

'Tis the season....

As this time of the year rolls around again it's common to hear the usual kvetchs about the commercialization of Xmas and a longing for the good old days when life was simpler. The same things have been heard since way before the Romans whose extravagant "goings on" at the winter Solstice were the focus of the puritans of their day.

I will tell you an old, old story. Long, long ago there was a time when the winter came on heavy with snow and cold and lasted long and when the seasons turned the winter continued and there was no Spring. We were cold, so cold the fire failed to warm and food was such a struggle to find. The animals had gone or died of the endless winter. The sun had abandoned us and the sky was grey without respite. This lasted so long that we forgot Spring except in the confused tales of the old and after awhile we stopped believing them.

Then slowly we noticed the Great Change and over a long time the Sun returned and warmth and the Spring.

Each year, at this time, the days get shorter and the nights longer until it seems the Sun will leave us finally in darkness. Then, around the 25th of December we can see the Great Change and the days begin to lengthen once again. The Sun has returned!

Is it any surprise that just like those long ago people who took from what they had and shared it with those who had survived – congratulating them on being alive - so do we of the present day give gifts and rejoice in the Light? Unlike them, however, we know, or think we do, that the Sun and the Spring will inevitably return.

Xmas is often a koan for Western Buddhists. Do we ignore it? adapt it? convert it? or go to bed, pull the covers over our heads and wait for it to go away? What do we say when someone wishes us Merry Xmas? Do we wish them Merry Xmas back or is it a case of "No Xmas please. We're Buddhist!"

I have noticed that Asian Buddhists seem to have no such qualms. A few years ago a Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Edmonton announced their annual Christmas party in their newsletter and when I saw the notice it caused me to rethink the whole business.

So, now, I've stopped worrying about it. I wish people Merry Christmas! and accept their Merry Christmas! back. Rev. Aurelian and I will be having Christmas Dinner with our nearest neighbour being grateful for where we have been, where we are now and for the opportunity to train with others. After all, one of the greatest and most important teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha is gratitude.

Wishing you and yours a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from all on Dragon Flower Mountain.

in gassho,
HKoten