

**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, April 02, 2011*

**Q** : Disasters and Faith  
**A** : Shocking events in Japan have preoccupied the news, as if the most frightening movie effects had come to life. My tradition, with deep roots in Japanese Buddhism, was profoundly affected. At that time, I was headed for a retreat in the US. Recognizing this preoccupation in us, our facilitator dedicated the retreat to exploring our responses to disasters. Firstly, he acknowledged that, as personal as this disaster might feel, it is one of a series of similar disasters, the normal upheavals in the natural world. We needn't layer it with religious significance, divine retribution nor tales of the End of Time. It is a further reminder of the Buddhist principle of impermanence.

Next, he relayed to us what he has heard from his many colleagues in Japan : that there is no need for any of us to fly to Japan, and more importantly, there is deep appreciation among Japanese for our distant concern and prayers.

There is no doubt of the value and necessity of financial support through NGO's on site, however, these events cut right to the value of faith. Faith is simple in good times, but, moments of tremendous suffering call us to examine its value. Like most, I felt helpless

and distant, wanting concrete ways to help. On reflection I began to appreciate that the pain I felt for the Japanese is no different than theirs. Suffering is suffering, and, as the historical Buddha taught, it defines the human condition.

One powerful Buddhist practice in that retreat was a practice called 'metta bhavana', or Cultivating Loving Kindness. In it we used our meditative capacity to contact and draw into our hearts whatever we could of the suffering in us and the world. Recognizing the energies residing within our hearts, we transformed suffering into compassion, which is then released out into the world, including ourselves. For me, as for others, this practice grounded me in a spiritual centre and connected that centre with the suffering of the world. Further, it provided a much appreciated means for sharing that energy with others in places like shattered Japan, and a re-affirmation of faith-practices.

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