

Joy to the World!

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Introduction

“You find peace not by rearranging the circumstances of your life, but by realizing who you are at the deepest level.” Eckhart Tolle, *Stillness Speaks*

This month has three religious traditions celebrating major holidays, and also this month we experience the shortest day of the year – the longest period of darkness, and the Winter Solstice, the “return of the light.” Interestingly, the three religions of which I shall be speaking today all have similar practices and all have to do with light. The religion celebrations about which I will be speaking are Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity.

I. Bodhi Day

The 8th of December is traditionally celebrated as the day of Buddha’s enlightenment. It is reported that the man who became known as the Buddha was once asked, “Are you a prophet?” He replied, “No.” “A messiah?” Once again, he replied, “No.” “A holy man?” “No.” “Then who are you?” “I am awake.”

Bodhi Day is so-named because the man, Siddhartha Gautama, after many years of searching for truth and for the end of sorrow and suffering, vowed to sit under the Bodhi tree until he found his answers. He fasted and meditated for a week and, on the morning of the eighth day, he “awakened;” he realized who he was, as Eckhart Tolle would say, “at the deepest level.” He became “enlightened.”

Traditionally, his realizations happened in three stages:

- (1) The cycle of rebirth;
- (2) The Law of Cause and Effect; and
- (3) The Discovery of the Four Noble Truths, namely:

1. Life, as it is typically lived, is suffering;

2. The cause of suffering is attachment/desire;
3. The cure of suffering is overcoming attachment/desire; and
4. Enlightenment is the end of suffering.

After reaching the state of enlightenment (also known as Nirvana) Siddhartha Gautama who became the Buddha, “the Awakened One” went on to teach for many years and his teaching spread across the world, transforming the lives of millions. In the same way as the young Siddhartha wanted to find the answers to life’s mysteries and to find the causes and cure for suffering and sorrow, at some point, we too may experience the desire to go beyond the superficial aspects of life and find answers to our deeper questions. We may, like the young Siddhartha, spend some years trying out religions and philosophies; we may visit psychologists, try different forms of meditation and spiritual practices, sometimes to no real effect.

We may try to rearrange the external circumstances of our lives – changing jobs, mates, moving to new cities. You may have heard the expression, “Wherever you go, there you are.” We do not find an end to suffering until we, like Buddha, discover the deep truth of who and what we are. Buddha’s determination to find the truth led him to the experience of Truth and the answers he had sought. He experienced a release, the freedom from suffering, and oneness with the All.

This is the discovery we all must make – to allow the Light of Truth to fill us to the brim, to burn away our fears, desires, our illusions of separation, our egoism, and as a result to become so joyous that our Inner Light radiates out to the world around us and we become a beneficial force on the planet, messengers of peace and personal transformation, living examples of victory over sorrow and suffering.

On Bodhi Day, a tree (sometimes, a ficus) is decorated with lights and beads, three shining ornaments representing the three necessary elements for spiritual growth: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha (the enlightened teacher, the path, and the spiritual community).

“You are what your deep driving desire is.
As your deep driving desire is, so is your will.
As your will is, so is your deed.
As your deed is, so is your destiny.”

II. Chanukah

“In the midst of darkness, I see Light. At midnight, I sing a song to the dawn, knowing that Eternal Light dissipates all darkness.” Ernest Holmes

“You are the light of the world. You are the candles of the Lord. How important then that this light is kept burning with the oil of pure Spirit, through the wick of peace and joy.”

Chanukah is also known as the Festival of Lights – an 8-day Jewish holiday observed by the lighting of candles on a special candelabra – the Menorah – one additional light on each night of the holiday, progressing to 8 on the final night. An extra light called a Shamash (Hebrew for “guard” or “servant”) is also lit for the purpose of lighting the others. The word Chanukah means “dedication” or “consecration” and commemorates the “miracle of the container of oil.”

According to the Talmud, at the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem, after its desecration by the forces of Antiochus IV, there was only enough consecrated oil to fuel the eternal flame in the temple for 1 day. Miraculously, the oil burned for 8 days, which was how long it took to press, prepare and consecrate fresh olive oil.

The “Temple” represents that which is sacred and dedicated to God – to the recognition of the Source of all Life. We are born sacred, an expression of the Divine, originally pure. However, most of us are eventually exposed to a variety of “desecrating” experiences – some we have voluntarily participated in (i.e., drug addiction, alcoholism, promiscuity, the love and pursuit of money above all else, the compromise of our values in order to succeed or to survive. And each person comes to a point where “the temple is desecrated.” Desecration means to divert from an originally sacred use to a common use; to treat sacrilegiously; to profane; to put to an unworthy or degrading use; to pollute.

Now Antiochus IV looted the temple, massacred the Jews and even raised an altar to Zeus and sacrificed pigs on that altar. In our sacred lives, we have as a species forgotten our sacredness, our Inner Truth; we have worshipped the wrong things, erected idols to money, success, romantic/sexual relationships and other things. Some have even felt like “pigs were being sacrificed” on the altar of their lives.

The Talmud says that if we would be free from sin [mistakes], the mind and heart must be open to enlightenment. Ignorance of the Truth is the great sin/mistake from which spiritual enlightenment alone can give freedom. We must put first and foremost our spiritual life, our search for Truth, cleansing and rededicating the sacred “temple” of our life. We must allow the light to be relit using the holy, consecrated oil of prayer, meditation, spiritual study, and communion with like-minded people.

“No matter how long a room may have been darkened, the entrance of light immediately illumines it.” The more light, the less darkness. The miracle of the oil speaks to us by revealing that even if we don’t think we are enough or we have enough strength or will-power, or even if we believe the forces of darkness have completely

overpowered us or polluted us – when you run out of “oil,” that is when the oil of Spirit shows up and takes one to a new experience of light.

This year, we really need only one resolution for the new year: to cleanse the temple of our lives, our minds, our hearts, our intentions and rededicate our lives to good, to the Inner Truth – to rediscovery our “original goodness.”

III. Christmas

Text: Matthew 2:1-11

“Like the wise men in the Christmas story, who followed the bright star to a stable where they beheld one destined to teach and heal, so I follow my Inner Light as it leads me to renewal, healing and love.” Kathleen Scott

“Wise men” was translated from the Greek; “magoi,” a Persian word for men expert in the study of stars. It doesn’t say three kings (as in the song). The magi journeyed to Judea to see the so-called “king of the Jews” and to worship him.

Specifically, Christmas is the day we traditionally celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, and some of the events surrounding his birth and the spiritual significance for us of those events. It has symbolized for many “a time when we celebrate in story and song the birth of a child born as a savior to his people; a child who would grow up to preach about the possibility of a more loving, more just, and more peaceful world; a child not born to royalty, but to humble parents in humble beginnings, reminding us in a different way that salvation comes unexpectedly in the unlikeliest of times and in the unlikeliest of places and that love must become incarnate to become real.” Pacific Western Regional Newsletter, by James Kubal-Komoto, Pacific Western Regional Lead

I grew up in the Christian church and as a child, I was entranced by the songs and story of Jesus being born in a manger, of the shepherds, wise men and angels celebrating his birth. I also loved the story of Joseph and Mary seeking, but not finding shelter, that the life of the holy child was threatened by an insecure Roman-installed king, causing Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt to hide until the death of Herod, of their return to Nazareth and Jesus’ upbringing in the Jewish religious traditions. I also loved the teachings and compassion and love of Jesus as reported in the New Testament and how he was a spiritual rebel in the face of the strictness of Judaic law.

The wise men brought gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold – a gift for a king; frankincense – an aromatic gum of resin from various trees in East Africa, used as incense and in medicine; and myrrh – an aromatic substance used in perfume and also in embalming.

The spiritual lessons for us in the Christmas story beyond that of following the Light to the birth of our sacred selves, is that we too may be born into poverty, we may face fears and perhaps we must flee our original circumstances to return to our sacred selves, to the study of religion until we experience our personal awakening and are able to make use of the gifts given to us at birth. As helpless infants, our parents do what they must to protect us from dangers and destructive forces. The circumstances of our birth and even our parentage do not necessarily reveal our future. There is a point where we may have to go into the wilderness to discover the Truth for ourselves, which may be very different from the religious tradition into which we were born and brought up.

The discovery of this Truth is like the star which led the wise men to Jesus. We are each guided to our rebirth – the discovery of ourselves as sacred beings, full of the power and love and wisdom of the Divine.

At a certain point in the teachings of Jesus, he states, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3-9). Jesus is referring to the heavenly birth, which means being born into the knowledge and experience of the highest Truth. We partake of the Divine Nature and the Divine Nature finds expression in us. The recognition and experience of this is what is meant by being “born again.” “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, but that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.” But we cannot be born of the Spirit unless we do align ourselves with the nature of the Spirit which is goodness, peace, mercy, justice and love. It is conscious union with God.

In his life, I believe that Jesus did not mean to be set up as an idol – as the exception – for he is reported to have stated, “These things that I do, you can do and greater than these.”

In each of the traditions we have examined today: Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity, we find the same message told in different stories. The experience of enlightenment, the miracle of the oil holding forth the light, the star guiding the wise to the birth of the Divine.

Let us embrace the spiritual meaning in these traditions and embrace that which has been meant for us since the beginning of time: release from sorrow and suffering through enlightenment; the light that lasts no matter what, the guidance available to lead us to the birth of our truest self.

As the Winter Solstice approaches (December 21st) let us claim: “I live in that Light in which there is no darkness, in that Love in which there is no fear, in that Life in which there is no death.” Dr. Ernest Holmes.

Happy Bodhi Day! Happy Chanukah! Merry Christmas! Peace on earth, good will to all!