

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 : Which is more important in your religion: faith or works?

A : The primary teaching of the historical Buddha is known as The Noble Eightfold Path, and it describes eight activities which together comprise a proven (but not exclusive) way to relieve our human suffering. These eight steps are often gathered together under three sub-headings or clusters as insight, ethical intention and practice. The original words could comfortably be translated as faith, values and action. This would add the third category of values to the dichotomy of faith and works.

Rather than a dualistic either/or choice, Buddhist teaching describes these as an interconnected continuum. It recognizes that the acquisition of advanced intellectual understanding or the profession of a profound faith can become a self-obsession, a source of self-adulation. Further, it advises that the best and most moral of intentions can collapse into a sentimentalism. And finally, actions or works may be random and without purpose unless they have some foundation of insight and intention. The choice is really a false one, Buddhists would say, since faith-insight, value-intention and work-practice each inform and motivate the other. Each is devalued without the shading of the others.

This is reflected in all the great religions and (self-professed non-religions too) in the modern world. Only at the extremes do we see exclusionary activity trying to separate them. Centres of study, faith and worship are most

typically found next to charitable, educational or other service initiatives of that tradition. It seems experience has taught us all that the flow through the continuum of faith-values-works is a complete and socially constructive one.

It is interesting to bring this view into some current debates where different sides try to insist on hard divisions. In particular the discussions about the place of religious activity in schools and the American-style "separation of Church and State" come to mind. Perhaps, were we to replace efforts to separate faith and works with an appreciation of the relationship between insight-faith, values-intention and works-actions, we might come to a better appreciation for the lack of moral foundations in both education and politics.

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:: om namu amida butsu::*

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