

Holiday, holy day

At first, there were holy days. In ancient India, this was the full moon and new moon days, and the lunar quarters in between, which were all 7 days apart. This follows the lunar calendar, and is perhaps the earliest 7-day (hebdomad) system, as old as the Babylonian system. The early Buddhists followed this calendar, as do many traditional Buddhists (especially those in south and southeast Asia) today.

During these holy days, the faithful generally take time off from work or their regular activities, from their occupation and preoccupation, to spend time either alone in some form of religious activity, especially meditation, or congregating before a teacher to listen to the Dharma. On new-moon and full-moon days, monastics would gather in conclave to hear an elder recite their monastic code (the Pāṭimokkha), and renew their monastic vows, as it were.

As society became more secularized, especially after the Industrial Revolution (18th-19th centuries), when mass production, productivity and labour become more measured and systematic, the idea of “holiday” assumes a more dominant role. Originally, such days referred to special religious days or “holy days,” but they now generally refer to any special day of rest or relaxation, away from work, from school, or worldly activities.

Whether we are religious or not, we generally look forward to holidays, even a holiday, a break, from our regular routine. The more routine our work, the more likely we are to look forward to such a respite. In other words, there are things we *have* to do, and things we *love* do.

Often enough we work so that we *have* things to support our lives and give us happiness. If we spend our holidays wisely, then we *are* truly happy. Generally, work is about *having*, while holidays and holy days are about truly *being*. It is possible for us both to have and to be, that is, when we enjoy our work as we do our holidays.

At work or at school, we often have to do things we do not like, or of which we are not always mindful: we are then not our true selves. On holidays, we have the chance to simply be our selves. In other words, our holidays should not merely be a break from work or schooling, but it should be a time for self-renewal, self-discovery, even self-liberation.

This means being with *those* who are truly happy and with whom we feel really happy, people in whom we see goodness and those who see goodness in us. Besides such positive people, we should enjoy wholesome places, abodes of natural beauty and peace, where we can imbibe such goodness.

When we see such goodness in others or in such places, we are also seeing and building goodness in ourselves. Let us breathe in that goodness, and breathe out that goodness. Let us breathe space into our being so that our heart grows more still and clear. The still mind is a holy mind, a heart that truly and simply *is*.

Holiness is not in a place or an object or another person or an external being. We have projected holiness onto them. Religion is really feeling: a good religion makes us feel good; a true religion lets us see the truth; a free religion frees us.

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True holiness is within ourselves, when we are truly at peace with ourselves, when we forgive ourselves for things done or undone, when we accept ourselves unconditionally, so that here begins our spiritual growth. Then whatever we do, we are at peace with it, because we would not consciously do anything bad or evil.

Even our work can be joyful; when we are not working, too, we are joyful. For, we are living in the present moment, responding naturally and harmoniously to what needs to be done next. Even in the face of failure, we feel a sense of sweet relief that we are able to learn from it, so that we better ourselves in due course.

When we are able to enjoy both our work and our rest, when we enjoy both what we have to do and what we love doing, then we are living a full life. For, then, everyday is a holiday, every day is a holy day.

In the Vatthûpama Sutta (M 7)¹ (on the parable of the cloth), a brahmin invites the Buddha to wash himself pure (or “baptise” himself) in a holy river nearby. The Buddha explains that rivers and water do not wash away our evil or sins. (For if they do, then the fishes and water creatures would be the holiest of beings!) Then the Buddha famously declares:

For the pure, it is always a holy day!	For the pure, it is always a precept day!
For the pure, whose deeds are pure,	his vow is always fulfilled.
Wash right here, brahmin (in the Dharma)!	Towards all being give safety.
If you speak no falsehood,	if you harm no life,
if you do not take the not-given,	faithful, free from selfishness—
what need is there to go to Gayā? ²	Any well is Gayā to you!

(M 7.20/1:39) =
SD 28.12

Happy Lunar New Year & may all your days be holydays.

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¹ <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/28.12-Vatthupama-S-m7-piya-ds.pdf>

² That is, Bodh Gayā (beside the river Niranjana), where the Buddha awakened to Buddhahood, the holiest of Buddhist places.