

Buddhism with chutzpah

By Ruth Ostrow

MY husband is pink in the cheeks and running around in a terrible state. "You've got to call a rabbi. You can't do this without speaking to one of the rabbis," he implores, his face getting tenser by the moment.

It is 5pm on the day I have decided to make my Buddhist vows. I've been studying the ancient philosophy for the past six months with my Taiwanese teacher, Grandmaster Shan Fo, visiting head of the Buddhist Mahayana Zengong order. Now it is time to pledge allegiance to the cause.

My husband has thus far tolerated my new-found spirituality, quietly, in the hope that it would evaporate. As if I were a child with a new toy. He never believed it would get to this.

It did. I have had enough of being a "non-practising" something or other. Like so many others, I have come to a stage in my life where I need religion. Want religion. Yearn to believe in something greater than an existence which can range from the painful to the excruciatingly mundane.

Call it a mid-life crisis, a bad case of existential terror, or simply one long anxiety attack, but I can no longer cope with the seemingly random nature of things. Life is so pointless when you are cosmically alone.

But as with so many of my generation -- particularly women -- the fire and brimstone religions of the Old Testament don't speak to me. The never-ending list of "Thou shalt nots" gives me the heebie-jeebies.

I cannot believe that any higher being would dwell on such pedantic detail and ritual. I favour instead the simple eastern approach that focuses on kindness and cuts out the middleman, those holy men with their patriarchal interpretations of what God said.

And I'm not alone. Before Shan Fo came to Australia from Taiwan earlier this year as part of his worldwide Buddhism lecture tour, he advertised heavily in the Chinese press. One small ad was placed in an English paper. Yet the venue at Sydney's Boulevard Hotel was deluged by white faces.

His disciples had under-estimated the hunger for spiritual enlightenment in the West, and were caught on the hop without enough English notes. This time -- the grandmaster having returned briefly to initiate us -- his team is better prepared. And so here I stand on the night of my initiation, choosing a nice dress for the occasion, while my husband rails at the sky. He is a child of the Holocaust and has a profound link to Judaism. I feel great pity for the pain I'm causing him.

To calm him down I show him my pledges: To honour and love all sentient beings. To act at all times with compassion and kindness. To be selfless and good. Simple words, but beautiful and brave.

"This isn't the Spanish Inquisition," I assure him. "No one has asked me to renounce Judaism. I am simply pledging to act with integrity and tolerance all my days.

"Buddhism is a philosophy," I say. "But you'll bow down to Buddha?" he says, looking disturbed. In Jewish law it is forbidden to bow to idols. "Buddha is neither man, god nor idol. Buddha is in all of us. It is cosmic energy, the creator of all things, it is the essence of ourselves," I implore. He is unconvinced.

I leave him in an anxious state. He has just finished reading a book by Rodger Kamenetz called *The Jew in the Lotus*, about a group of Jewish delegates and rabbis from the US who journeyed to India in 1990 to see the Dalai Lama. Their mission was to address the issue of the huge exodus of Jews to Buddhism, and to uncover the mysterious lure of eastern faith to Jews and Christians alike.

In the US today, workshops on Kabbala, the Jewish mystical arm that has thus far been denied to women or men under 50, are now being made readily available in a desperate attempt to stymie the tide and call young Jews back to the esoteric spirituality in their religion.

In Australia, a lone ranger, Rabbi Laibl Wolf, is seeking to bring JuBus -- Jewish Buddhists -- back into the fold via the Internet by offering lectures and tapes on the similarities between eastern religions and Jewish mysticism. His target market is those of us seduced by the magic, and dignity, of living and dying the Buddhist way.

Although it is Tibetan Buddhism that usually has most appeal to westerners, I have been drawn to study Mahayana Zengong Buddhism, a derivative of an ancient order flourishing in Taiwan and South-East Asia that incorporates Chinese methods of healing, Zen sitting and moving meditations, and Chi Kung exercise. In this order, the body is the temple of the soul. Health is put before doctrine. We spend more time exercising than praying.

And so, despite my husband's protests, under the awnings of flowers I finally stand, trembling with excitement at my impending entry into Buddhism's sacred realm.

The Grandmaster calls me up, and as I give my pledge, I utter my new name, which in Mandarin means "Ocean of Love and Wisdom". I suddenly feel like I belong somewhere in the spiritual order of things. My heart is open, and respectful of all life. How can any god be angry at that?

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

I attended that Metaphysical Mastery lecture you mentioned. I, too, was looking for the magic, having recently been through a series of harsh life challenges. Does it help to believe in "mysterious possibilities"? Absolutely. Through force of will and a bit of magic, I have turned my life around full circle. It pays to believe. K. O'Sullivan, Leichhardt, NSW

Dear Ruth,

Please keep sex out of the paper. Things relating to sex should always be kept private. The true way is that two people should both mate when they want to have children. They should be married people -- not single, de facto or gay, which is against God's law. But this world has muddied the waters. Your views should be banned.

John M.W. King, Blacktown, NSW

Dear Ruth,

Having just recovered from a bout of chemotherapy, I was moved by your story

on the search for meaning. Without the hope that there is a divine purpose behind it all, the tribulations of life could easily become too painful to bear.
Name withheld, Mosman, NSW

Dear Ruth,

I know I'm going to tread on toes, but it is my belief that Homo sapiens was never meant to be monogamous. It is driven into us that we are expected to take a partner for life. But over the passage of time people drift apart. So many couples are living a lie. Life would be happier if no one owned anyone.
G.C. Morrell, Washington, DC

Dear Ruth,

Your column got me thinking that at 43, even if I were to live till 80, I only have 37 more summers left! When you realise that in a flash we will be six feet under, you see what a waste it is that we ruin our quality of lives on trivia.
Jo, via e-mail

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