

## 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.

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Sunday, July 24, 11

**Q** : Does imagination play a role in faith?  
**A** Faith grows from our full human experience, speaking to our rational and emotional sides.

Buddhist wisdom has never been mere philosophical speculation, rarely dry lectures. The Middle Way strikes a balance. Imagination, for Buddhists, is a legitimate and valued medium for teaching and practice.

Buddhist literature is primarily intended to convince but rather to surprise, delight and awaken. It employs story-telling, poetry, fables, parables, fantasy and other imaginative writing to engage the emotions and the intuitive mind. One such example is the poetic form called *haiku*, micro-poems aspiring to represent the concept of "the whole universe in this moment". A successful *haiku* mirrors its graphic cousin, *sumi-e*, that familiar and instantly recognizable form we call Japanese painting with its subtly hinting narrative and miniature surprises. Japanese aesthetics consider it crude to make full disclosure - suggestion and imagination are signs of true teaching.

In religious practice too, Buddhism employs the power of imagination, for example, visualization practice. In these we are invited to imagine such and such a figure, say the bodhisattva of compassion, KwanYin. Buddhist art has provided ample versions, so this is not difficult. We imagine her presence before us, in vivid detail. We may simultaneously repeat her name or some other verbal formula. In some variants, we will be invited to bring this image

into our own heart-region and experience ourselves containing the full power of compassion, dwelling in the centre of our being. This is not play-acting, nor trance, nor fantasy for deception. This is a teaching device to help us experience ourselves as we are - connected with the presence of the most powerful energies of the universe - compassion, care-giving, healing, insight, creativity, to name a few.

For Buddhists imagination is exactly that - *image*-ination - the creation of symbolic imagery as teaching and practice tools. The human search for meaning takes us beyond our usual limits and so we must employ such methods as will allow us entry where the rational mind stalls or recoils. We might conclude in *haiku* form :

*Pouring through square windows,  
Errant sunlight splashes and soaks,  
In purposeless play.*

*Rev. Innen Parchelo, doshu,  
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