

**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, June 12, 2011

**Q** : Is worshipping together better than praying by yourself?

**A** : When I have the opportunity to instruct people in Buddhist practice, I usually conclude with a recommendation that, for most people, collective practice has more energy and strength than solitary ones. Fellow practitioners repeatedly confirm this from their experience. This is not to assert greater value to it nor deny the value of solitary practice. Indeed, there is much to be gained by a period of private effort. Further, around our world, not everyone has the availability of collective practice. It does suggest that, while all forms of practice have their respective merits, group practice is more efficacious than solitary, more of the time.

There is a saying in Buddhist practice - *No one ever practices alone*. No matter when, where or how we engage in our religious practice, someone somewhere is also practising. This is more than a variation on the theme of interconnectedness. This is a reminder that the ongoing activity of beings in all realms is the opening to Awareness. If we take practice forms as acts of engagement with one's acknowledged Higher Power, and, if we can accept that the activity of the universe is that same act of engagement, then no one ever prays alone.

For Buddhists, prayer as a personal address, performing recitation of a verse or through some surrender to grace, for examples, is certainly different from a ritual offering or copying sacred texts. Different as act, but not in its motive or effect. What we might call private prayer is not any different from more public worship, except at some superficial level. What matters in all forms of religious activity is the intent, the sincerity or, as Buddhists might say, the "mind of practice". In Buddhism we call this "mind of practice" *bodhicitta*. Rote repetition, that is "going through the motions", regardless of the religious activity is hollow and pointless. *Bodhicitta* is both the recognition of and the intention for actions that lead to the relief of suffering in the world.

Finally, a *haiku* asks:

*Which is true practice -  
Compassionate action or private  
insight?  
Which petal is the real trillium?*

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