

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 27, 2011

Q : How can one overcome the anxieties of this world?

A : Anxiety has different meanings for us. In common parlance it applies to momentary worry about some aspect of life - be that a term paper, a divorce or a bank balance. In more medical contexts, anxiety is a serious neuro-physical disorder that can disable a person's life for a brief time or chronically. It can prevent an athlete or actor from succeeding. It can keep people trapped in their homes, unable to be with others. It can be an exhausting debilitating condition that ends careers, relationships and, at times, even lives.

Regardless of which type we speak, anxiety is not an illness or disease but a natural human activity which can be normal or abnormal depending on the individual, their genetics, their neuro-physical make-up and disposition. As such, it cannot be overcome, beaten or defeated. Like any other chronic condition, it can be responded to, managed and lived with.

Buddhism has led the world in providing proven and effective methods for living with anxiety. For Buddhists, anxiety is part of the spectrum of pain and suffering that characterise human life. One of its fundamental teachings,

and part of our Eight-step Path, is the practice called "vipassana" or insight. Since the 1960's, a secular variation of this style of meditation has grown into a staple of social work/psychology/medicine's responses to anxiety. Thus, in both of my careers it is central. As a social worker, I teach secularised mindfulness methods to individuals with anxiety through a multi-week psycho-educational program. As a religious advisor, I instruct people in Buddhist vipassana to find a point of balance and calm amidst life's difficulties, be they social or spiritual. In both settings, people who learn and practice attest to its benefits.

Currently, anxiety is most often treated with medication. The research of people like Canadian psychologist, Zindel Segal, has demonstrated that mindfulness practice is as effective as medication in helping people cope with anxiety and/or depression. Regrettably, in a world where promises of a quick fix are just one pill away, there are those who find acquiring and sustaining a lifetime practice of mindfulness too difficult.

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