

## 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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*Sunday, April 15, 2012*

**Q** : How do you tell what parts of your religion should be taken literally and which parts are metaphorical?

**A** : Religion, as used here, suggests historical information, texts, activities and teachings. Buddhists don't take every detail as either literally true or simple metaphor. Within the Buddhist tradition, many details are taken as historical. Our founder, Shakyamuni, was an actual Indian prince (550 BCE). Researchers have tracked down his modern relatives, the Shakya clan. Biographical locations are identifiable and still accessible. Buddhist spiritual giants like Milarepa, Shinran, Saicho and Kobo-daishi have well- documented lives. However, like other ancient lives, these are subject to debate, study and revision.

This is not to say that every single detail of Shakyamuni's life is taken as fact. The fantastic drama of his birth, for example, is not assumed to be history, any more than details in the life-stories of Alexander the Great, George Washington or Confucius. We must acknowledge a much different East Asian orientation to history, as compared to modern Europe. Life-stories were seen as teaching devices , not factuality.

Further, this either /or frame is incomplete. Two levels of meaning should be added - ritual and myth, since they are neither just history nor just metaphor. Some define myth as archaic, embarrassing pre-science. This misses the point of why humans, even today, cultivate mythology. Mythology is more than simple metaphor. It is the construction of an

alternative history for inspirational and educational value. Myth is not history nor is it meant to be. Myth is complex and universal human story-telling which may intersect factual history but its purpose has little to do with establishing scientific certainty. We Buddhists have our mythologies, and these provide invaluable shared stories, which inform and inspire our practices.

Finally, details of religious practice, including historical data, can have important ritual meaning. Again, some dismiss ritual as primitive and disposable, however, it too is a universal human activity which has an irreplaceable role in our lives. A prime example might be any number of Buddhist pilgrimages which are based on verifiable historical events, but whose greatest value is in connecting the pilgrim with the original path-walker in a space which transcends historical time.

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:: om namu amida butsu::*

*This and all other contributors' responses are available on the Citizen's online blog:*

<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>*