

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.

Sunday, February 19, 2012

Q : Are people inherently sinful?
A : We've touched on this question of 'sin' before, and it may be helpful to revisit the difference in how Buddhists view it before commenting on its presence in human nature. The concept of some kind of moral stain which applies itself to an individual as a result of an immoral act is not present in Buddhist teaching. There are many reasons why. First, there is no concept of a permanent personal soul, hence, nothing for sin to attach to. Then, Buddhism does not propose any kind of pure state to aspire to, to fall from or to be cleansed back to. To do so would again require something permanent, some entity to be pure, stained or cleansed.

Buddhist teaching pivots on the concept of impermanence. There is nothing in our experience which sustains, nothing that is eternal, nothing which is unchanging. We cannot step in the same stream twice. Therefore, the idea that there is some permanent 'nature' or 'essence' does not appear in Buddhist teaching. We are not 'inherently' anything, because there is no unchanging self, soul or spirit.

Of course this is not because Buddhist teaching ignores morality. It is a faith deeply concerned with moral action. For Buddhists, that which we call 'me' is a process of motives, desires and actions, without any enduring self or soul. Each of our actions has a moral momentum and consequences will follow upon the actions we take all through our lives. We will approach an understanding of spiritual truth as we are able

to free ourselves from self-centred, greed-driven actions and dedicate our lives to the relief of suffering.

Although many have interpreted this teaching as 'pessimistic', it is, in fact, the 'good news' of Buddhism. Each of us is entirely free to change the direction of our lives, to recognize the futility of the pursuits of material gratification, of the exercise of power over, of the foolishness of craving for specialness. We can open our eyes to the pervasiveness of human suffering and the liberative potential of a life of compassionate action. We have no sin to carry, to soul to purify. All we need do is live each moment in the service of fellow beings.

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:: om namu amida butsu::*

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