

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 20, 2011

Q : What does your faith say about couples living together outside of marriage?

A :The formal institution of marriage has no scriptural authority for Buddhists. Consequently couples can cohabit as they choose without sanction or blessing. Many Buddhist priests are licensed to perform civil ceremonies. Any couples who wish to can, of course, seek to have their unions blessed by a priest as an adjunct to whatever marriage service they select. This ceremony, as I have observed, becomes a declaration of intent before a treasured and supportive community. This adds an extra level of responsibility and consequence to the decision to form a married-or-equivalent relationship. In some respects it thereby becomes a community-strengthening experience, where other members also assume responsibility to support the couple in building a successful relationship.

Some Buddhist sects which teach or practice in a monastic environment would not allow any marriage-type relationship to form within that cloistered time. Therefore, if a married person spends time in a monastery, the marriage is "suspended" as it were. They are treated as a monastic for that time and follow the associated standards of celibacy. Other sects, who

see everyday life as the ground for spiritual fulfilment, do not discriminate between lay or clergy in allowing couples to form and raise families. In fact, in many Asian countries, priesthood and management of a temple has been treated as a family business, with children assuming duties and carrying on from parents.

Regardless of the legal status of the couple, the encouragement is always to use that coupling experience to practice "the Bodhisattva way", that is, the values and intentions which foster the aspirations of our faith. These will include compassion, honesty, perseverance and mindfulness, to mention a few.

If I can step into the controversial question of same-sex coupling, I am not aware of any Buddhist sects which specifically forbid or condemn such relationships, married or not. I would expect attitudes to reflect local law, custom and tolerance, however any discrimination would be difficult to support by any scriptural authority. All human relationships are treated as sacred and considered the means for engaging in the work of compassion and wisdom.

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