

## RELIGION EXPERTS COLUMN

*Below is my response to the question provided for the Ask The Religion Experts feature in this Saturday's Ottawa Citizen. We hope this will generate thoughtful discussion of real-life applications of Buddhadharmā and deeper understanding for us all.*

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Saturday, July 21, 2012

**Q** : Does the renewed debate on Doctor Assisted Suicide say anything about the sanctity of life in modern times?

**A** : Public interest in this "debate" represents two shifts, both somewhat connected. Firstly, it mirrors the broader shift in the social value of the doctor-patient relationship. More and more, both parties are moving towards a collaborative relationship, very different from the 'doctor knows best' attitudes of previous generations. I see this in my own personal care and in the environment of the health sector within which I work. From the Health Ministry down, the patient's rights and responsibilities are being acknowledged. The default is shifting to a conversation between the patient and the practitioner, a shared care model. This is proving a challenge for both sides.

The connected shift is the construction of our mortality as, first and foremost, a matter of our direction. This life I live is more defined as mine to do with as I see fit. The obligations of society, religion and family still have weight, but are factors not determinants. Consequently, decisions about what to do with this life, including ending it, are seen as lying in the personal sphere. We will each have the right/responsibility to make a qualitative, subjective decision on whether this life is worth sustaining or not. Returning to the first point, we are then empowered to collaborate with our physician to establish a plan which reflects our will.

As to the sanctity of life, this further involves

individuals in defining what constitutes value. It empowers each of us to have the privilege of determining the quality of our own lives. In terms of end-of-life decision-making, I would suggest this actually sidesteps the more important issue. We may be granting greater control over the decision to the individual, but I question whether our society is sufficiently concerned with providing ethical standards and guidance that can help individuals make such decisions. This has been the historic role of religions, and I would argue that we as religious leaders need to provide the understanding, example and the invitation to engage individuals in developing this capacity.

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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>*