewed found “Jewish mysticism inaccessible.” He writes: “Most were surprised…that such teachings existed. They certainly didn’t know of any teachers.” (Kamenetz, ibid. pg. 148) When Kamenetz discussed Kabbalistic doctrines with Allan Ginsberg, the famous poet and a Jewish Buddhist, Ginsberg, asked questions which Kamenetz could not answer: “What specific group with a lineage teaches that and has practices that lead to understanding of that, the absorption of that? Who would be the contemporary teacher representing that tradition? What’s available for students?”(Kamenetz, 1994, pg. 148) It would be important to say here that women traditionally could not participate in mystical practices. These practices were secretive. It is only in the last few decades that Kabbalah has become popularized and that women may participate.

Weinberg also believes that having powerful Buddhist teachers who are models of what they teach is a significant attraction for Jews moving towards Buddhism.
4) Attitudes, Feelings and Identity

Overall, the view of Buddhism, as expressed in major teachings is that ‘the dharma is neither male nor female’... None of the major teachings of Buddhism supports gender inequity or gender hierarchy. Instead, if one tries to link these core teachings with questions about how best to think about and deal with human sexual differentiation one must conclude that the Buddhist worldview and ethic are more consistent with gender equality than gender inequity, more consistent with flexibility and non-fixation regarding gender roles and stereotypes than with rigid, unalterable gender specific norms and behaviours. Therefore I am convinced that the only possible conclusion one can derive is that, at least in terms of worldview and major teachings, Buddhism is remarkably free of gender bias”. (Gross, 1993, pg. 209-210)

Many of the participants discussed their attitudes regarding how they felt as women in Buddhism. Some of the women felt very comfortable in Buddhist settings. For example Anna replied, “I feel that Buddhism is a vehicle for me... and I don’t think it makes any difference that I’m a woman.” Susan said when I asked her how she felt as a woman in Buddhism: “I feel fine. I mean this sangha is not based on a monastic, there’s no hierarchy between male and female.” Sarah agrees with Susan, although she discusses her concern with the tradition of ordination and her ideas for improvement:

So for me as a student of Buddhism a sense of practice, like very concretely, I’ve felt very empowered within a setting of retreats to participate fully and to feel as much involved as any man and I don’t feel in any way that being a woman is a disadvantage. The emphasis
in Buddhism itself, of taking ordination as a path of steps to assess merit...has been problematic for me and so it’s less a question of not finding the status within the practice for myself because I think I have one but on some level of dissatisfaction with the extent to which, there is still a very strong strata within the tradition, whether it be Theravadin, Mahayana, or you know, Vajrayana, Tibetan Buddhism. The view within all three that there is an emphasis on being a monk or a nun and what that means for those of us who choose the lay life is that there is often not enough consideration on how practice actually can be incorporated into the context of a relationship and in fact how relationships can be a very fruitful place to practice and how to encourage that, how to use the tools of Buddhism to enhance the relationship that will carry with it the potential for real personal transformation. I don’t think there is enough emphasis in Buddhism on that. And that is the one thing that I guess I appreciate about Judaism for example is that it is really focused in the family and the importance of the relationship and the focus on what passages the couple need to be in order to meet their spiritual requirements and I think in some ways it’s probably gone overboard in that direction.

Rachel speaks of her experience of living in her community. “I felt very accepted as a woman and I felt respected in my position there as well...I don’t really identify as a woman, I am a human first and I’m doing what I do...I look at people around me and see what they do for their human values not their sexual values.” Nadine discussed her distress at her teacher who has been promiscuous with his students and how she was dealing with this situation:
This teacher has been sleeping around too, I found out! That's why I went and found myself a woman teacher...I'm still sitting with him because I feel, I mean, I feel like he was my, he brought me up in a way...He's been an incredible teacher for me and I rant and rave and I get furious at him, you know and but I think if I'd been younger I would have gotten angry and would have left. But I feel such a commitment to this man and have such a long history with him and so much intimacy with him on a spiritual level that what I keep choosing at this point is to stay and to keep ranting and raving and giving him books to read and insisting on psychotherapy, you know. Some of my friends have left and others of us are trying to stay with him and get him to straighten up and deal with the problem that he has, some people just ignore it. So its a struggle, you know it's just like every place else... But I needed, I felt like I needed a woman teacher because I needed some place else to go to have support to pull this off.

This problem of sexual activities by male Buddhist teachers in North America has been discussed by Wessinger. She points out the dangers of according “superhuman status to the teacher”. (Wessinger, 1993, pg. 139) She writes: “As a result, many American Buddhist women have turned to women teachers to avoid exploitation.” (Wessinger, 1993, pg. 139)

Inclusiveness was a factor that was significant for a number of women. Although, as some participants stated, the Patriarchal and sexist aspects exist in Buddhism, they have still felt they are able to participate fully and when sexist aspects existed overtly such as in Nadine's account of her teacher, she made the choice to work from the inside to change things, seeking out a woman teacher for support.
A number of prominent Buddhist leaders and teachers such as The Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hahn have also encouraged students to not abandon their roots. Some of the women in this study discussed this issue of not having to convert or take on the whole religion as an attraction to Buddhism. For example Adrienne says: “I mean I don’t actually feel that taking on Buddhist beliefs means that I’m not a Jew...I don’t feel that what I’m making is a commitment to Buddhism. I feel like I’m studying the Dharma and really taking what feels like the truth of it on...”

Rena speaks about how she feels:

I haven’t clearly sided with one particular school and after the recent teachings it seems like His Holiness didn’t suggest that anyone had to and that it actually is more of a benefit it study various schools....I’m really interested in learning more, but I’m not committed to one particular practice. I’m not saying I’m going to commit, I’m still not saying I’m a Buddhist, you know, but then again that’s because I wasn’t born a Buddhist. Like I feel that my lineage is Jewish. But I still am practicing Buddhism. I don’t know, the Dalai Lama really seems to make it open and available that way? Like he doesn’t say, you don’t have to be a Buddhist to do this, if you want to do this, if you find something valuable take it on. You know but, if you don’t find it valuable then just refuse it (laughs). It’s so much less dogmatic than, this is also another reason why I can really get into it.

Rachel’s testimony of her experiences in Japan exemplify the non-threatening environment that is often found in Buddhist settings:
My teacher was living his life and we were allowed to live with him and observe what he was doing. There was no telling us how to live, how to do anything. It was just his own work that he would discuss and then everybody had the freedom to discuss whatever came out. It was just open discussion, exploring where each one of us was coming from...

Ruth makes an observation comparing followers of Sai Baba, a Hindu Avatar and those at The Dalai Lama’s teachings: “There’s a lot more Jews here than there was at Sai Baba’s ashram. The kind of devotion that people show the Dalai Lama is much more low key compared to Sai Baba. Its much more easy to digest. I mean you don’t have people falling all over his feet. So its much easier for the Western mind to accept Buddhism than Hinduism.” Ruth’s point, that it may be easier to ‘accept’ Buddhism over some other religions for Jews, may be significant in explaining in part why a number of Jewish women may be more inclined to be attracted to Buddhism than to other religions. Some of the participants addressed the idea that at least in the beginning one does not feel forced to make a commitment and thus they were able to feel comfortable with the aspects of Buddhism they accepted. As Kamenetz notes:

You don’t have to be converted to Buddhism to meditate. You don’t have to sign up to a long list of beliefs or assertions about historical events or figures. The most basic meditations are as available as your next breath. And if they prove useful to an individual, beyond them are very systematic paths of spiritual development. (Kamenetz, 1994, pg. 149)
Many participants felt unthreatened by the notion that they could use the aspects of Buddhism and Buddhist practice that were helpful to them and provided them with meaning in their lives, without having to fully convert to Buddhism and cease to be Jews.

5) Quality of Life

In Buddhism it is emphasized that meditation is to be not only practiced while sitting or walking but throughout the day. This practice is part of what is known as mindfulness practice which emphasizes living fully in the present moment, whether it is while washing dishes or while working. (Thich Nhat Hahn, 1975) The Bodhisattvah path consists of six transcendental activities: “transcendental generosity, discipline, patience, energy, meditation, and knowledge. These are called the six paramitas. Paramita means arriving at the other side or shore, which indicates that the activities of the Bodhisattvah must have the vision, the understanding which transcends the centralized notions of ego. The Bodhisattva is not trying to be good or kind but is spontaneously compassionate.” (Trungpa, 1987, pg. 179) Traditionally Buddhist practitioners begin the Bodhisattvah path by taking a vow that they will give up preoccupation with their own personal development in order to devote their lives for the ‘benefit of all sentient beings’. One essential practice for the Bodhisattvah is that of ahimsa, which means non-violence or non-harming. (Thich Nhat Hahn) Thich Nhat emphasizes:

In order to practice ahimsa, we must first of all learn ways to deal peacefully with ourselves. If we create true harmony within ourselves, we will know how to deal with others. Most important is to become ahimsa, so that when a situation presents itself, we will not create more suffering. To practice ahimsa, we need gentleness, loving-
kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity directed to our bodies, our feelings, and other people.” (Thich Nhat Hahn, 1993, pg. 69-70)

The five precepts are the ethical foundations of this path. The five precepts are: Do not kill, do not steal, no sexual misconduct, do not lie and no intoxicants. Thich Nhat Hahn a contemporary revisionist has reformulated these five precepts in order to make them more relevant to today’s world. For example the first precept has been translated to:

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking and in my way of life”. (Thich Nhat Hahn, et al, 1993, pg. 13)

Some of the participants discussed the ethics of Buddhism and how they are practiced in everyday lives. Nadine explains:

My husband and I talk about the ethical parts, not just the quiet meditation, but the ethics of Buddhist precepts, so I think they {my children} know, so that is I think a good thing. I feel like its a lot the ethics of Buddhism which ultimately of course and not that different from the ethics of Judaism or Christianity or any real religious teaching, but for me Buddhism said it much more clearly and is much more obviously grounded in the practice of Buddhism, that for me to sit in emptiness is a clear expression everyday of honouring
that we exist and preciousness of each being, so how could I kill somebody or how could I cheat somebody or steal from somebody? I mean not, obviously I’m not walking around this perfected Boddhisatva or anything but you know sitting practice is a constant reminder to me to bring that into daily life and that in fact, my daily life is my practice. And Buddhism to me expresses that quite clearly.... what I really try to maintain is Thich Nhat Hahn’s precepts, which are so wonderful and to me are the best map I’ve ever read for being a human being.

Sarah discusses her commitment:

Well, the vows (refuge and precepts) that I’ve taken, when I took refuge a long time ago and I’ve renewed those vows a couple of times in a Tibetan tradition and in a Mahayana Zen tradition and there are things that are important about the vows is that, there a way of living a Buddhist practice and it doesn’t even really always get associated with that label, in terms of how it manifests in my life, but it’s definitely a very strong commitment in terms of how I want to live my life and it affects absolutely everything from a decision not to swat a mosquito that’s you know is hovering around my face to decisions about how to be straight forward and truthful as possible in all my interaction and those kinds of things come up every day when there is a temptation to take the easy way out which would be the breaking of the vow and yet sort of I come back to this commitment I’ve made and really try as much as possible to live in a way that is consistent with those vows and I mean it’s everything from being mindful about eating, even if I’m eating the wrong foods, to take a minute to pause before I shove it into my mouth, I take a moment to
appreciate the food and to mindfulness around consumption of distractions...The other things like an ongoing meditation practice and connection with a community of people that practice and participating in retreats. All that stuff is left daily so it feels like it’s not the most important piece of it but certainly those are parts of it.

Rena took the Bodhisattva vows: “I took the Bodhisattva vows last year and I personally am committed to the idea of helping other people in my life and also practicing it in my own way.”

Hannah speaks of trying to be mindful in her life:

Buddhism is to me self awareness and learning about yourself, taming the mind, training the mind so you can help others...that philosophy directly guides my behavior and my actions and everything I do, and that philosophy is compassion and how to treat other people with respect and how to deal with other people, just because I’m, that the field I’m going into, social work, so its just, its all about how to relate to other people and how to empower other people... Someone asked me the other day, like, if I’ve tried on myself what I try to teach my adolescents, I work with adolescents who are having self esteem issues and somebody asked me if I’ve tried what I teach them and I’m like, that’s how I live my life! You know its like I work by the principles I believe in.

Adrienne who has not made an outward commitment to Buddhism said: “I want to be of service to the world in whatever way is best. I want to learn to trust, like trust everyone and
everything and I’m beginning to take all these ways of seeing things on as often as I can, like every moment that I can...It’s easy to forget.”

It may be significant that the majority of participants have been socially engaged in social and political causes before involved with Buddhism. Perhaps this suggests an affinity between Jewish and Buddhist values regarding social justice and being of service to others.

Many of the participants felt that Buddhism was a natural extension of their previous beliefs about the universe. Hannah describes her reaction after reading a book based on Eastern philosophy as a young teenager: “It was something I read and I said, wow, this is just what I’ve been thinking for years or for a long time and it just clicks and...I feel like I’ve always thought this way.” Rena describes her feelings of reaffirmation in terms of her commitment to helping others and the environment:

Well all its done is recommited me to what I already was doing. It just gave me a pat on the back, like you are working for the environment, you’re working for all sentient beings and I already knew that, like not to underestimate the power of a micro-organism or stepping on a flea and how it affects the food web. You know, completely the same.

Sarah discussed how she felt in retrospect: “In retrospect I can see that the essence of the teachings was what I believed when I was younger but I just didn’t have the words or the language to describe the feeling.”
Susan articulated it as feeling at home which makes sense given how she viewed the universe as a young girl, “I was looking for something and the more I heard about Buddhism, I just felt at home.”

These participants are describing the great mystery. Are these participants referring to a memory from a previous life or a primal archetypal memory; or is it that these participants were in touch with universal truths about existence that have remained hidden or buried in the watered down versions of Judaism and in a society full of anomie and alienation that they were raised in, and that we are in great need of in today’s world. This anomie has created a longing for wholeness, interconnectedness and community is not being created in the mainstream Jewish or Christian worlds. As well as living in a society which caters to excessively individualistic ego-serving values or that are dualistic and cause separation between the “in-group and the out-group”. (Campbell, 1988, pg. 28)

As a result of learning Buddhist principles, going on retreats, and integrating Buddhist ethics, doing meditation and mindfulness practices, the participants created a lifestyle that was centered around Buddhism.

6) Summary

Due to feelings of exclusion and alienation from Judaism, the participants found many factors in Buddhism that attracted them to a new life of meaning and fulfillment, and as an important part of their spiritual search and development. The beliefs of non-theological approaches to spirituality, the lack of a concept of a male Creator God, the principles of the interconnectedness of all life, the practices of meditation as a path of self-understanding and community, the relevance of spiritual teachers who in many cases practice what they teach, the
notion that Buddhist spiritual practices can be used to help them feel included and comfortable without threatening their identities as women and as Jews, and finally, the quality of lifestyle that supported them in modern life and its anxieties, provided a strong basis for a process of living a meaningful and fulfilling life.
Chapter 8
Integration

1) Introduction

If it is true, as is widely rumoured, that the majority of Non-Asian Buddhists in the United States are Jews, we indeed have a wide range of examples from whom to choose...What is the most important is to ask how we will address such people, and to realize that such seeking can hardly be dismissed as a 'cult' phenomenon or as a passing fad...I propose that we need to reconstitute Judaism as a religion friendly to the notion of quest, to a vision of life as an unending voyage in search of truth or God or Oneness, but one in which some measure of that goal is attained incidentally along the way”. (Green, 1994, 10,12)

In the Samuel H. Goldenson Lecture delivered at the Hebrew Union College in December 1994, Rabbi Arthur Green discusses a Jewish woman raised in the multicultural environment of New York city, who has been exploring Eastern spiritual paths, finding them more meaningful to her than Judaism. The young woman he describes has a close Muslim friend and was exposed to many other religions and cultural belief systems as she was growing up and is a seeker, searching for a more spiritual way of life. Rabbi Green uses the woman as a metaphor in order to discuss the serious issues of why Jews and Jewish women, are seeking spiritual practices and belief systems outside of Judaism. He believes Judaism needs to respond to her and women like her, in a serious fashion.

Rabbi Sheila Weinberg has analyzed key reasons why Jews have been exploring Eastern paths, and particularly, Buddhism: the notion of no personal God in Buddhism, including no
naming of a male God, experiential spiritual practices such as meditation, the notion of inclusiveness and compassion outside of one's identity group, teachers “who are models of personal transformation,” and the sense of community related to the larger sufferings of all peoples, rather than “wounded Jews.” (Weinberg, 1994, 2) In my study of Jewish women attracted to Buddhism and becoming Buddhists, my findings regarding Jewish women were parallel to hers. The women I studied were not completely leaving Judaism but rather were integrating aspects of both religions into their lives.

2) Integration: Beliefs

How are Jewish women integrating being Buddhist and being Jewish? My findings showed that many are not believing in Judaism in a religious sense, but rather are identifying with a cultural and ethnic identity of being Jewish. Therefore this integration process is not a full religious conversion, but rather a blending of the two religions. For example Sarah articulates the ways she sees the integration of Judaism and Buddhism in her life:

I identify as Jewish because I believe it an ethnic identity, it’s part of my ancestry...its like part of how I understand my family tree and my history, where I come from, who I am and also partly, how the world sees me. And so I identify as a Jew, but in terms of my own spiritual practice, its informed by Judaism to some extent, but its very, very small extent. So I’m a Jewish Buddhist! Well it means that being Jewish is part of who I am, part of the connection that I carry with me, where I came from, and it may leave open a door to further possibilities because its always there, you wake up with it everyday, and it may find larger expression in my life at one point, but I’m open to that happening. I
mean I’ve just signed up for a course in Jewish mysticism for 12 weeks that starts next week, so obviously there is a part of me that is interested in exploring that, but the Buddhist part is firmly entrenched. I can never imagine giving up that. That will always, its inside of me, its a central part of how I see the world and how I understand my place in the world and it will, I feel like, its not like a passing fad.

Nadine explains the ways she understands her process of integration:

I don’t know. I mean its clear for me what it means to be a Buddhist...and the Jewish part, I don’t know? I’d call it a mystery...because I feel clearly that I’m a Buddhist and I feel also clearly that I’m Jewish...You know the people that I choose to be with are Jewish, that’s who I feel most comfortable with and excited by and aligned with. The foods I eat are Jewish, you know the Jewish calendar of holiday’s has meaning...I practice parts of Judaism that resonate for me and feel good and that I want to share with my children and I’ve dropped a lot of the have-tos...Clearly for me the religion does not do too much for me, Jewish religion. Its more of a cultural identity.

Both women are expressing in different ways their need to be connected to their cultural roots of being Jewish. Most of the other participants, with the exception of Susan, who no longer identifies with her Jewish identity, also described similar processes of identifying culturally as Jews and living lives informed by Buddhist philosophy and practice such as meditation and retreats.
3) Conflicts in the Integration Process

Integration for the participants is a complex process that has many shades. Some of the women in this study have grappled with different conflicts as a result of exploring religious philosophies and approaches outside of Judaism. Sarah speaks of her unresolved conflicts:

I don’t feel a conflict in the sense that I feel well situated, in the commitments I’ve made within Buddhism. I feel very clear about some things, but I do feel misgivings in terms of what’s absent in my life as opposed to what’s in it. Its less a conflict around where I’m at and what I’ve been doing. But the fact that I still sense a need on some levels to connect to a Jewish community and I mean, actually, I was talking about this with my partners friend and she goes to a lesbian, Jewish congregation once a month that is held at JCC and she talks about how spirited it is and how they sing songs and how its really rich in meaning and I’ve also spoke to other people who go to a Reconstructionist congregation and how, they’ve really appreciated the services there and that there’s a real feeling of spirituality and in some ways I have a conflict around the fact that I dismiss Judaism based on what was in fact a very narrow exposure, I wasn’t exposed to the full range of Jewish expression. I rejected a certain kind of Judaism, in a certain kind of community, and its no wonder I rejected it based on the kind of person I am. I don’t necessarily think that had I been offered those other opportunities early enough that I would have gravitated away, had the things that I rejected in my own Jewish upbringing, been offered, you know, during those years, I may never have made a commitment to Buddhism. I might have felt very comfortable in the Reconstructionist community...I had that sense when I listened to Rabbi Elyse Goldstein speak, you know, in terms of her sense of spirit.
and her interpretation of God and, just the sort of reconstitution of Jewish ritual, in a more contemporary and meaningful way, gave me this sense that had that kind of community been offered to me when I was, like anywhere between the ages of 13 and 25, it might have made a stronger imprint and I might have stayed, but it wasn’t and I travelled very far away and its very hard if you’re just 35 to imagine taking those steps back, but that’s where the conflict lies because the more I hear about these bright pockets within Judaism, I have a bit of a pull and a bit of a sort of feeling like, I owe it to myself to explore it...you know everything that I was dismissing Judaism for and entrenching myself in Buddhism as a result, may not be in fact the case. It may be possible to find what I was looking for in Buddhism in Judaism, but I didn’t know that when I was making those decisions...And so the conflict I guess comes in now to the point of well? What do I do about that? You know and especially comes up because I’m at an age in my life where you know if I was thinking about those other milestones in life, like making a commitment to a partner, having a family.... Those issues really come up, like how would I resolve them and would I want to raise a child Jewish and make an effort to just find the kind of Jewish community that I felt comfortable in or would I want to like expose them to Buddhism and how would I deal with that? And I haven’t quite resolved that so that’s where the conflict lies, not so much for me of what I’ve taken on, but what I’ve given up.

Sarah seems to feel guilty, not quite knowing how to resolve this conflict. Another participant also spoke about the conflict in terms of the guilt and shame she felt in expressing religious feeling outside of Judaism. Adrienne explains how she felt doing some Buddhist practices: “Since a couple of days ago I realized I had a ton of shame about visualizing the
Buddha...because of believing in something that is not Jewish.” Perhaps Adrienne’s shame could have also been related to growing up in a secular home, where expressions of religious feeling was considered embarrassing. Adrienne also spoke of feeling some conflict with regards to how her family would feel about her commitment to Buddhism. She explains:

In fact, I get a little nervous everytime I go to send them letter or something, because I’ve got a lot to say you know, but I don’t say anything yet. I think they would not understand quite yet. I think that they don’t really know much about spirituality in general. I certainly haven’t and I think that they have more fear than trust, whether that be about anyone who is not Jewish or anyone who is not American maybe even, or there’s just a lot of fear of other. That’s not really even acknowledged in our family. Actually, I don’t think being full of fear and suspicion of anyone who is not from your culture or subculture is very healthy... I think only that my grandmother and my brother won’t understand. But luckily my aunt is also getting into Buddhism...We’ll be here to defend each other that we are not abandoning the family and that we are not brainwashed (laughs). I think the greatest fears are my own.

The fear Adrienne feels is one that is not surprising, since in Jewish culture the preservation of family and the fear of Jewish extinction has been such a driving force and belief that has been internalized by most Jews. Rena addresses the power that family can have over making decisions that might feed into the fears surrounding Jewish survival: “If I started calling myself a Buddhist then I’d have family troubles and then I’d have a lot of other troubles...I haven’t told them about the vows I took.”
Nadine expresses some of the anger she feels towards her family:

They (her parents) don’t want to know about it (her involvement with Buddhism)...My parents and in-laws they just don’t really want to know, I do occasionally push it in their face, not in a mean way, but I don’t want them to ignore it...So they say to me things like, ‘oh, you are going to relax’, you know when I go for a week to sit for a week. They say, ‘oh that’s nice we hope you relax’...You know things like that. But, you know I don’t have to explain it to them. It’s not like I need them to understand...They didn’t want to know and you know my in-laws almost blame me that my husband is a Buddhist, but he was meditating far before me so, but they want to blame me for it.

Nadine also spoke of the physical and emotional abuse she experienced at the hands of her mother growing up and how attending family functions makes her feel sick: “My mother’s rules were connected with her violence...For me holiday’s aren’t so happy because it was all laced with all that stuff...So going to my mother’s for Passover still makes me sick to my stomach. I go mostly so my kids can have their grandparents.” In this violent family, the ritual of religious holidays brought back painful memories for her which became merged with the practice of Judaism. Nadine’s situation raises an important question, namely what will happen after the parents of these women die? Will they continue to practice Jewish rituals? Or will they feel a weight lifted off of them allowing them to be able to express their whole spiritual selves authentically? This could certainly challenge the idea whether there is true integration with two evenly balanced religions.
Many women were not integrating Judaism and Buddhism in their lives without some conflict. The women discussed inner and outer conflicts ranging from unresolved conflicts causing guilt, and shame to fears about the family causing fear and secrecy around their new commitments, to feeling sick attending family religious functions. These conflicts add to the picture of understanding why these women do not leave the Jewish fold entirely.

4) Family, Community and Jewish Identity

What are the other reasons that keep these women Jewish? Some of the women discussed their conflicts with letting their family know about their new path. This seems to suggest that having a sense of duty to the family and pleasing the family was a factor that plays a part in their choice of integration. This concept of family is a big part of Jewish culture and Jewish religious practice, and is viewed as “the embodiment of Jewish values.” (Handelman in Barack Fishman, 1993, pg. 46) Rena observes this value as “keeping the family strong, keeping the family together.” Many of the participants expressed strong emotional ties they felt to their families. Some like Nadine had negative experiences while growing up, while others had positive and/or mixed feelings. For example, Rachel describes her positive experiences in her family and community:

I remember the holidays as times to gather, times to bring the family together and usually really good times, good memories and we went to Synagogue...I had a lot of respect for the Rabbi...and I appreciated his point of view because I could ask him anything and he would be able to give some guidance...and also the community, the Jewish community
itself was a big part of my upbringing and I think that it gave me a community feeling and an appreciation for community and for working together with other people.

Hannah also expressed positive feelings:

Family was the biggest part (value) because my family is from Michigan and my parents moved to California but we always go back for Bat Mitzvahs or other holidays, or just go back and visit and that for me is what Judaism pretty much is. It’s the culture, just going home and being with my grandparents and my cousins, aunts and uncles.

The pull of family may be significant in why these women integrate instead of convert to Buddhism.

A number of participants expressed emotional ties to Judaism in terms of belonging to the tribe. Some ties were articulated in feeling a connection with Israel. For Ruth, who was in India deciding in fact whether she would move there had very strong and deep feelings about Israel:

"I do feel very identified with Israel...I feel after 2000 years that we’re back there is very significant and I feel that it is an incredible opportunity to live there when Jews have wanted to be there for so long. But politically it is very problematic."

Most of the participants had many critiques of the politics and particularism of Israel, but also expressed some emotional pulls to Israel and Israelis. For example, Adrienne who has a Buddhist boyfriend explains of her experience of how she felt meeting Israelis in India:

Just recently we were in Delhi at this hotel where lots of Israelis stay...and I’ve never been around Israelis my age before...it was a trip...I would be there and my brain would kind of tweek, all this stuff would come up like ‘my people’, but wait they don’t know
who the hell I am, but they think I’m Israeli, because I kind of look Israeli, and a lot of them would greet me with Shalom and I’d walk through with my non-Jewish boyfriend and I instantly would feel guilty.

Adrienne also is expressing the tribal sense she feels with other Jews. Many of the other participants felt this sense of belonging to the tribe. Even though Nadine had a strong reaction to Jewish particularism, and finding Judaism “too tribal”, she later on talks about how many of the people she associates with etc. are Jewish saying, “that’s who I feel most comfortable and excited by…” Therefore she feels identification and comfort with the tribal aspect of being born Jewish, while at the same time feeling limited by its particularism and its beliefs.

Anna who is half Jewish has as an adult come to identify more as a Jew and expresses her ties to the tribe in this way. “I feel more Jewish more and more, in a way because of the Israeli connection, I’m married to an Israeli and so now I have a lot of family over there and also within my family.”

Hannah also refers to this tribal sense: “I can’t figure out what it is. Because I know I feel an identity to other people. if someone says their Jewish I kind of understand their background and where they’re coming from and I don’t understand why that is? Because I’m not really that Jewish but someone who says they are, I feel that I can identify with them.”

The tribal sense that these women are speaking about is connected to memory. Memory of an ancient collective history, as well as memory of the persecution that Jews have experienced over the centuries from culture to culture, culminating in the Holocaust. Remembering the suffering has served as a deep emotional glue creating a bond that has kept Jews together. In the interviews, some of the women discussed this in terms of the consciousness they felt as
Jews. For example, Sarah discussed how she felt one cannot shed one’s Jewish identity and history:

Which is very important because I’m not Christian and growing up in North America, not Christian means you are something else, you know, and I don’t feel it’s my choice to not be Jewish. I particularly feel that in light of what happened two generations ago in Germany, many people who probably had less identification with their Judaism than I did, may never have had 2 ounces of Jewish education got rounded up and killed because they were Jews and it was their ethnic identity as Jews, not their practicing religion, not their spiritual connection, not any sign in their houses or their way of life in particular, it was the fact that they were Jewish and I have a very strong consciousness and awareness of that, being born Jewish doesn’t mean that you have the freedom to renounce it because we live in a world where we can’t renounce it, you’re still Jewish.

There is also a mysterious power associated with Jewish memory that is beyond explanation. Nadine alludes to this in talking about the phenomenon of Jews becoming Buddhists. She provides an example of how the mystery of memory manifests itself: “I don’t know how much of it (staying Jewish) is just emotional history, it could be past lives. I have no idea, you know the very first time I heard Klezmer music (Yiddish music) I just jumped up and started dancing and I was already in my 30s or 40s. It just went right into my cells...I don’t know.” Nadine describes an example of what is part of a mysterious element that seems to carry hidden memory for Jews. Memory that Jews cannot understand with rational, intellectual explanations.
5) Outward signs of Integration

In searching for signs of the ways in which Judaism and Buddhism are being integrated it is helpful to look at the outward behaviors and expressions such as rituals that are practiced. Many of the participants seemed to take what was useful from each of the traditions applying it to their lives. This was done in different ways. Here are a few examples. Sarah has described the ways she practices, and of how she might like to practice:

I feel very disconnected from Synagogue mostly because I haven’t found a community that I feel comfortable with and I keep hearing about all these alternative congregations where they have really better Rabbis and better things going on and one of these days I think I might explore it, but I basically got to a point where I felt pretty disconnected from mainstream Judaism and so didn’t want to mark those festivals by going to Synagogue, but certainly by doing other things and even when Yom Kippour comes, now I like to fast, for me fasting is part of the practice I do in Buddhism and at times, and it makes sense, it’s the day of atonement, I like that and so that’s something I do… And I lit the Menorah candles at my mothers on the first night of Chanukah, that was also something I do. So its just this sort of done in a very ad hoc way… I meditate on and off fairly regularly and I do retreats once or twice a year for sure.

Anna explains how her husband and their children practices:
We practice some of the Jewish holiday’s. I also went to this Jewish renewal Synagogue a few times and my husband grew up in a Kibbutz and he did practice a lot of the ritual’s without the religious overtones and I feel very comfortable with that....Since we’ve had children I liked the idea of introducing the Jewish rituals in general without necessarily religious overtones....I don’t feel akin to religious aspects of Judaism, but rather more so to the historical and cultural aspects...I don’t relate to religious aspects like going to Sunday school. Judaism is very new to me.... We do little rituals, not in a Jewish way, and not in a Buddhist way. We do it more in a Native spiritual way. We use Buddhism more as a philosophy of life and a way to talk about things within a framework... We create our own rituals according to how we feel.

Similarly Susan also expresses this desire to create her own rituals that are meaningful. Susan is one of the only participants who no longer labels herself Jewish. She explains:

The celebration or marking would come out of the event itself: being a reflection and expression of what is important at that time, and that sometimes can change. But my partner and I are very much at home with making our own, using our own words and drawing from the words of others if they speak to us and that can be Buddhist or Native American or Hindu etc... To give an example, when we were married, it was a short ceremony but we wrote every word ourselves and it very much came out of what it meant to us. he joy and the satisfaction that comes from that is that each time that there is an event that says mark me, that needs some kind of attention, the attention grows out of, the attention given, how can I say this? Almost encourages inquiry and for us that is a
very important part of the practice, that as soon as you do what you did before, it’s rote, and you lose that freshness and the chance to grow and expand whatever one’s idea is of that event.

In contrast to Susan, Ruth is a religious Jew exploring Hinduism as well discusses her practices:

Like now I pray, you know I have my prayer book, like last night I did the Sabbath prayers, lit the candles (for Shabbat), had my pictures of Sai Baba (Hindu Avatar) and Mehr Baba (Hindu Avatar). I’m in Dharamsala listening to the Dalai Lama’s teachings ...I don’t know how often but sitting is still important definitely.

Nadine explains how she integrates the Jewish rituals and Buddhist practices of meditation:

My husband and I were married by a Rabbi, but that wasn’t really my first choice. It was his. It was very important to him. We actually had a kind of ecumenical service even though the Rabbi did it, we had. We created our own service and had, we had the service at a friend’s house and she decorated the house with all religious symbols. I didn’t even know she was going to do it. I didn’t plan this, it just happened. That was how she decorated her house for us. So I don’t gravitate I don’t think towards Jewish ritual particularly. I mean Shabbas is really nice for us as a family to have this at the end of the week. You know we have a big meal Friday night and we have family time. And the seasonal holiday’s have significance to me, but I think it’s more for me as a Pagan. In that Succoth has meaning for me and Passover, the beginning of spring. I mean because
Jewish holiday's are so agriculturally oriented and living on the land is very important to me, it suits my adult self...I have sort of as an adult I've taken what is meaningful from Judaism for me. And I've done that with my adult friends. Sort of reinvent our Judaism because there is some tie, I feel you know, very emotional tie and I feel that I've had to reinvent it for myself, you know, find ways to make it meaningful...Well I sit probably 2 or 3 hours a day it depends on how much child care I get, but usually I sit 2 of those weeks and get childcare for the 3rd week and I also have another woman Zen teacher who I've been sitting with for a year and she does weekend retreats, so I go to sit with her maybe twice a year. So it's a big commitment, it's the most important thing in my life.

The outward behaviors of the participants do not correspond with a total conversion to Buddhism. This can be seen by the fact that many are practicing some Jewish rituals and cultural practices. These rituals in some cases are being used in ways that the participants have deemed as more meaningful than when growing up. For example, Nadine now lights Shabbat candles, a tradition that her mother did not do. Their spiritual paths were more clearly Buddhist, with the exception of Ruth, and in some cases eclectic, as exemplified by Anna's and Susan's examples.

6) Integration: Sociological Factors

The integration of Buddhist practice and philosophy into the lives of these women is quite clear and was significant. These women sought an approach that was very different from the Jewish path they were raised with. An approach based on practices such as meditation that were grounded in mind/body/spirit approaches to self, emphasizing such teachings as
interdependence of the universe and mindfulness in everyday life. Teachings that had methods and a philosophy that not only promised release from suffering but taught ways to transform the self towards more global consciousness.

As explored in the push section of this thesis, the participants had some serious critiques with the Judaism they were raised with. The critiques regarding the Patriarchal aspects of Judaism and the exclusivity of Judaism were seen as limiting and inhibiting. These critiques need to be seen in the context of the socio-political climate.

The developments during the 1960s, particularly the emergence of the Feminist movement, was responsible for transforming women's consciousness and facilitated much criticism of the Patriarchal structures inherent in society, which included critiques of Judaism and Christianity, and the equality of women within these religious systems. It may be significant to note here that some of the early pioneer Feminists were Jewish women like Betty Friedan and Emma Goldman. As well the counter-culture during the 1960s caused a paradigm shift for an entire generation, resulting in a “shift from an ethic of self-denial to an ethic of self-fulfillment.” (Ellwood, 1994, pg. 328) The entrance of Eastern religions during this time, with the influx of teachers, was welcomed with open arms and certainly helped to inspire this shift in consciousness. As well, the popularity of travelling to countries such as India, Nepal etc. opened up many people to other cultural and cultural belief systems. The fact that Jewish women were having children later also would point to there being more exploration time to explore values as an adult. As well, living in a pluralistic society in North America meant that they were exposed to many different cultures and therefore the environment was one which stimulated discovery lending the possibility of finding approaches more suitable or relevant to an individual's life.
All of these sociological developments may hint at some reasons why these Jewish women would want to move towards global and universal approaches. These women were not learning about global consciousness in Judaism and the roles, at least for the women over age 40, were limited for those who developed a feminist consciousness. The point is that the women in this study were likely directly or indirectly affected by these sociological shifts that has opened up a world that is in some cases vastly different from the world of their parents and grandparents. I am suggesting that pull towards and the integration of Buddhism into these women’s lives was also supported by these sociological trends as well as by the push and pull factors that the participants described, affecting them as individuals.

7) Summary

Joseph Campbell writes:

If you want to find your own mythology the key is with what society do you associate? Every mythology has grown up in a certain society in a bounded field. Then they come into collision and relationship, and they amalgamate and you get a more complex mythology...But today there are no boundaries. The only mythology that is valid today is the mythology of the planet-and we don’t have such a mythology. The closest thing I know to a planetary mythology is Buddhism, which sees all beings as Buddha beings. The only problem is to come to the recognition of that. There is nothing to do. The task is only to know what is and then to act in relation to the {brother/sister }hood of all these beings...We need myths that will identify the individual not with his/her local group but with the planet. (Campbell, 1988, pg. 28-30)
Joseph Campbell points out the paradox for Jewish Buddhists who are attempting to integrate these two religious identities. In Buddhism, Buddhists are taught to move beyond ego and its attachments and that includes one’s identity. While in Judaism, Jewish women are taught the importance of keeping the family, community and the tribe together. These women are living with this paradox. How is this paradox to be resolved? Buddhism has methods that teach us about paradoxes in life. To accept ‘what is’ is to embrace paradoxes in life. Many of these women moving toward Buddhism at this time explain their Jewish-Buddhist integration as taking the aspects of each tradition that are useful and helpful. Generally, most did not identify as Jewish in a religious sense but rather identified as cultural and ethnic Jewish women, while taking on Buddhism as their spiritual path and philosophy.

Rabbi Green’s approach to the Jewish Buddhist question is first to take it seriously, and second, to suggest what it means. His comment that it is not a “fad”, but a significant phenomenon amongst younger Jews (baby boomers and younger) must be explored in more depth. Many sociological factors impacted these women seeking spiritual fulfillment outside of Judaism and the philosophical paths and religious rituals in which they were raised in their families. The result is the integration phenomenon that has been described in the lives of these women.
Chapter 9

Conclusion

You look at Buddhist communities and there's a large portion of Jews. So what is this? And there was this wonderful Rabbi who is one of the co-leaders of the Jewish-Buddhist weekend at IMS, a Buddhist meditation Centre - her name is Sheila Weinberg. She talks about that maybe a lot of us were killed in the Holocaust and have come back in this lifetime and you know are trying to figure it all out. But some other deeper karmic kind of recycling, who knows? But here we all are like fish swimming to our nesting ground. It's almost like an instinctual draw. We are being pulled. Each of us has our individual story, but here we are winding up in the same territory. (Nadine)

1) The Purpose

It has been the task of this thesis to uncover some of the reasons why Jewish women are drawn to Buddhism by looking at the lives of nine Jewish women. In exploring this question, it was also important to ask why these Jewish women leave Judaism. As well, another purpose of this study was to investigate how these women are integrating Judaism and Buddhism into their lives. Lastly, I have attempted to shed light on my own personal process as a Jewish Buddhist.

2) Research Questions:

1. What attracts Jewish women to Buddhist practice and/or thought?
2. How do these ‘Jewish Buddhists’ integrate the two religions within themselves?
3) Rationale:

One important rationale for this study is that there are very few studies on Jewish Buddhist women. The research done on Jewish Buddhists is scarce and there have been no studies committed solely to the study of Jewish women. The Jew in the Lotus (1994) by Kamenetz has been the first book to explore this phenomenon by interviewing a number of Jewish Buddhists (Jubus) and Buddhist Jews (Bujus) in India and North America. The phenomenon is also mentioned in some of the East-West literature (Emma McCloy Layman, 1976, Harvey Cox, 1977) and conversion literature (A. Maller, 1981, Charles Selengut, 1988,) and Jewish Buddhist spiritual dialogue literature (Sylvia Boorstein, 1997, Arthur Green, 1994, Nathan Katz, 1994, S. Rapee, 1994, Zalman Schacter, 1978, Sheila Weinberg, 1994). However because these works do not distinguish as an important factor women from men I was limited in terms of the background information for this study.

4) Methodology

Nine North American Jewish women who had made some form of commitment to Buddhism were interviewed using an in-depth interviewing approach (Seidman, 1991, Reinharz, 1992) in Canada, India and the United States. As well, I attempted to use a Feminist approach as articulated by Reinharz.

To analyze the first research question: Why are Jewish women attracted to Buddhism? I used the “Push and Pull” model of conversion as articulated by McGuire in Selengut (1988), to understand the “interactive process” (Selengut, 1988) of what factors pushed these women out of Judaism and what factors pull them towards Buddhism. The second research question
analyzed the approaches and process of integrating the two religions in their lives as articulated by the participants.

5) Summary of Major Findings

The push factors that emerged from the interviews were organized under seven headings: 1) Theological Difficulties; 2) Practice and Rituals; 3) Exclusivity of Judaism; 4) Jewish Education; 5) Jewish Identity issues; 6) Gender Role Identity; 7) Lifestyle. A significant theme became evident in the analysis of the push factors. This was the way in which the women perceived themselves as being excluded from Judaism. This exclusion was articulated in terms of having difficulties with the Patriarchal and sexist aspects of Judaism which ranged from problems relating to a male God to feeling excluded in terms of spiritual practices and limited roles for women. As well, these women have been responding to a serious crisis within Judaism, a crisis that is fed, in part, by “the materialism of much of Jewish life today, the lack of spirituality in the synagogue, and the failure to communicate Judaism as a spiritual path.” (Kamenetz, 1994, pg. 282) These developments may be attributed to the formation of the Reform movement in the nineteenth century, which diluted Judaism, the horrors of the Holocaust and subsequent loss of faith, the developments in Israel as the Jewish “homeland”, the change in structure of the nuclear family in the twentieth century, the change to ‘upwardly mobile’, and increasing assimilation. As well, the sociological factors of the Feminist movement, the counterculture of the 1960s, and the increasing popularity of Eastern religions during that time continue to influence North American society and popular culture to this day, creating a desire for expansion to a more global, inclusive perspective. All of these factors alongside these developments seemed to lead to feelings of alienation from their own culture. As a result, spiritual longing and gaps in spiritual
practice became more important to the participants as they grew up and entered adulthood, and which ultimately led to their desire to search for alternative spiritual paths that were deemed as participatory, egalitarian, universalistic and personally meaningful.

Due to feelings of exclusion and alienation from Judaism, the participants found many factors in Buddhism that attracted them. The Pull factors that emerged were organized under the following headings: 1) Beliefs and Doctrines; 2) Spiritual Practice and Buddhist Rituals; 3) Relationship with a Teacher; 4) Attitudes, Feelings and Identity; 5) Quality of Life. The factors discussed include: their beliefs of non-theological approaches to spirituality; the lack of a concept of a male Creator God; the principles of the interconnectedness of all life; the practices of meditation as a path of self-understanding and community; the relevance of spiritual teachers who in many cases practice what they teach; the notion that Buddhist spiritual practices can be used to help them feel included and comfortable without threatening their identities as women and as Jews; and finally, the quality of lifestyle that supported them in modern life and its anxieties. The women seemed to be finding within Buddhism a spiritual home, one that informed their lives with new meaning and fulfillment and one that promised personal transformation with practice, and a philosophy that was universal, expanding the boundary toward global consciousness.

The study of religious integration as it relates to Jewish women and Buddhism is at its beginnings, and has many more aspects to research. The notion of integration as I found it, was that the women interviewed retained their cultural and ethnic Jewish identity, while practicing Buddhist philosophy and spiritual practices in their everyday lives. Many had Buddhist husbands and partners. These women were not fully converting to Buddhism. In a modern pluralistic society where religion has become an individual matter and less one of a tradition that is passed down without question through the generations, the notion of integration has
implications for the study of conversion and the role of religion in North American society. Hammond has argued, “external religious authority has been widely rejected in favour of one’s right to find a religion that meets one’s own perceived needs.” (Hammond in Ellwood, 1994, 8) This merging of worldviews often leads to an integration of different symbolic systems, as was the case with most of the participants. Bibby has viewed this integration process as one of “fragmentation”, whereby authoritarian religious systems are “rejected increasingly in favour of drawing upon fragments of those traditions and other systems in a highly selective consumer-like fashion.” (Bibby in Hewitt, 1993) I have no doubt that this “fragmentation” is prevalent in today’s society. However, I prefer to see this integration as an ability to embrace and integrate the different symbolic systems of meaning to create a whole.

6) Limitations of Study

There were several aspects regarding the approach and methodology of this study that I would have liked to have expanded and explored further;

1. I would expand the number of women interviewed in order to further understand the ideas and modes of integration behavior;

2. I would have liked to further explore gender identity and the relationship of the women as daughters with their families, particularly as the relationship to the mother as a role model, both positively and negatively;

3. I would have separated categories that distinguished between the different generations of women, for example, post-menopausal and younger and between those women who had children and those who did not;
4. I would have liked to have done more in-depth interviews spending more time in the first interview, followed by a second interview one year later;

5. I would also liked to have expanded the questions regarding their meditation practices and what it means to the women;

6. I would have liked to expanded the Jewish education section to explore further the modes of non-formal Jewish education in their families;

7. I would have explored new categories regarding the levels of their commitment to Buddhism and the schools of Buddhism they were following;

8. I would have liked to have interviewed more of them in their homes, in order to view the physical environment they created for themselves, with particular reference to religious symbols in the home, and whether or not a Buddhist meditation area had been defined and whether there was a combination of Jewish and Buddhist iconography;

9. I would have explored the affinities between the Jewish and Buddhist world-views, in order to further understand how these religions can be integrated into the lives of the women studied.

7) Value of Study

The value of this study was to explore one aspect of adult education, namely the process of transformative learning in relationship to religious values and how they are integrated into the lives' of individuals. Furthermore, this study contributes to furthering studies on the ways women integrate more than one religious belief system and raises issues associated with integrating dual or multiple identities. This also has implications for understanding new religious patterns in North American society and intercultural communications and dialogue.
8) Personal Learning's

The experience of interviewing these women was abundantly fruitful, because as a Jewish woman exploring Buddhism, the process encouraged me to explore further my own Jewish identity and my own integration process of Judaism and Buddhism. Meeting other Jewish women whom were Buddhists was an incredible experience. I saw myself reflected in some of their stories as well as seeing the individuality of each woman. As I interviewed the women, I felt affirmed somehow. My identity as a Jewish woman became stronger as I listened to the familiar struggles of these women. In a way, the interview process helped me to work through my own conflicting feelings of what it means to be a Jewish woman. I realized that my biggest struggle lies with being half Jewish and, as such, not being recognized by the Jewish community, and not feeling that I really belong. The conflict I experienced when deciding whether to make a commitment to Buddhist practice was probably fueled by feelings of guilt that perhaps I was betraying my ancestors. This may also explain why once I did make a commitment, I was unable to call myself a Buddhist. Today I am a Jewish woman and a student of Buddhism. I am able thus far to integrate the two since Judaism for me has never been about practicing the Jewish religion. It has been a cultural identity, part of my history, an integral part of who I am, and a significant part of my family identity. My integration process, however, is ongoing and does not exclude further exploration of Judaism as a religion.

In the final weeks of writing this thesis I attended a Shabbat service at my childhood Reform Synagogue. I might add that I never attended this Synagogue on Shabbat before. As I sat through the service watching the male Rabbi, I felt uninspired. I wondered how much of Judaism gets lost in the translation from Hebrew to English. I also felt there was a qualitative
difference between how it feels for me to sit in a meditation hall compared to how I felt sitting in the service that day. But then later in the service I had an interesting experience. While the Rabbi opened the Arc and removed the Torah I began to cry. I could not explain what had come over me. Perhaps through the unveiling of the Torah I sensed the mystical power buried in my own history. It was the only ancient ritual I could see in the service that had remained intact from traditional Judaism. When I left the service I felt many things. On one hand, I felt that the service was Patriarchal and unengaging, while on the other, I was intrigued by the emotions triggered during the opening of the Arc.

I have been searching for different approaches to resolve the paradoxical relationship between what keeps me a Jew and what draws me toward Buddhism. Interestingly, the initial departure from Judaism for Buddhist practice has in some ways facilitated my coming home. The experience of stepping away from one's tradition often creates new understandings and perspectives of where we have come from. In Buddhism I have found a philosophy and way of life that is spiritually meaningful and which allows me to keep on struggling with my Jewish identity while redefining who I am in terms of the Greater Self.
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Appendix A

From Judaism to Buddhism:

Jewish Women's Search For Identity

Questionnaire

I am interested in why Jewish women become Buddhists and in what ways they integrate the two identities within themselves. Could you please complete this questionnaire prior to the interview. I look forward to our meeting and learning from you. All information that is written here will be read only by me and will be later destroyed after its use is no longer required. In addition, your identity will be coded in my study. You are free to withdraw at any time from this study.

1. Name: __________________

2. Date: __________________

3. Address: ____________________________________________

4. Phone number: __________________

5. Age: ________
6. National origin:

   Place of birth: ________________

   Place lived most recently: ________________

   Specify whether first, second, third generation etc. in North America ________________

7. Circle from which Jewish background you came from:

   Secular Reform    Conservative    Orthodox    Reconstructionist

   Other, Please specify ________________

8. Circle which background your mother came from?

   Secular Reform    Conservative    Orthodox    Reconstructionist

   Other, Please specify ________________

9. Circle which background your father came from?

   Secular Reform    Conservative    Orthodox    Reconstructionist

   Other, Please specify ________________

10. Are your parents still living? _________________________

11. How many siblings do you have? ________________

   ___ brothers, ___ sisters.
12. If applicable, where are you situated in relation to other siblings? __________

13. Did you grow up in a Jewish neighbourhood? __________

14. Education: What is the highest level of formal education you completed?

______________________________

15. Circle which kind of schools you attended:

public school  private school  Hebrew Day school

16. Describe briefly your work experience:


17. Were/are you active in any political, secular or religious groups? Please specify.


18. What is your marital status? ______________________


19. If you were/are married or common law, was/is your partner Jewish?
Yes__ no__ If not, please specify__________________

20. a) Do you have children? yes__ No ___

21. b) If yes, how are your children being raised? Please circle:

Secular   Jewish   Buddhist   Both

c) Will your children have Bar/Bat Mitzvah’s? yes____ no ____

d) Do they learn about Jewish history? Celebrate the High Holiday’s?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

22. What happens if you or a loved one dies? Will there be a Jewish funeral? A Buddhist one?

Please explain:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Appendix B

Interview Questions

I) Background

(Religious upbringing)

1. I would like to learn more about your Jewish background. You said in the questionnaire that you came from a -----background.

2. What was your religious upbringing like?

3. a) Did you go to religious school? What was that like?

   b) How much of a theological background did you learn in your studies?

4. What were some of the important values your family wanted to instill in you?

5. What (if relevant) Jewish rituals and practices were meaningful to you growing up? Do you still practice these?

6. a) What rituals were not meaningful for you? b) Why weren’t they meaningful?

7. If you have a significant milestone in your life such as a wedding, birth, death etc. how would you acknowledge or celebrate these occasions?

8. What does Israel mean to you?

9. What was your sense of God growing up?

II) Women's Roles and Issues in Jewish Family Life

10. a) What was it like growing up a Jewish girl?

   b) What was your role in the family?
11. (If you have a brother) Were you treated differently from your brother? If yes, in what ways?

12. Was there anything traumatic that happened to you related to being Jewish? If so would you like to share that experience?

13. Was there anything in your behavior that did not fit into the norms of your Jewish community?

III) Why Buddhism?

14. What attracted you to Buddhism?

15. What was going on in your life at the time?

16. a) How long have you been involved?

   b) What is the nature of your commitment and how does it find expression in your daily life?

17. Are you actively involved in a Buddhist community? If no, why not? If yes could you tell me about it.

18. How do you feel as a woman within Buddhism?

IV) Integration

19. Have you been open with your family and friends about your involvement with Buddhism? If so, when did you tell your family? How many years did you keep it private?

20. Have you experienced external/internal conflict as a result of your commitment to Buddhism? If so can you describe examples of this conflict?

21. How has your commitment to Buddhism impacted your values, your life and lifestyle?
22. Do you still consider yourself Jewish? Could you elaborate?

23. If so, what does it mean to you to be Jewish and Buddhist?

24. Have you found similarities between Judaism and Buddhism in terms of values, lifestyle, and faith? What are the differences you see?

25. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?
Appendix C

FROM JUDAISM TO BUDDHISM: JEWISH WOMEN'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

INFORMED WRITTEN CONSENT

To participants in this study:

I am a Master of Arts student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto). The subject of my thesis is: Jewish Women who have become Buddhists. I am interviewing North-American born Jewish women ages twenty-four and over who have made a commitment to Buddhism for at least one year. An ethical review has been completed for this study in order to ensure the confidentiality of the information collected. You are one of approximately twelve participants. The interview should take approximately one to two hours.

As a part of this study, you are being asked to participate in one in-depth interview and to complete a questionnaire. I will be asking you questions pertaining to your ‘Jewish experience’ as well as to what attracted you to Buddhism and how you have integrated the two in your life.
My goal is to analyze the transcript from your interview in order to understand: (1) Why Jewish women become Buddhists, and (2) In what ways have 'Jewish Buddhist' women integrated the two religious experiences.

Each interview will be audiotaped and later transcribed. The name of each participant will be coded in the final form so as to ensure confidentiality.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to participate in this study and that you have read and understood the information in this consent form. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you.

Participant’s signature

Interviewer’s signature

Date: