

Mindful Christmas

How Buddhists should enjoy life

[Previously published as 211222 piyatan]

Christmas is the most exciting holiday of the year for many, if not, most, western and westernized Buddhists, especially the wealthy and leisurely. The Christmas Buddhists. Today, the Christmas tree and presents decorate the houses of Christmas celebrants. After centuries of cultural and colonial conditioning, we cannot fail to feel the cheer of the season.

The early Christians did not celebrate Christmas, just as the early Buddhists did not celebrate Vesak. No one knew the exact date of Christ's birth while the Buddhists are more certain of the Buddha's birthday.

Winter solstice

25 December was the date of the winter solstice in the Roman calendar. Westerners in the northern hemisphere celebrated the "return" of the sun from its journey south to welcome back warmth and fruitfulness. The churches were practically empty during this festival. What better way than to convert 25 December into a Christian festival to draw in the crowd.

It was nearly 400 years after Christ that Christmas was introduced by the Church Father, John Chrysostom, in Constantinople in 378. St Augustine explained that it was significant to take Christ as being born on the shortest day of the year, and grew up as the days grew longer with increasing light.

The sun

To Buddhists, the Buddha is the "kinsman of the sun" (*ādicca,bandhu*). In Dhamma terms, just as there is only one sun, the Buddha is our one and only true teacher. He gives us a meaningful life through the 4 noble truths, in the light of life's true purpose, to awaken, like the sun awakening us daily.

Christmas is celebrated by most Christians, but not all Christians: just as most Buddhists do not celebrate Vesak, and most of us do not even know which day of the year it is. Many people get drunk during the Christmas season, but are more likely to remain sober for the rest of the year. Many Buddhists tend to spend the years in a drunken stupor, hunting and gathering what wealth and worldliness they can. Then, maybe, they spend Vesak day not doing so, perhaps taking some vegetarian dish for a good feeling and filling.

Christmas tree, bodhi tree

The Christmas tree started in mediaeval times in Livonia (modern Estonia and Latvia), and was then adopted by the upper class in Germany, in the late 19th century. However, it was said that Martin Luther was the first to have a Christmas tree outside his Alsatian home. The tree (a fir, spruce or pine) was decorated with "roses made of colored paper, apples, wafers, tinsel, sweetmeats," recorded a chronicle in Strasbourg in 1604.

The Catholics had long resisted the German Lutheran Christmas tree. The Vatican Christmas tree stood for the first time in Vatican City in 1982.

We love trees

Most Buddhists love trees. The Buddha was born under a sal tree, first meditated (at 7 years old) under a jambul tree, left home and lived amongst trees, most of the suttas were taught under some tree; and the Buddha passed away majestically under the twin sal trees. Hence, we at once engage with the Christmas tree as a religious symbol of life and light. As Buddhists, we, of course, see it in a Buddhist way.

A celebration is, as a rule, a celebration of lights. So it is with Christmas and with Vesak. In the darkness of our lives we are always drawn to such lights. The mindfulness of light (*āloka,saññā*) is a healthy exercise in early Buddhism; so is the mindfulness of space (*ākāsa,saññā*). Most Buddhists would be attracted to the lights of any festival: where there is light, there is also good food and good cheer.

Buddhist renewal day

More serious Buddhists (like my wife and myself) see 25th December as Buddhist renewal day, spent in quiet reflection with some sutta or exchanging joyful Dhamma messages with students and friends. On this shortest day of the year (in the northern hemisphere), we reflect how short our human life is, how precious. This is our opportunity to be happy in the light of the sun of truth, and seek our way to the path of freedom.

It is a holy day to us. For those who keep the precepts, everyday is a holy day. The holidays, in the other hand, are days we spend bringing light and space of happiness to others. For us, Christmas and Vesak are not just a day in our lives. It is everyday of our life. When we wake, we rejoice in living and learning the Dhamma from our daily lives. Then, we rest our bodies to renew itself for the next day, closer to the path.

Universal values

The Buddha, in his wisdom, gave us the 5 precepts, since we value life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom. Hence, we remind ourselves not to take life, not to take what is not ours, not to take advantage of others, not to take others for granted (by being untrue), and not to lose our wits. This is what being a Buddhist is basically about.

Christmas day, of all days, is one day we should remind ourselves of these 5 values that make our lives meaningful and purposeful. We cannot take our human state for granted. We often forget this; then, we break the precepts. It's only human that we should keep the precepts; then, we do not fall into any subhuman state blinded in greed, hate and delusion.

Have a blessed Christmas. Be a better Buddhist.

Happy Dhamma renewal day.

R739 Inspiration 430
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