

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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Q : How does your faith deal with the issue of suicide?

A : We need look no further than the news headlines to see that Buddhists have a complicated relationship to suicide. Since Vietnam, and recently in Tibet, Buddhists have used suicide, in the most dramatic manner - self-immolation - to protest oppressive regimes. It is important to recognize that suicide, involving Buddhists, bullied Canadian youth or others, is not driven by the same motives in every case. Distraught lovers will hurl themselves to their deaths. Young people abandon all hope of improving their lives in the presence of endless abuse. Those engulfed in shame or disgrace have committed acts of self-destruction for the sake of their honour. The iconic Japanese act of *hara-kiri*, self-disembowelling, is not an act of despair, but provides a response to shame or loss of face. More recently, we see how individuals will allow themselves to meet death in the fulfilment of their duty. This seems to have been the case with many of last year's Fukushima workers who accepted their deaths while trying to prevent greater loss of life in the meltdown. Such suicides we call heroism.

People often wonder how a pacifist faith like Buddhism, one known for its care of all life, can lead to apparently despairing acts. For Buddhists, human life, while precious, is not unique. We view life as a succession of births and deaths on our journey to full and complete Awakening. What matters is not just this life itself, but how we live it. Thus, acts of remarkable self-sacrifice, such as the Tibetan

suicides can represent an ultimate statement of principle. Such people are prepared to use their mortality as an instrument upon which they will play the sorrowful dirges of misery which their people experience daily under oppression.

Our faith teaches that no act, in and of itself, is good or evil. The intention, that is the moral momentum, is a crucial factor in determining the consequences of our actions. Therefore, each of those Buddhist suicides understood their vow not to take lives, but did so deliberately as an ultimate expression of determination to end greater suffering and establish justice.

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:: om namu amida butsu::*

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<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/life/ask-the-religion-experts/index.html#>

All my past 52 columns are available online at:

<http://www.realperson.com/ARE.htm>

We invite you to consider this response and share your own on our Red Maple Leaflet blog at <http://www.redmaplesangha.blogspot.com>

