

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, April 10, 2011

Q : Is there such a thing as a collective conscience?

A : Any question of conscience stands in relation to a moral code. Unlike many faiths, Buddhism arose as a response to the predicament of human suffering and its relief. It had no connection to ritual acts, such as correct foods to eat, broken relations with a supreme being or sacred formulas. Its morality is not one of right and wrong, that is, the proper performance of some codified sacred acts. Rather, it concerns itself with penetrating and resolving the predicament of suffering. Fundamental to this endeavour is a recognition that all beings, all life-forms, are inescapably interconnected. As Vietnamese teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn says, we "inter-are". Since we share existence with all life, our suffering and that of others is collective. Our goal of ending suffering is not personal; the familiar Buddhist vow is "Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them." Morality for Buddhists is collective, how we contribute to the relief of suffering of all, rather than serving our own narrow passions. That same teacher, Hahn,, in his *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*, also proposes that immoral acts violate community relationships, and should be addressed collectively, by restoring harmony within the social unit, say, a

Buddhist community. It is similar to the Aboriginal practice of a healing circle. Compassion, instead of punishment. Relationship, instead of individual rights. Unfortunately, our Western culture is dominated by a libertarian obsession with the self, its rights and freedoms. We are taught that we can do whatever we want as long as it doesn't interfere with others' freedoms. All me-me-me, all the time. As such, we come to be isolated beings, less and less members of families, schools, organizations, hometowns, nations or eco-spheres, devoid of any sense of belonging, duty or responsibility to others. As a consequence, a morality of collective conscience has very little traction. Buddhists assume that all life arises interdependently. We hold it is impossible to act without affecting the lives of others. Our suffering is not separate from others, its relief is the duty and morality of all. For Buddhists, there is only collective morality and collective conscience.

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