

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, January 15, 2012

Q : How should we deal with spiritual doubts?

A : Doubt exists in relation to certainty, or, we might say 'faith'. Can doubt and faith can co-exist? There can be all kinds of spiritual doubts - are the scriptures 'true'? will I find relief from suffering and confusion? The Buddha's advice was typically brief and pragmatic - "Test it out". He tells those who question not to accept anything on his word alone. The final test is our own experience, although not simply the application of reason. He knew that reason, logic and debate were of limited value, science only goes so far. He meant the application of 'prajna', or insight based on full body-mind experience. If people didn't accept his teaching that was fine, they should rely on whatever resonated as truthful.

In Buddhist practice, especially meditation, unusual, disturbing and even fantastic experiences arise. We are taught never to take these at face value. Too often the inexperienced take them as 'proof' of their faith, wisdom or failure. They might interpret unique life experience as evidence of special status. This is self-deluded ego, the problem of human suffering, not the solution.

Great Buddhist teachers insist we doubt anything that arises in our experience. One practice method, developed in East Asian practice, is the 'koan' (public case). This is a repetitive questioning process (doubting, if you will) to continuously investigate and challenge our understanding of our experience. The famous "what is the sound of one hand

clapping?" typifies the power of questioning to push us beyond familiar belief, ordinary logic and pat answers. Koan practice is relentless in its encouragement to doubt all our comfortable spiritual and intellectual resting places and settle for nothing less than a breakthrough of insight.

This kind of questioning does not negate faith or certainty, both can sustain. Doubt does not betray one's faith. Part of the power of the religious mind is its capacity to hold faith and doubt simultaneously, using each wisely. We are not computers only capable of either/or, and we are not babies only able to swallow whatever life feeds us. We can use the fullness of our experience to penetrate the question of life and death.

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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>