

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, March 13, 2011

Q : What role does faith play in health and/or healing?

A : Over the past decades, we see a major shift in how we view health. It is less seen negatively, that is, as the absence of disease. More often now, it is defined positively, such as the UN has done, as a multi-faceted state of well-being. This includes such factors as diet, poverty and psycho-emotional balance. More and more, health is holistic, that is, encompassing the full spectrum of human experience, rather than the limited lens of bones, blood and organs. Needless to say, one's faith, however we define that, belongs with and contributes to overall well-being.

There has been a parallel professional investigation of the impact of faith-based activities as a determinant of overall wellness. Many main-stream health professionals are speaking of the value of faith practices. Most prominent in my field of social work has been the American social work theorist, Edward Canda. His respected research has demonstrated that people who are active practitioners in a faith-based activity lead healthier lives and experience more complete healing from illness.

Buddhists, since our earliest times have followed Shakyamuni's original teaching that human suffering had a

spiritual "cure". He is often called the Great Physician, diagnosing suffering as caused by attachments and craving. His treatment and cure is to follow the "prescription" of the Eight-step Path. Further, as is clear from this Path, whether we rely on modern research evidence or the recommendations from the Great Physician, it is clear that the significant factor is not simply faith.

For example, in Buddhism, faith has been described as the first part of a three-part process. The other necessary parts are, on the one hand, asserting one's full and honest intention to fulfill the call of faith, and on the other, engaging in active faith-based practices, whatever those may be, to fulfill those intentions. Decorating ourselves with nice thoughts and feelings, reading this week's inspirational books are of little avail without the intention and activation of our faith. Engagement with life, with all its messy parts and delights, is both valuable and necessary for the assurance of wellness.

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