

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, February 6, 2011

Q : What are the limits to 'free will' ?

A : That we all can make choices is fundamental to Buddhist practice. Life presents itself and we respond as an expression of what we value. We express our values, intentions and will in action. However, Buddhists don't describe this capacity for choice-in-action as 'free will'. That concept has its origins in the belief that individuals can somehow exist in isolation from each other and the world. It goes along with the parallel concept that personal freedom resides, in some unique way, in that individual. As I understand it, the idea of 'free will' emerged theologically to affirm that humans aren't little puppets dangling on God's strings. God and his children are separate and humans are free to love God or not.

Buddhism presents a different view. Humans, as are all beings, are part of the vast web of existence, intimately and unavoidably implicated in each other's lives. It is the urge to define our lives as separate or "ours" which is the cause of our spiritual suffering. For Buddhists, human will is always qualified by two invariable conditions. First, our lives, our very existence, is intertwined with the lives of all other beings. We cannot do anything without it having an impact on others and the world. We act out our lives in this web

of countless other lives. Secondly, every action we take has a consequence for us. As the cart follows the oxen, what we choose brings us a result.

So, we are free to choose to lay our hands down on a glowing stove burner, but only the foolish or insane would choose such pain. Buddhists recognize that we can choose whatever action is available to us as humans. We also recognize that choice comes with responsibility and consequence. Actions which aim to establish a separate and eternal life will only result in more of the same spiritual suffering we already experience. Finally, the idea of limits itself is a false one. Any marking off - my will from yours, my freedom from yours - is the very action which brings us the spiritual suffering we all seek to end.

*Rev. Innen Parchelo, doshu,
Red Maple Sangha*