

Reinventing the Holidays
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Growing up in Puerto Rico, Christmas was a grandiose celebration. Not just Christmas day, but the whole month of December was devoted to preparations and festivities. Then, at the beginning of January, we had New Year's Day followed by the Day of the Three Kings. It was a time for good deeds, giving and thinking about others. It was also a time to show your appreciation for those who had been good to you.

I remember trays of delicacies and baskets of fruit and treats arriving at our home from people expressing their appreciation for my parents. We would also receive many beautiful cards. On Christmas morning, the children would wake up to a huge, decorated tree with what seemed like thousands of wrapped gifts below it. We visited grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, delivering and receiving presents. It was a magical time.

When I had a family of my own, I tried very hard to preserve that same magic for my four boys (in spite of the commercialism that had seeped into the holidays by then). We were living in Trinidad and Tobago, and the Christmas celebration there was just as passionate. Everybody re-painted their homes, made new curtains for the occasion and decorated their homes to the max. The Christmas music, called *parang*, was heard everywhere and every night there was a Christmas fete. Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day and New Year's were enthusiastically celebrated.

All Trinidadians celebrate a variety of religious holidays with equal devotion. Trinidad and Tobago has a very diverse population. Hindus, Muslims and Christians live together peacefully in this small nation. Divali, the festival of light, honoring the goddess Lakshmi of the Hindu religion, is enjoyed by all, no matter what their beliefs. The same goes for Phagwa, where colored water is sprayed all over the participants. Hosey, the Muslim festival where elaborate floats are paraded down the streets and dumped into the ocean, is a favorite of all Trinidadians. The Trinidad Carnival, famous all over the world, was originally a pagan festival, and everyone participates.

In Trinidad, a holiday is a holiday to be celebrated regardless of your religion. Trinidad is a living example of SGI President Ikeda's words:

True cultural exchanges encourage mutual respect among peoples of different races and cultural backgrounds and create bonds of peace among the hearts of human beings. (*Buddhism in Action*, vol. 7, p. 364)

So, when I became a Buddhist, I decided it was time to reinvent Christmas. I got rid of the angel on top of my tree and replaced it with a big red star. I made decorations with origami and fruit, and I bought cards with uncompromising artwork and a message of peace or happy holidays. I made a Christmas wreath with gold spray-painted lotus pods, and we even tried changing the words to the Christmas carols. Nevertheless, we continued celebrating the holiday with family and friends.

The magic of Christmas is in the spirit of the people. At this special time it is acceptable to be sentimental about your appreciation for others, to be joyous and happy. It is a time to share and give, to be generous, compassionate and kind. All this is very compatible with Buddhism. In fact, as Buddhists we try to do this every day of our lives, not just during the holidays.

Christmas is also a celebration of childhood. We go to great lengths to make Christmas special for all children, whether with glittering decorations, magical lights, treats or gifts. This is also the case in the Hindu celebration Divali, where children receive gifts, and gardens are decorated with tiny little oil lamps called *dejas* arranged in elaborate patterns.

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The celebration of Hanukkah also involves candles and gifts for children.

If we can find the common denominator in all the various cultural celebrations throughout the world, these special times can become the “bridges which link human hearts and pave the road for the advance of kosen-rufu” (*Buddhism in Action*, vol. 7, p. 130).

New Year’s Eve, or Old Year’s Night as it is known in Trinidad, is a good time to look back on our lives and make determinations for our future. New Year’s resolutions are our determinations for self-improvement.

This is also a good time to get in touch with old friends and express appreciation. This way, we make the holiday a Buddhist experience.

Incidentally, I put my angel back on the top of my tree when I found ancient Persian paintings of angels and realized that they are not just a Christian invention but a universal depiction of positive energies or *shoten zenjin* (protective forces). I make my own holiday cards now, with Buddhist guidance included, and I still use my gold lotus pods to decorate my tree and my wreath.

For me, this will always be a good time to remember President Ikeda’s words:

As far as our daily lives are concerned, we must treat our friends with great respect, regardless of whether they share our faith or not. (*Buddhism in Action*, vol. 7, p. 130)

Because so many of us have come to this Buddhism from other faiths, it is comforting to know that we can continue to honor our family traditions while still practicing this great religion, which embraces all cultures, societies and individuals.

Illustrations by Cuqui Bonnell