

## 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, October 2, 2011

**Q** : Does your deity punish and reward in this life?

**A** For this question, Buddhadharma is a square peg in a round hole. "Deity", if such a term is ever used, would mean two different things, each quite different.

First, in the Buddhist idea of the Six Realm of Existence, there are two kinds of deities, *devas* and *asuras*. *Devas* are characterised by self-centredness and self-indulgence. Someone called them the Hollywood celebrities of the Six Realms, because of their egotism, privileged status and centuries-long life spans. The *asuras*, or jealous deities, are similar to the *devas* except they are driven by envy.

Even though both types of beings seem enviable, they share with humans a conditioned life. This means they are subject to the Law of Cause and Effect (Karma) and they, just like humans and animals, will decline, die and re-enter the stream of rebirth. Thus, while they may be deities because of prior good deeds, they are finite beings and hardly in a position to mete out any rewards or punishments to others.

In the second case, the closest thing to a "deity", in the way this question is posed, might be a Buddha, that is, one whose

body-mind is fully awake to Awareness itself. Because Buddhas have woken up to the impermanence and insufficiency of life in the Six Realms, they generate no further karma and, as a consequence, stand outside the Six Realms of beings. Buddhas, by definition, are exclusively dedicated to the eventual Buddha-hood of all beings. The way in which Buddhas are active is that they direct opportunities for insight to all beings. There is no reward or punishment, just realization

Some would identify the activity of *karma*, that is cause and effect as a kind of punishment/ reward mechanism, but this is a misrepresentation. At its very least, *karma* is a momentum of the intention and thrust of human action. It is not moral, in the sense that it judges using an independent moral standard. The degree of greed or selflessness, indifference or devotion, in any action sets the consequence in motion. The consequence is the fulfilment of the act, neither punishment nor reward.

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