

Religion Experts Column

This is the response to this week's question for the **Ask The Religion Experts** feature of the Sunday Ottawa Citizen. Questions are provided by the editor. 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, January 30, 2011

Q : Are state-run lotteries a good or a bad thing?

A : If I had a million dollars.... When governments discovered what charities and casinos have known for years, they latched onto lotteries enthusiastically. Gambling makes money, big money. And it does so with comparatively small investment. Gambling is dressed up as a "free" source of money, funding social initiatives. By no accident, they fund small community projects which would never happen without this gambling. And who could be against hockey rinks in remote communities?

Lost in the hype are the full financial and emotional costs. First, they conceal how governments are ingenuous/ingenious in redirecting the costs of legitimate community-building back to citizens, primarily those who can't afford it. Very few "lottery-funded" projects are frills. They tend to be those which would fall off the funding table because they are small, low-profile and of low immediate economic value.

Secondly and, from a religious perspective, more centrally, these masquerading forms of gambling deceptively feed our lowest intentions. We are bombarded with images of endless happiness where we can bathe

in bathtubs full of cash or live in obscenely oversized houses (which few winners can afford to maintain). We are told that greed is good and that sudden wealth is wonderful (in spite of research which shows big wins often degrade the winner's life). It encourages us to focus on our own lives alone, ignoring the reality of poverty and social need around us.

Buddhists ground their faith in a set of precepts, guidelines of ethical behaviour, practical ways to express our faith and wisdom in concrete terms. In our small community we define one precept this way: "I vow to challenge the promises of consumption, to restrain my use of luxuries, to avoid situations of greed, gaming and exploitations of the vulnerable; to act always with moderation, and find skillful ways to use my material prosperity to fulfill these vows". Buddhists, like everybody, are free to choose to gamble. Unlike the gaming commissions, however, we call it what it is and are unrelenting in reminding ourselves of the true and largely negative consequences of such behaviour.

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