

RELIGION EXPERTS COLUMN

*This is my response to this week's question of **Ask The Religion Experts**, a feature in the Sunday **Ottawa Citizen**. Questions are the editor's. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

Sunday, June 19, 2011

Q : Is lying sometimes justified?

A There are different kinds of lies - a complete lie, a mistaken lie, a protective lie, a lie of creativity. The lie of creativity proposes that the moon is made of green cheese -clearly untrue, yet appropriately untrue. A protective lie reassures a child that we love them more than anything in the world. Mistaken lies seem very popular with some politicians. Here, I think we are talking about the complete lie, as in "no, officer I wasn't going over the speed limit".

Buddhists do not support a belief that Truth is fully or completely knowable by humans. In fact, our belief is that humans are deluded about what's real and true. This delusion is thinking we have an eternal self or can avoid the legacy of dissatisfaction that defines our human condition. In the midst of impermanence, we grasp for an imagined permanence, initiating the whole cycle of birth and death.

Buddhists are more concerned with intention than black and white truths. The Asian notion of *karma* applies here. We experience the consequences of what we choose and do. However, the intention of that act subtly influences that consequence too. Hence, in our world, the protective lie can be excused. Similarly, the mistaken lie

may be excused except if, as we see in current public life, the intention is clearly to obscure immoral actions.

The Buddha exemplifies a well-intentioned lie on several occasions. In the Lotus Sutra, there are two situations where he uses lies to serve his salvational intention. One is the metaphor of the "burning house", where he compares his 'lie' about his own mortality to that of a father, rescuing his sons from a conflagration, as the "skillful means" he employs to distract his disciples from their immersion in self-destructive delusion. Another is the metaphor of the wealthy father who disguises himself as a common worker to gain the trust of a son who has fallen on hard times. In both cases, he points to an intention, the freeing beings from suffering, as words which transform a lie to a act of grace.

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