

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 Buddhadharmā and deeper understanding for us all.*

Sunday, October 16, 2011

Q : Does the desire for prosperity conflict with religious values?

A : There is the false impression that all Buddhists want to abandon material prosperity, shave their heads and relocate to a mountain top. The Buddhāway asks no such absurd behaviour. Buddhists may live in poor or wealthy countries and their lives will be no different from their countrymen. This is not due to any encouragement to abandon or acquire material prosperity.

Buddhists are guided by precepts which are few, simple and open-ended. They allow us to interpret them according to our circumstance, aspiration and the larger body of Buddhist teaching. For us, the relevant precept here would be the eighth, which, in part, says: "I vow to challenge the promises of consumption, to restrain my use of luxuries, to avoid ..exploitation of the vulnerable;...and find skillful ways to use my material prosperity to fulfill all (eight) of these vows".

We can see that material prosperity in the Buddhist life is never an end in itself, the way it can be for many secular people. Material prosperity is instrumental, that is, it facilitates our fulfilling a larger purpose - compassionate service to all beings. We understand that everything is transient and

so, prosperity itself is fleeting, never the solution to the predicament of human suffering. Further, we understand that prosperity comes at a cost to ourselves and others - people, animals and the environment.

The desire for prosperity is more important than what one possesses. Attachment, in the sense of grasping on to what is fleeting, is recognized as the cause of our sorrow. Should we, in the course of our lives gain or lose wealth, this in itself is neither helpful or otherwise. The crucial factors are the intention and action. A poor person can be as attached to a few coins as a millionaire to great wealth. A wealthy person can be a great and generous benefactor, as many are, using their wealth for the benefit of others. Are we trying to hold or inflate the ever-changing my-me-mine we imagine, or are we making use of this precious human life to effect the awakening of all our fellow beings.

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