

**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, November 06, 2011*

**Q** : Is killing to defend your country justified?

**A** : Ah, if life were only that simple. The range of possibilities that fit this scenario could easily include: Canadian soldiers since the War of 1812, bombings by the Taliban in Afghanistan or the US in Hiroshima, government-approved slaughters of animal populations, killing lab rats in search of a cure and much more. Justified? Justified where? In a court, in public opinion, by 'history', before God?

Even within our one faith, it would be hard to find a consistent behaviour. Buddhists have stood on both sides of many lines. Japanese Zen masters endorsed their military's ambitions in South East Asia and Vietnamese Zen masters risked their own lives to prevent warring armies from meeting.

The scriptural injunction, which informs all Buddhist practice, warns that killing, no matter what the rationale or excuse has dire consequences for the killer. The karma of such an act, even in a so-called justifiable circumstance, will impact on many lives for many generations. Circumstantial considerations do not justify, but only qualify that karmic consequence, they cannot interrupt the inevitability of its result. Buddhism never deals in the absolutes of right or wrong. As with any action, one needs to understand there is no escaping the karmic consequences. In the question posed, this would include taking responsibility for those affected by a killing. This

is poignantly illustrated in the 1950's Academy Award-winning Buddhist film, *The Burmese Harp*. The central character is an ordinary Japanese soldier stuck in Burma as the Japanese surrender in 1945. As he begins the long march home he is overwhelmed by the carnage left from their invasion. He understands about and accepts his responsibility and realizes he cannot go home until he has personally found resting places for all those whose deaths he participated in. In our world, governments are quick enough to shed the responsibility for their own injured after defensive action, let alone their enemies. Imagine the effect on modern warfare if such an ethic was adopted for all those humans, animals and habitats injured or destroyed in that combat.

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