

**RELIGION EXPERTS COLUMN**

*Below is my response to the question provided for the Ask The Religion Experts feature in this Sunday's Ottawa Citizen. We hope this will generate thoughtful discussion of real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

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Saturday, December 31, 2011

**Q** : Are personal resolutions morally binding?

**A** : Some people make resolutions for fun or wishful thinking, more like "it'd be really great if...". They don't invest much, don't expect much and don't feel much when things do or don't happen. No one takes them seriously, so, no harm intended, none received. At best or worst, morally neutral, I'd say.

In our congregation, at personal and collective levels, we go through a formal annual reflection we call "intention setting". Towards year-end we reflect on the question "in what ways have I contributed to my own purposes and to my congregation's? We suggest a tri-partite focus - wisdom/learning, purposeful action and fulfilling ethical responsibilities. People have a month or so to consider the past twelve months in a non-judgmental way. The idea is to take an honest look, recognizing we had certain intentions and tried to fulfill them. We review what happened, knowing that many external circumstances affected the outcome. No judgment, no gold stars and no punishment. The point is to re-view our recent past to allow us to flip that momentum around into the future.

The next step happens at year-end, when, with the past experience in mind, we ask the question "in what ways do I intend to contribute?", again with those three areas. This permits us to set our path for the coming year, as one might sketch a path before a journey. We understand that life is not ours to construct, many hands, human and otherwise,

control the outcomes. All we control is our intention and action. Thus, as the year begins, we step into it as one would on a journey, with direction, energy and determination. We expect to be sometime successful and sometimes frustrated. We wish to emphasize intention, direction and action, not accomplishment.

Returning to today's question, in this process we define an intention which we accept, even embrace, as an expression of our spiritual practice. In this sense it has a moral weight, though hardly binding. It is our announcement to others how they can recognize our deepest values. Thus, whatever the fulfillment, it demonstrates our commitment to live with integrity and purpose.

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:: om namu amida butsu::*

*All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog  
<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/life/ask-the-religion-experts/index.html#>  
We invite you to consider this response and share your own on our blog at <http://www.redmapleleaflet.blogspot.com> )*