

## RELIGION EXPERTS COLUMN

*This is my response to this week's question of **Ask The Religion Experts**, a feature in the Sunday **Ottawa Citizen**. Questions are the editor's. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

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Sunday, July 03, 2011

**Q**:What is heaven?  
**A**

Buddhism avoids dualities like heaven and hell or history as a straight line. Time has no end. We don't teach a Judgement Day nor any eternal realm where humans reside forever.

Closest to heaven is the Wheel of Life (*bhava-chakra*). This proposes six transient 'realms' beings follow on their path to Awakening. According to one's intentional actions, one inhabits an appropriate realm. This is *karma*. Many mistake *karma* as a cosmic book-keeping system where actions give reward or punishment. Within our faith we teach all beings arise from/by unqualified compassion. This compassionate universe unfolds as this Awareness. Karma is not reward or punishment, but the transformation of our lives into the most appropriate conditions to awaken to this Awareness. Consequences of intentioned action are dynamic adjustments directing us back to Awareness.

The Realms include the higher realms - celestial deities, jealous deities or humans and lower - animals, hungry spirits, or "hell realms". Some view these as physical realms, some as symbolic or psychological states. What might parallel to Heaven

would be the first two. However, all realms are temporary and dwelling there is the outcome of intentioned actions. The highest realm is a place of harmony and enjoyment; crystalline light and beautiful music are everywhere. Its' residents have all there needs met, however, they will witness themselves age and decay, moving to a realm appropriate to their intentioned actions.

It would be remiss not to mention the Pure Land of the Jodo Shin. This is a heaven-like place, where devotees await final re-birth before full Awakening. Those who praise Amida Buddha, the Supreme Buddha of Light and Love, will benefit from His grace, being reborn in His Pure Land. This Grace transcends *karma*, acting as divine fulfilment of Amida's vow to save all who sincerely recite his name.

Finally, Part 1 of a famous Zen case: The warrior asks the Master - "What is heaven, what is hell?" The master replies: "What are you asking me for? That's the stupidest question I ever heard." The warrior draws his sword and holds it to the Master's throat. *Part 2 next week.*

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