

## 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 18, 2011*

**Q** : Can one be a realist and religious?

**A** These are two nebulous concepts, so the response will have to assume some more particular meaning for 'realism' and 'religiosity'. For me, a realistic person is someone who grounds themselves in their personal experience, that is the evidence of their senses combined with their mental resources - logic and insight. In fact, the Buddhist definition of the senses is that we have six - the five physical ones plus the mind. As for religious, it seems we fill this page weekly with a discussion of what it means to be religious, and, no doubt, we could spill over onto many more. I won't venture a definition here, but rather relate realism to the practices and teachings of the Buddhist tradition, inasmuch as I would call that religious.

Our readers need go no further than the teachings of our founder, Shakyamuni, whose own life represents one person's quest for understanding in the face of the reality of human suffering. A famous story tells of a woman pleading with him to revive a child who had just died. He agrees to do so if she can find a household which has not experienced death. She sets off and goes house to house. Sometime later she returns and explains to the Buddha that she has given up on trying to revive her child because, after confronting the reality that death is a fact of everyone's life, she accepts her own child's passing with equanimity.

A favourite piece of advice which the Buddha gave to his followers was that they accept nothing he taught on his word alone. They each must investigate matters for themselves and confirm what he claimed to be the way of the world. Should their own enquiry not match his, he encouraged them to find a teaching which did match.

Finally, from a later Buddhist approach, that of the Meditation or Zen School, we discover that same rigour. Teacher after teacher insists we settle for nothing less than the insight into reality which comes from our own enquiry. They insisted we look into the nature of reality as it confronts us in the most mundane of experiences. In one Zen story, the student asks the teacher to tell him the nature of Truth. The teacher, with characteristic Zen realism, replies: "Five pounds of flax". In other words, the truth will be understood when you understand the immediate reality of such an ordinary object as flax.

I would caution that realism does not simply mean "what I can hold in my hands". Without the interpretive capacity of our minds, we would be little better than calculators. Both realism and religiosity are ultimately searches for meaning, and that requires the engagement of all of our senses and our mental capacities - reason, imagination, memory and insight - the whole person

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