

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 24, 2011

Q : How important is it that people marry within their own faith?

A : Doctrinally, there is nothing in Buddhist teaching or practice to obstruct or discourage marriages between different faiths. This question would seem to depend on how closely the practices of a given faith tradition are associated with cultural practices. In many countries where Buddhism has been a dominant faith, it has been flavoured by elements of local culture - holidays, language, social values and the arts. This flexibility and adaptability is characteristic of Buddhism all over the world. Each country used common elements, say the *Heart Sutra* or some form of *stupa* (reliquary) structure, but it is not difficult to identify country-of-origin based on images of the Buddha, monastic dress, scripture and liturgy. Over time, these have merged as cultural expressions, unique to their homeland. For example, countries like Sri Lanka or Thailand have embraced Buddhism for centuries. Yet these two cultures are distinctive, to be sure, even with the common thread of Buddhism.

This question is especially visible within Western Buddhism, in fact, there is debate over this precise issue. People who have immigrated tended to

carry customs and forms from their country of origin, like Taiwan or Tibet. It might be difficult for a Western-born individual, with no cultural links to participate in one of these services. Can someone born in Ontario truly practice Tibetan Buddhism, in essence is Buddhism faith-based or cultural?

On the other hand, those born in the West, regardless of ethnic roots, who adopt Buddhism as their faith are creating an amalgam which suits them but can seem unacceptable to the immigrant Buddhists. Is it inauthentic for a third-generation Japanese-Canadian from Toronto to recite the *Heart Sutra* in English? Which is the true Buddhism, where does culture stop and faith begin? For those marrying within our faith, one could have to ask, are the partners who are marrying in a Japanese Buddhist ceremony, for example, affirming a Buddhist faith or making a Japanese cultural statement by so doing, do they even make the distinction? To the degree this is a cultural statement, it might be more crucial to marry within the faith.

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