

(Due to the sensitivity of this reflection, we are limiting its circulation only to Buddhists and those who wish to be informed. If you feel there are others who would benefit from it, please forward this message to them.)

## A truly Buddhist Christmas?

Buddhists are generally a very good-naturedly tolerant lot. We are happy to see others (human and non-human) happy. This is the true Buddhist spirit.

However, when Buddhists greet other Buddhists “merry Christmas” (not uncommon in Singapore and to some extent in Malaysia, too) it makes me wonder how meaningful this is, and how helpful (or how damaging) this can be?

The first thing that strikes me is that I see no Christians wish any Buddhist “happy Vesak” on our most sacred day. Much less have I heard of Christians wishing one another happy Vesak.

Furthermore, if we are so generous in such greetings, we should also wish non-Muslims “selamat Hari Raya,” we should wish non-Hindus “happy Deepavali,” or wish non-Daoists “happy Laozi day” and so on. We are unlikely to do this. Why?

The reasons then become more obvious. Please join me in reflecting on a few of these reasons. Firstly, we generally regard Christmas (consciously or unconsciously) as a great commercial holiday. But would our Christian friends approve of this? Imagine others taking Vesak to be purely a commercial holiday!

The second reason is even more important and worth examining more deeply. For easy reference, I call this the “Christmas syndrome,” that is, our minds are still colonized by Christian influence (the reason for this are worth examining further, too).

The Christmas syndrome worsens into mental slavery when we are willing to put aside even the Dharma for other things. Let me give a worrying example. Once, at the start of an open meditation class for students, the leader came up to me with a worried look, wondering if we should forego the short opening puja (Namo tassa), and not to mention anything Buddhist at all during the course. Reason: some Christian students were keen to join the meditation class, too. (Let the wise see the wisdom or lack of it here.)

Then there is the Pinkerton syndrome, when we think that Christmas is great or acceptable because the angmos celebrate it. But there are many angmos who are Buddhists, even monks and nuns, and also come for Sutta classes. Again, there is a darker side here when it becomes mental slavery: once, a temple administrator intimated to me that “white Dharma speakers give better Dharma talks and attract larger groups.” (Again here let the wise think for themselves the falsity of such a statement.)

Then again, Christmas is not so merry even for some believers. Associated Press, in early December 2010, reported Philippines Immigration Bureau chief Ronaldo Ledesma as saying that

officers at passport counters were banned from saying “Merry Christmas” because they might be misconstrued as soliciting gifts or cash. Philippines children traditionally offer Christmas wishes to solicit gifts from godparents and relatives. The practice was hijacked by corrupt officials who sometimes used it as a code for extortion requests.

In December 2008, I proposed, for the sake of freeing our minds for joy and commitment to the Dharma, by declaring 25 December as “Buddhist Renewal Day.” This idea was inspired by my memories of the times I spent with Buddhists in Europe and California. They told me that during Christmas, many of them would spend the long holidays in retreats studying Suttas or doing intensive meditation. (I can see them sitting like meditating Buddhas snugly wrapped in warm blankets in the calm glow of silent candles.) (While writing this, I happily discovered on the net that on 5 April 2008, Ajahn Amaro of Abhayagiri forest monastery, Redwood Valley, California, too, had used “Buddhist Renewal Day” for upasika training.)

May the Dharma bring out the true meaning of our lives, and inspire us with its true purpose. Let us renew our commitment to the Three Jewels.

A very happy new year!

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