

## **Merry Christmas and Happy Buddhamas!**

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*Good morning, Happy Christmas, and Happy coming New Year to all. Welcome to the Radio Thailand's weekly Dhamma Talk. I am Venerable Phra Dhammashakyavamsavisuddhi of Mahamakut Buddhist University and World Buddhist University, your host for this morning's Dhamma Talk. This is a weekly Dhamma sermon brought to you by Radio Thailand to keep you remind of your spirituality based on the teachings of the Buddha and attuned them to your needs in the chaotic modern lives.*

Yesterday was the Christmas Day. Accordingly, it is our culture to greet each other with the phrase 'Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.' However, this year's new year is still clouded under the 'Covid-19 New Year.' The year which forced us to celebrate our New Year in private instead of a group celebration. To be safe from the Covid-19, most government request their people to confine the celebrations in private. The group celebration is discouraged. Indeed, 2020 has become unsafe year for all of us. It becomes the Covid-19 pandemic year. Millions of people died from it and infected with it. Over 200 million were victimized by the virus. We are the lucky ones who are still able to breath for next coming years but with a mindful awareness and bodyfulness. The Covid-19 teaches us a great lesson of life of isolation as never before. The great lesson we have learned so far has been how can we socialize with isolation? It is a latest challenge for mankind.

Moreover, the Covid-19 also teaches us to be self-consciousness in parallel to social-consciousness.

Today, the Dhamma which will be expounded for the increase of awareness and wisdom, are upon the topic of the Christmas Day. First of all, let me greet all Christian friends with the word 'Merry Christmas!' Of course, merry Christmas or Happy Christmas does not apply only to Christians. Although it might have religious connotation in the past in the present society Christmas day is more celebrated secularly. In America and Europe, Christmas decoration not necessary means Christians anymore. In general, it is a popular holiday season. Christmas became a secular gift-giving festival and holidays.

Etymologically, the term Christmas simply means festival of the 'Christ's Mass' but many academic studies show that it is distantly related to the actual Jesus Christ. The festival was first created in the mid-14th century, and it was slowly evolved by bringing different elements together into the Christmas till it shapes as we see these days. In a secular backdrop, Christmas day is considered as a very important family gathering day. Often with excessive festivity mood, it sometimes turns to be a family fights day too. Therefore, in a real-life Christmas may have different meanings to different people.

I have even heard some western Buddhists turn Christmas into Buddhamas. Simply means it is time for celebration for being awakened or enlightened. Buddha means awakening and mas means festival or celebration. Accordingly, when I am with my western friends, they sometimes greet each other with 'Merry Buddhamas' or 'Happy Buddhamas.' After all, all the spirit of Christmas is the time for peace and goodwill, kindness and generosity which of course is the key teaching of the Buddha.

As Christmas approaches, we are delighted to wonderful decorations, beautiful lights, great presents, and, for Buddhists in western countries, the inevitable question “So, do you celebrate Christmas?” The question always brings a smile to those western Buddhist faces as they usually answer “of course!” But how can a non-Christian celebrate Christmas?

Most Western Buddhists were not born into a Buddhist household. When referring to religious affiliation, mostly admit that their families were of the Christian/Catholic background, so they always had a Christmas tree, and knew of the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. The smells of freshly cut pine trees, alluring multi-colored lights, decorations, and (oh!) those presents, were just icing on the cake.

So, do many western Buddhists celebrate Christmas? As a Buddhist, many Buddhists celebrate Christmas in a non-Christian way.

### **Christ, the Bodhisattva**

If you ask most Buddhists what they think of Jesus Christ, you may be surprised to hear some very positive and supportive opinions.

Without speaking to the spiritual context, many believe Jesus was what those in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition call a “Bodhisattva.” A Bodhisattva is one that forgoes their own benefit to help others and has compassion, kindness, and love for all beings. Jesus definitely helped others in ways we still experience today by showing the world immense compassion, love, kindness, and beauty and how to incorporate that into people’s lives and help others. So, for Buddhists, we can see Jesus as a blessing to this Earth.

The very popular and well-known Vietnamese Buddhist Monk, Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, wrote an extremely popular book titled “Living Buddha, Living Christ” which helps explain how both traditions can understand each other, and share similar beliefs such as compassion.

For Mahayana Buddhists, the aim of their practice is to become a Bodhisattva, which is an expression of *bodhicitta* which is the desire to attain enlightenment for the sake of others. If there is a slogan, it would be: May I attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Many Mahayana Buddhists, both lay practitioners and monks, take the Bodhisattva vow to reinforce this commitment:

Beings are numberless; I vow to liberate them.  
Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.  
Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.  
The Buddha Way is unobtainable; I vow to obtain it.

Becoming a Bodhisattva in Buddhism is not like becoming a god; a Bodhisattva lives in the here and now working to help all living beings.

However, from a Theravada perspective the equivalent Pali term bodhisatta is used in the Pāli Canon to refer to Buddha in his previous lives and as a young man in his current life in the period during which he was working towards his own liberation. When, during his discourses, he recounts his experiences as a young aspirant, he regularly uses the phrase “When I was an unenlightened bodhisatta...” The term therefore connotes a being who is “bound for enlightenment,” in other words, a person whose aim is to become fully enlightened. In the Pāli canon, the bodhisatta is also described as someone who is still

subject to birth, illness, death, sorrow, defilement, and delusion. Some of the previous lives of the Buddha as a bodhisattva are featured in the Jataka tales.

According to the Theravāda canon, the bodhisattva path is not taught in the earliest strata of Buddhist texts such as the Pali Nikayas and their counterparts such as the Chinese Āgamas which instead focus on the ideal of the Arahant. In later Theravada literature, the term “bodhisatta” is used fairly frequently in the sense of someone on the path to liberation. The later tradition of commentary also recognizes the existence of two additional types of bodhisattas: the paccekabodhisatta, who will attain Paccekabuddhahood, and the savakabodhisatta, who will attain enlightenment as a disciple of a Buddha.

In the 1st-2nd century BCE Sri Lankan work, the Buddhavamsa, the idea of the person who makes a Bodhisatta vow to become a fully enlightened Buddha out of compassion for all sentient beings is presented. Another related concept outlined in the Buddhavamsa and in another text called the Cariyapitaka is the need to cultivate certain Bodhisatta perfections or paramitas.

In Buddhist countries, Kings were often described as bodhisattvas, starting at least as early as Sirisanghabodhi as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (r. 247-249) in Sri Lanka, who was renowned for his compassion, who took vows for the welfare of the citizens, and was regarded as a mahāsatta (Sanskrit mahāsattva), an epithet used almost exclusively in Mahayana Buddhism.

In a similar way, King of Thailand is also described as bodhisattvas. During an elaborate and ancient coronation ceremony in 1950, the world’s hardest - working monarch famously proclaimed that “I shall reign with righteousness for the happiness and benefit of the Siamese people.” Similarly, King Rama 10 had his first royal command at his coronation that “I shall continue, preserve, and build upon the Royal legacy and shall reign with righteousness for the benefit and happiness of the people forever.” These are a truly Bodhisattva’s vow – working for happiness and benefit of others. This is sometimes backed up by their royal duties which sometimes clearly associated with the practice of the Ten Pāramitās of ten perfections.

An interesting part of the story of Jesus is that he was very much like a Bodhisattva in his own faith, of course, and not Buddhism. In summary, Jesus descended into hell to free anyone who wanted salvation. The point being, Jesus didn’t abandon anyone...even those already in hell. That’s kind of cool. That story always strikes me as how we view Bodhisattva’s in Buddhism...we are actively living in “hell” in our world not the hell you’ll read about in the Bible, but one of our own doing and actively work to help and free those in this world from delusion.

### **The Buddha Tree**

Do Buddhist’s have a Christmas Tree? Well, Western Buddhists may have decorated pine trees in their homes, but it may or may not have anything to do with Christmas.

Most people are not aware that things such as the ‘Christmas Tree’, was actually a pagan tradition during the winter solstice, which no Christian wanted to adopt at first (in-fact it was banned by Christians, the Church, etc.). It was only after it was promoted in a magazine that Queen Victoria had one that it was popularized, and then only in the late 1800’s did Americans adopt it. Even Christmas Day, December 25th, was actually during the very popular pagan winter solstice (the 25th was the ‘return of the sun’). It’s still unknown when Christ was actually born, and this date was decided since there was

already established celebration that the church could switch from a pagan celebration to a Christian celebration.

In many western settings, a popular Buddhist holiday, Bodhi Day, is celebrated in December as well to celebrate the Buddha's enlightenment. Those multi-coloured lights you use for your Christmas tree, are also used during this celebration on ficus trees. Although many Western Buddhist's may have an artificial pine (Christmas) tree they can use for the same purpose.

So, having a "Christmas Tree" is quite acceptable with Western Buddhist's to have, and some may even have one because some of their family members may be Christians, Catholics, etc. Buddhism is accepting of other religions, so this wouldn't bother them at all.

### **Wrapping Up a Buddha**

When it comes to gift giving, Buddhists look to Saint Nicolas (Santa Claus) for someone who resembles our values.

The selflessness and compassion Saint Nicholas brought to children is something that is very much a part of Buddhism, which is the selfless act of charity and caring without expecting anything in return. According to Buddhist practice, some families are very mindful of what gifts they give to others, and want them to be meaningful and not harmful. For example, they would not give a gun, even a toy one, to a child as a present on a day that we want to express peace for all mankind.

The love, sacrifice, teachings of love, and kindness of Jesus Christ is the kind of things that Buddhists go all teary eyed about. We are all about how we are all connected, and helping one another. Just like the Buddha, Jesus, 500 years later, also took in all sorts of people with various backgrounds into his flock. Jesus didn't care about your past, but where you are going. The Buddha and Jesus would have a lot to talk about if they were walking together.

When it comes to presents, Jesus and Buddha had different gifts, of course. While Jesus promoted salvation and heaven after death, the Buddha promoted inner salvation and heaven in the here and now. The Buddha gave us the gift of his teachings, which were his explanation of how "life" works. Part of that gift is a present you make. You ARE the present...all nicely wrapped up, with a bow even. What is inside is the most beautiful gift in the world, known as Awakened. Do you know how you feel as you rip away the wrapping paper of a present that is the same in Buddhism as ripping away the false concept of "self". As you start ripping away, you become more excited, but also can see the 'box' of your present...which makes you more excited, because now you know what you are getting. As you open the box what we call awakening in Buddhism, you hold in your hands the actual present. This is enlightenment. Sorry if you were looking for a new game console instead!

However, in a Buddhist practice giving gift is considered to be a part of who we are. It clarifies that we are not alone in this world. We have to live with others accordingly giving and compassion is the key element for people which is conducive to living in harmony and happiness. Giving is a key to friendship and altruism. Therefore, in Buddhist countries monks go out for alms round every morning to urge people to understand the value of giving without expecting anything in return. We give things for benefit of the receiver not as investment.

Although this should be the practice, among many Thais who gives alms round in every morning like to wish for things in return. They want monks to pray for them although we realize that Buddhism is the DIY or Do It Yourself religion. Praying is not a Buddhist way, but it is doing and acting yourself. For example, if you want to be a rich it is not taught in Buddhism to pray from the Buddha or monks, but you are encouraged to do everything within your power to achieve it.

“But Wait. Don’t You Worship to Your ‘God’, Buddha?”

Not at all. The historical Buddha that everyone knows is not a “God” in Buddhism, but instead Buddhists’ respected teacher and above all...a human being.

The Buddha told everyone that he was just a man who had found the meaning of life and end to suffering (enlightenment). He never claimed to be any god, deity, or spiritual being.

You may see Buddhists bow to a statue of the Buddha, but that is out of respect for him as their teacher, not as idol worship. In Asian countries, students everywhere bow to their teachers out of respect and humility, and the Buddha is no different. Some Buddhists even give offerings of food, water, etc., to a statue of the Buddha not as an offering to a god, but to bring about selflessness and compassion in themselves. This is similar to “repetition in learning something”, and in Buddhism this helps us to awaken and bring out the kindness in ourselves so we can share this selflessness and compassion with everyone.

There is a cute story on Simpson series how a Buddhist equally celebrate Christmas. In the Simpsons episode, She of Little Faith, where Lisa converts to Buddhism, Reverend Lovejoy tries to dissuade her by saying that she can't celebrate Christmas because “Santa doesn't leave presents under the Bodhi tree”. Richard Gere puts things right by explaining that Buddhists believe that those religions that are founded on Love and Compassion are valid spiritual paths.

So you can eat your Christmas cake and still be a Buddhist, though of course you can never finally have the cake whether you eat it or not, all cakes are compound phenomena and thus subject to impermanence.

Excessive consumption of Christmas cake may also promote the realisation that there is no inherent difference between an object of attachment and an object of aversion. “Can't you manage just one more slice? Look here's a nice piece with extra thick icing... What's the matter, aren't you feeling well?”

### **The winter solstice**

Of course, the origins of Christmas long pre-date Christianity. The majority of the world's religions originated in relatively low latitudes (around 30°N) where the difference in day length between Summer and Winter is not particularly noticeable. However, for us who live further from the equator, the long dark nights and short dull days of midwinter are definitely a big psychological issue. That is why the Winter solstice has always been of such importance to Northern Europeans. It symbolises, if not the rebirth, at least the conception of the new year. In the Celtic calendar Imbolc (Candlemas) was the actual birth of the New Year, with the appearance of the first lambs and green shoots.

The Celtic annual cycle of Imbolc, Halloween and Winter Solstice offers a rich source of symbolism and analogy for the process of rebirth, life, death, bardo and conception that would not be as apparent in traditional Buddhist countries, which are mostly at lower latitudes. So it is likely that as Buddhism continues to spread in the Anglo-Celtic cultural areas, it will adopt some of the Winter Solstice customs. There is no reason for in not to

do so, for it is often remarked that unlike most other religions, Buddhism is not tied to a particular culture. It is effective for any sentient being, anywhere, any time.

Do Buddhists celebrate at Christmas? This one does!

A British Buddhist named Bodhipaska wrote in his blog: 'I've spent Christmases in a variety of ways. My first substantially non-traditional Christmas was 20 years ago when I went on a two-week intensive meditation retreat. It was well into the afternoon of Christmas Day before I even realized it was the 25th, and I remember it struck me then that there was nothing intrinsically Christmasy about Christmas. If I hadn't checked the date I would never have known that it was a special day in the western calendar.

The lesson of this for us was that the festivity of festivals comes essentially from within. There is no "season of goodwill" without people actually exhibiting goodwill. I think people tend to automatically assume that they will feel and act differently just because the page of the calendar has flipped, but of course that's not the case.

It is not necessarily one need to become a Christian to celebrate Christmas. After all, it is conglomeration of different old traditions and cultures: the tree, the lights, the gifts, the feasting, the traditions like kissing under the mistletoe — even the Santa Claus.

It is said that the reason people celebrate Christmas on December 25th is that this was the traditional birthday of the Roman sun god Mithras, who was probably the single most important deity in the empire in the early days of Christianity. What better time to honor the Sun than at the time its light is weakest? Mithraists celebrated their deity each Sunday (that's why it's called Sunday) with bread and wine.

The festival day became amalgamated with other winter celebrations such as Yule, which was a Germanic pagan 12-day festival based around the solstice. Bringing evergreens into the house reminds us of life in the midst of Winter's quasi-death. Mistletoe, sacred to the Celtic Druids, reminds us of fertility.

The ironic thing is that Christmas, having been co-opted from Paganism by Christianity, has now in turn been co-opted by Capitalism, our new religion, and that it's taken Buddhist practice to help people to avoid the gross commercialism of the day and to appreciate the simpler things, and as we grow older we enjoyed more and more the opportunity to spent time with our family.

So I wish all a Merry Christmas. Concentrate on appreciating the people more than the gifts, and remember that it's only a season of goodwill if you let your heart soften and connect with others.

Christmas is definitely a time of giving – a time that gives us ample opportunity to put the Buddha's teachings of tolerance, understanding and generosity into practice. For instance, when dealing with the crowds, why not try letting others go ahead, even give our parking space to the next person. We really don't need to rush. Unlike our deadlines at work, the time pressures we have during the holidays are self-imposed. So be willing to relax a little, soak up the festive atmosphere, appreciate the Christmas decorations and the fact that so many people are motivated by a common goal at one time during the year – the spirit of giving. Of course, Christmas is overly commercialized, yet it doesn't take away from the fact that it brings people together, encourages generosity, as well as the practice of gratitude.

Dana ("giving") is the most fundamental of all Buddhist practices. It is the first topic in the Buddha's graduated talks, the first step on the bodhisattva's path to perfection, and

the first of the ten paramitas (perfections) in the Mahayana tradition. It therefore sets the tone for all that follows in the spiritual journey.

The act of giving purifies intention, the quality of mind with which any action is undertaken. For a brief moment, the giver's self-absorption is lifted, attachment to the gift is relinquished, and kindness towards the recipient is developed. All actions—of thought, word, and deed—undertaken for the sake of others rather than for one's own selfish purposes become transformed by the power of generosity.

Giving needs to be practiced and developed because our underlying tendency toward attachment, aversion, and confusion so often interferes with a truly selfless act of generosity. Consummate observer of human nature that he was, the Buddha pointed out the many ways we can give with mixed motives: we give out of fear, or in accordance with tradition; we give with the expectation of return; we give in hope of gain, or a favorable reputation or rebirth; we give to adorn our mind, or simply because giving brings joy.

All generosity is valuable. When asked by King Pasenadi of Kosala, "To whom should a gift be given?" the Buddha replied, "To whomever it pleases your mind."

All schools of Buddhism recognize that giving brings the most benefit when coupled with wisdom. In the Mahayana tradition, this means recognizing the inherent emptiness of any true distinction between giver and recipient. In the earlier schools, less attention is paid to the metaphysics of giving and more to its psychology, focusing upon the intention of the giver, the nature of the gift, and the worthiness of the recipient.

An act of giving is of most benefit when one gives something of value, carefully, with one's own hand, while showing respect, and with a view that something wholesome will come of it. The same is true when one gives out of faith, respectfully, at the right time, with a generous heart, and without causing denigration. Under such circumstances, according to the Buddha, "before giving, the mind of the giver is happy; while giving, the mind of the giver is made peaceful; and having given, the mind of the giver is uplifted." One who is accomplished in *dana* is said to "dwell at home with a mind free from the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in relinquishment, devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing."

The nature of the gift itself is less important, and is adapted to suit various populations. It is appropriate for people of means to give freely to those in need, for lay people generally to give the basic requisites of a simple life to monks and nuns, and for all people to give less tangible—but much more valuable—gifts to one another at every opportunity.

One of the most important acts of generosity involves Buddhism's five precepts. By giving up killing, stealing, false speech, sexual misconduct, and intoxicants, one "gives to immeasurable beings freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression." And the highest gift of all is the gift of *dharma*—by teaching (if qualified) or by facilitating the teaching of others.

In a profoundly interdependent world, generosity is fundamental to the entire economy of life. Even the simplest biological function involves receiving something from others (nutrients, oxygen, life), processing it in some unique way, and then passing it on to all other members of the matrix of life. We all do this whether we want to or not, and whether or not we are aware of it. The practice of giving becomes perfected when we align

ourselves very deeply with this truth, by consciously and mindfully offering everything we do or say—even everything we think—as an act of universal generosity.

And when it comes to challenges with your loved ones, if your Mum or Auntie are nagging you over something, remember to touch that part inside of you that is peaceful, stable and firm. As the Buddha said, “Just as a solid rock is not shaken by the storm, even so the wise are not affected by praise or blame.” Have the wisdom to understand that their words have no substance to them at all. Experience them as echoes of the love and concern that underlies each one. If we can also understand that unkind words or judgments are a reflection of another’s projections, there is no need for us to be affected by them. In fact, you can imagine that their words are nothing more than the light touch of a feather. Don’t solidify them. Don’t allow thoughts of anger to continue to echo within. Instead, connect with the spaciousness of the moment. Imagine yourself like a rainbow; unable to be touched, becoming even more beautiful as the rays of mindfulness shines upon it. Who knows how many more gatherings we will have to spend with your loved ones? So cherish every moment and spend your Christmas cultivating peace and love for all.

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### **Merry Christmas and Happy Buddhas!**

A simple greeting, filled with joy and good wishes. However, when I was studying in England many years back this greeting has caused confusion for my western friends. I have had people wish me, “Merry Christmas,” and then apologize, hoping that they had not offended me. I jokingly reply that I celebrate all holidays and accept all blessings. This often leads to the question, “Do Buddhists celebrate Christmas?”

Shakyamuni Buddha was born five hundred years before Christ so his teachings do not deal with Christianity. In most Asian Buddhist countries, the first exposure to Christianity came with Marco Polo and later with the missionaries. In America and Europe, the situation is reversed. There, Christianity was well established as the dominant belief before the introduction of Buddhism. As such, Western Buddhism has developed in a culture that places a great emphasis, both religious and commercial, upon Christmas. I cannot speak for all Buddhists, therefore, I will relate personal experiences.

Buddhists do not celebrate the religious aspects of Christmas. Many modern Buddhists relate to Christ as a historical example of an enlightened being. In his book “Living Buddha, Living Christ” the Vietnamese monk Thich Naht Hahn explores some of the teachings of Christ from a Buddhist perspective. Buddha and Christ presented ways of living to overcome suffering. Buddha taught the liberation from the endless cycle of birth and death. Christ spoke of attaining eternal salvation. Both recognized that greed, anger and desire were the root causes of our suffering. Our ego driven ignorance blinds us to the universal oneness of all existence.

Christ, like Buddha, taught compassion for all living things. One should live in a way that lessens not only your suffering but also the suffering of the lives around you. Peace on Earth, good will towards men.

Once you have a deep understanding and appreciation of the Buddhist teachings, interestingly, this will also have made you more aware of the spirit of Christmas. At this time of year, more people become focused on giving. Some give gifts. Others give of their time. Even more give the gift of good wishes. Christmas is a time of giving on all levels.



These days Christmas can feel like a massive consumer event, with little true meaning. Can we imbue it with meaning and significance, amidst the swirling waves of excitement and the buying and giving of items that may be unnecessary? Can we save it from the hijacking that seems to occur?

For many years, many like to spent Christmas or New Year, one or the other, on retreat. They are really happy to hibernate and contemplate. In that less pressing space they were able to take stock of the year that had been and to catch up with oneself in order to meet the New Year well and with an idea of their bigger life plan.

In the family context, what might a Buddhist Christmas look like? Buddhism focuses on ending suffering. All strands of Buddhism have the Four Noble Truths (the cause of all suffering that the Buddha discovered) and the Eightfold Path (the way out of that suffering, the Middle Way) in common. One thing I feel I can do as an antidote to my continuing preoccupation with myself and ignorance around being interdependent is to give thoughtful gifts. I talked about this in a previous Head's Up and noted that the inclination in the mind of the giver is important. Also, that the gift does not have to be material, it can be a gift of time or service.

It is also important to care for yourself during this potentially stressful time. So much stress comes from the idea that everyone should be happy and get on well. But things are as they are: children can get hyper and temperamental and old family patterns can resurface. Allowing ourselves to experience any feelings of disappointment and frustrations when they arise, can help us find a more creative response.

The whole of the festive period is really about caring – and gratitude. It feels really apt to orient my mind towards the practice of loving kindness and find time to do this regularly over the Christmas break. During this time, I like to remind myself to enjoy things in moderation. Laughingly, I say that is the 'Middle Way'! This is not quite correct because although the middle way avoids extremes of conduct and views; on the one hand, sensual indulgence and on the other, self-mortification, it really means to provide the body with what it needs to be in a strong and healthy condition yet at the same time to rise above bodily concerns in order to train the mind in right conduct, concentration and wisdom. In fact, the middle way is essentially a way of mind training, not a compromise with the attitude of renunciation.

Merry Christmas and Happy Buddhamas to everyone! Wishing you all a safe, happy and peaceful holiday period.

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