

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, December 11, 2011

Q : Can ordinary folks experience a state of grace.?

A : Some Buddhists argue that, since all beings require intervention by energies different from our conditioned selves to achieve Awakening, therefore, we only achieve Awakening by grace. This is different from the question here, which wonders about a 'state of grace', some special spiritual protection conferred selectively by a divinity. This is unknown in Buddhist teaching. The scripture known as the Lotus Sutra assures every living being that, in the fullness of time, each and everyone of us will become a fully Awakened Buddha - no exceptions. There is no distinction, no higher-lower, better -worse, nearer-further. As with any journey, some will arrive there sooner, relative to others, but this is a function of the choices and actions of that being, not some preferred, protective or condemned state. Thus, while we may rely on grace, it is not selective.

The other distinction in this question is 'ordinary folks', presumably not folks who are extra-ordinary from wealth, physical attributes or accumulation of spiritual merit. In Buddhist teaching, none of those places anyone in some special state. What we may be touching here is the praise of simplicity. In that case, Buddhism has two notable models, the "Zen fool" and the *myo-konin*.

The Zen fool is an ideal represented by certain ancient masters whose comprehension of teaching and practice was so profound that

they lived free of material trappings, dwelling in basic circumstances and, though their wisdom was great, they abandoned, even disparaged, conventional 'book-learning'. They are in such harmony with the Way that they seem child-like. On the other hand, the *myokonin* (literally 'those with the fragrance of saintliness') are similar, but would include those without formal or clerical training. Their exceptionality lies in their faith and devotion in the generosity of Amitabha Buddha. They disavow any personal spiritual power (called 'self-power') in favour of a complete reliance on the promise of Amitabha (or 'Other power'). *Myokonin* have no special power, protection or grace because of their simplicity. It is more that their actions have dissolved the binding power of greed and ignorance, thus reducing negative momentum on their journeys to Awakening.

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