

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.*

Sunday, September 11, 2011

Q : Is it a virtue not to eat meat ..?
A I have heard every possible Buddhist answer, ranging from 'we should all be vegans' to 'people can eat whatever they choose'. From a monk in Sri Lanka, a country which has a predominantly meat-less diet, I heard that it was not appropriate to set absolute standards. He explained that the Buddhist message needs to be available for all people in any land.

Therefore, he concluded, someone living in the Arctic must be able to eat animal-based food. Conversely, there are North American teachers who are in the forefront of the vegetarian movement. They argue, in part, that our civilization has moved beyond the necessity for meat, and people in developed countries should recognize the many benefits to the planet and their own lives from a meat-free diet. They cite the outrageous inefficiency of feeding livestock with grains which could sustain far greater numbers than the meat produced and at much lower cost. They cite the increasing danger from animal waste. They cite the well-documented cruelty involved in animal raising and processing. All strong reasons. Our prosperity provides us with choices, so we no longer need to rely on meat.

The other distinction commonly made in Buddhist circles is the difference between lay and monastic diets. Here, lay people are free to use a diet which suits their place, preference and pocketbook. On the other hand, monastics are committed to following the appropriate

monastic regulations set out in their tradition. However, here again, there may be some range of interpretation, since the monastic regulations are open to interpretation. For example, in my own Tendai lineage, we as clergy are committed to follow the "bodhisattva precepts", the closest term we have to 'virtue'. These, in turn, are based on the instruction from the Brahma Net Sutra which mention 'non-injury' and 'non-harm', and which can be interpreted in varied ways.

The interpretation we use locally sets out three pertinent phrases from eight precepts.

They are :

- 1.) "I vow to respect all life, sentient and insentient; and practice non-harm";
- 2.) "I vow to protect this body, this planet and all beings"; and
- 3.) I vow to challenge the promises of consumption, ...(and to avoid).. exploitation of the vulnerable."

This is typical of Buddhist texts which tend not to issue "thou shalt", preferring to provide frameworks for individual decision and action. Given the open-ness of these precepts, I can understand how one of my fellow practitioners maintains a vegetarian diet and another insists that humans are another animal who lives off of other animals. Ultimately, the act itself is neither virtuous or non, its is a combination of intention, circumstance and degree which determines the morality and consequence.

*Rev. Innen Parchelo, doshu,
Red Maple Sangha*

