
Religion Experts Column

Following is this week's response to the question provided by the **Ask The Religion Experts** feature of the Sunday issue of the *Ottawa Citizen*. Innen is one of a panel of responders who represent most of the world's faiths. Questions are provided by the editor. All responses are available on the online blog for the feature.

You are invited to consider this response and offer your own to those on the mailing list. It is our hope this will generate wide and thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.

Sunday, July 25, 2010

TOPIC: What is the most important prayer to your faith group?

Without a doubt, the most important and frequently recited text in Buddhism is the *Heart of Perfect Wisdom*, (or *The Smaller Prajnaparamita Sutra*). This abbreviated version of its longer cousin is recited in Buddhist practice daily, in either Japanese or English, by lay and clergy around the world. It dates back to the period just after the death of the historical Buddha and provides a succinct summary of some of the key elements of Buddhist faith. Its opening phrase "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form" reminds us that everything in our manifest universe, all that arises, is, without exception, transient and without an essence or permanence. It lists all the possible claims to permanence, right down to "conception, discrimination and awareness", and, in relentless, sweeping strokes, asserts these too are empty of permanence. In its concluding phrases it reminds us that reciting philosophy is not enough. It says we must go "beyond deluded thoughts and... live the heart of perfect wisdom". In living is the Way. For those curious, there are several dozen translations available online.

Within the East Asian schools of Buddhism, (including my own Tendai tradition) another sutra is chanted as frequently as the *Heart*, the *Lotus Sutra (The Saddharma Pundarika)*. Making no attempts at historicity or scientific enquiry, the *Lotus Sutra* relies on parable and mytho-poetic narrative to unfold some profound Buddhist teachings. We enter an apparently fanciful universe to learn about how the Buddhas unfold the Way. We are told that the Truth comes to us in many ways, like fabulous and welcoming cities on a long journey, each in keeping with our capacities and predispositions; that each of us is already the complete presentation of the Truth, but like the man with a precious jewel sewn into his clothing, we are unaware or that each of us will discover this truth in our own time as we learn to act in accord with it. No other text has influenced literature, art and religious life like the *Lotus Sutra*. A new translation, designed for the general English-speaking public, has just been released by Gene Reeves.

Rev. R. Innen Parchelo, doshu,
Red Maple Sangha