

**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, March 6, 2011*

**Q** : Why is it taught not to speak badly about the dead (even if they were scoundrels)?

**A** : There seems a disturbingly common tendency these days to endorse the expression of all manner of harsh judgements, unfounded gossip or condemning thoughts towards people, living or dead. We hear this in political rants, media comment or music lyrics. All over the Internet few think twice about 'dissing' someone, anyone. For Buddhists, this kind of unwholesome speech is only partly about the actual truth of such opinions. Just as much, it concerns the effect on us of articulating ill-will towards fellow beings. By rousing such negative energies, we are diminished when we seek to diminish others.

Our first teacher, Shakyamuni Buddha, understood the power of speech. It can transform a passing and inconsequential thought into intentioned action. It inserts us into our world. He included this in his most fundamental teachings, The Noble Eight-step Path. One step is "wholesome speaking", expressing oneself verbally in a way consistent with our highest aspirations. We need to attend to our thoughts before we voice them. Unless thoughts mirror our respect for all beings, our patience and goodwill, we are best to refrain from

such speech. The alternative is to give every and any thought voice, to speak from lesser intentions, thus setting in motion the chain of cause and effect which will hold us in the cycle of suffering that characterises human life. In short, speech is an action and unwholesome speech will lead us further from Awakening and Buddhahood.

In Buddhist literature, the most striking example comes in the 20th Chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, which describes a bodhisattva called Never-Disparage. (A bodhisattva is a Buddha-in-training, one who has vowed to end the suffering of all.) This bodhisattva meets every experience of mistreatment or insult directed his way with forbearance and compassion. He never strikes back physically or verbally. He explains his behaviour by reminding us that he has vowed to work for the spiritual fulfilment of all and to acknowledge his deep connection to all beings. His speech must be consistent with this vow. Our speech should be no less.

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