

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, May 29, 2011

Q: How can people of faith be good examples for peace?

A: Buddhists hold that the beginning of peacefulness lies in our own awareness of ourselves. Unless we can approach our personal or collective hurts, desires and vulnerabilities with understanding and compassion, we will simply continue to re-energize and re-enact a path of violence, in us or the world. This is the heart of pacifism, Gandhi-ji's *satya-graha*, 'soul-power'. Humans have the capacities to be compassionate or cruel, loving or hate-filled. We become the one we energize the most.

There is a story of Shakyamuni, when he was leading his early followers across North India. His reputation had grown and there were those who were jealous and hostile. Once, his followers saw a huge man, a renowned murderous criminal approaching, shouting threats and curses. The followers scattered for safety. The Buddha continued uninterrupted. When confronted by this man, he did not let fear, anger or anxiety take over. He focussed on recognizing the humanity of the other. Relying on his own profound awareness of his own weaknesses, he saw the man as no different than himself. The criminal was so disoriented and touched by this reaction that he ceased his threats. In time, he became one of the many loyal

followers. That is 'soul-power'.

Those caught up in greed and anger will dismiss pacifism as passive-ism - weak sentimentalism. Nobel Peace Prize winner, Thich Nhat Hahn, explains: "If you think compassionate people do not resist and challenge injustice, you are wrong. ...When we are armed with compassion and understanding, we fight not against other people, but against the tendency to invade, to dominate and to exploit." Bob Marley wrote: "Everyone cries out for peace, no one is crying for justice". For us to be examples of peace, we must confront injustice, at all levels. Buddhists have been accused of being passive, but peacefulness is not passivity, it is compassionate action. It transcends the petty self-interests of righteousness and retribution, the hallmarks of so much alleged modern peace-keeping. We can be "be peace" when we acknowledge the interdependence of all beings, and see that injustice and suffering for one, affects the lives of all.

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