Giving Presence Over The Holidays

We are in the autumn holiday season, with all the energy and commercialized excitement that is generated by contemporary consumerism and the celebration of gluttony. My intention is to develop an alternate view of this season that includes how some of the concepts and practices that Buddhism offers can turn our focus of attention and action towards a different spelling of this season—transforming *presents* into *presence*. After all, the original meaning of holiday is holy day, a day of spiritual renewal and commitment to realizing the potential of interpersonal celebrations. This doesn’t necessarily require renouncing the celebratory characteristics of this time, or the value of feasting and gift giving, but to develop a different attitude during this season, applying an important Buddhist concept, *Yoniso Manasikara, Wise Attention*, along with *Samma Vayama, Right Effort*.

Within the context of this talk, I will describe the holiday season as beginning at the end of October with Halloween. I believe this season has special consideration because of the onset of winter, which typically was a difficult period of time for ancient humans, particularly in the northern hemisphere. Food might be scarce, the weather would be cold, daylight would diminish until the winter solstice, and there might be other threats such as blizzards. To many, it would be a significant time of uncertainty and anxiety, so rituals and holy days might be offered to appeal to whichever gods or forces of nature might by worshipped in order to provide people with some assurance of survival. I will begin with Halloween:

***Samhein***, pronounced *sow-wain*, was important to the Gaelic culture living in what are now called the British Isles. The ancient calendar date they followed was November 1, not the contemporary October 31, the current calendar designation for Halloween. Here is what I found in Wikipedia about Samhein:

Samhain was a [liminal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality) or threshold festival, when the boundary between this world and the Otherworld blurred, making contact with the [*aos sí*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aos_s%C3%AD) (the 'spirits' or '[fairies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairy)') more likely. Most scholars see them as remnants of pagan gods. At Samhain, they were [appeased](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Propitiation) with offerings of food and drink to ensure the people and livestock survived the winter. The souls of dead kin were also thought to revisit their homes seeking hospitality, and a place was set at the table for them during a meal. [Mumming](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mummers%27_play) and [guising](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guising) were part of the festival from at least the early modern era, whereby people went door-to-door in costume, reciting verses in exchange for food. The costumes may have been a way of imitating and disguising oneself from the *aos sí*….

In the 9th century, the [Western Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Christianity) endorsed 1 November as the date of [All Saints' Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Saints%27_Day), possibly due to the influence of [Alcuin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alcuin), and 2 November later became [All Souls' Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Souls%27_Day). It is believed that Samhain and All Saints'/All Souls' [influenced each other](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_syncretism) and the modern [Halloween](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halloween).

***Thanksgiving***, a holiday celebrated in many countries around the world on differing days--in the U. S., the 4th Thursday in October. There have been geographic conflicts in the U.S. about when the first Thanksgiving occurred—Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621, Berkeley Hundred, a colony in Virginia, in 1619, or St. Augustine, the Spanish colony in Florida, which occurred in 1565. These celebrations were expressing gratitude that they had survived the Atlantic voyage and their struggles to avoid starvation or annihilation by some of the indigenous people. The current date was established during the Civil War by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 but wasn’t really celebrated until the 1870’s because of the difficulties of the Reconstruction period.

***Yule***, pronounced *yool*, is an ancient pagan Germanic festival which occurred on the Winter Solstice, on or around December 21, which is the shortest day of the year. The rituals involve light and heat, from a yule log or a cluster of candles, and represents the hope of those celebrating that the sun will successfully begin its journey back to longer days; the return cycle is completed during another important astronomical event, the Summer Solstice, occurring on or around June 21.

***Christmas***, which is the most familiar festival, due to U. S. cultural norms, occurring on December 25, and is said to be the day that Jesus Christ was born. Historically, it is unknown when he was born, but the Roman Emperor Constantine is believed to have established this date by integrating it with the Roman festivals of Saturnalia and Sol Invictus (the birth of the unconquerable sun god), which occurred around December 25 of the old Julian calendar system, which coincided with our dating of the Winter Solstice on December 21. A significant part of the Saturnalia festivities involved role reversal: slaves were treated as equals, gifts were exchanged (including gifts from masters to slaves), and rowdy partying would occur. Historical theorists suggest that December 25 was selected to replace Sol Invictus, as reported in Wikipedia:

A widely-held theory is that the Church chose December 25th as Jesus Christ's birthday (*Dies Natalis Christi*) to appropriate the festival of Sol Invictus's birthday *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, held on the same date.

The early Church linked Jesus Christ to the Sun and referred to him as the 'Sun of Righteousness' (*Sol Justitiae*) prophesied by [Malachi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malachi). A Christian treatise attributed to [John Chrysostom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Chrysostom) and dating to the early [fourth century AD](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_century_AD) associates Christ's birth with the birthday of Sol Invictus:

"Our Lord, too, is born in the month of December ... the eighth before the calends of January [25 December] ... But they [the pagans] call it the '[Birthday of the Unconquered](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dies_Natalis_Solis_Invicti)'. Who indeed is so unconquered as Our Lord? Or, if they say that it is the birthday of the Sun, [we may say] He is the Sun of Justice".

It seems that Christmas began to become commercialized during the mid-nineteenth century, primarily initiated by Macy’s department store. A variety of now-standard commercial enterprises were originated then: Christmas trees, Christmas cards, stylish presents, extravagant feasts. Some effort was made to consider the needy—consider Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol”, for example, but the need for profit-making, particularly after the Civil War, created the industry of marketing, which is pervasive in contemporary society.

***New Year’s Eve***, which has been celebrated for thousands of years at various times of the year that seemed propitious to whichever culture was celebrating the renewal of the cycles within a year. Our dating is related to Julius Caesar, who established the end of the Julian calendar year with a celebration of the Roman god Janus, whose head had two faces, one facing backward and the other forward, representing the transformation from the old to the new year. When the Gregorian calendar came into favor, the date was set as December 31; the New Year’s Eve is 13 days later in the Julian calendar system, which is still adhered to by Orthodox Christianity. This festival was celebrated with sacrifices to the gods and, again, partying, as was the case with Christmas.

I am mentioning these holy days to establish that the origin of these seasonal festivities (The word festivities is related to the feasts that occurred on holy days) was originally a cultural effort to seek the blessings of the gods during the coldest and darkest times of the year. These days, our modern conveniences mostly ensure comfort and security during the wintertime. It seems that the “reason for the season”, a term often quoted to remind us that Christmas is supposed to represent the birth of Jesus Christ, has been usurped, replaced by intensive consumer culture pressure to spend money on gifts, family gatherings and parties. I also wonder if there is some association between the Christmas season and the dates set for the end of football and soccer seasons, with all the commercial excitement that is generated.

As mentioned previously, my intention is not to suggest a new form of puritanism, rejecting holidays, feasts and gift giving, but to develop a new self-experience during this time of year, to cultivate a more wholesome presence, which will affect how we celebrate—giving and receiving gifts, the cultivation of charitable donations, bringing a different way of interacting with others, and so on.

The most important and impactful Christmas present I have received in my life was “The Experience of Insight”, by Joseph Goldstein—I read it twice between Christmas and New Year’s Eve in 1981 and completed my first residential retreat on April 11, 1982. I remember the date the retreat ended because it was Easter Sunday (thanks to Siri’s excellent calendar memory). For some reason, I was emotionally and socially prepared for a big change in my life—recently divorced, I was presented with the opportunity to reinvent myself, which I did, and the doctrines and practices of Buddhism provided the ways and means to do this, which is still a strong motivation in my much improved and happier life circumstances.

Many of the gifts we receive are trivial in nature, new clothing, perhaps some jewelry, or even gift cards or cash. I want to invite you to consider how your knowledge of Buddhist concepts and the introspective tools of meditation practice can be beneficially applied to this season. We have many challenges during this period—social and family gatherings, deciding which gifts to give and calculating the economics of buying the gifts, the food and drinks, perhaps travel expenses. How do you negotiate interactions with family members or acquaintances whose views are in conflict with yours? How do you initiate a cost/benefit balance? Do you consider the environmental consequences regarding Christmas trees, packaging, and other normal aspects of the season?

This is why I am suggesting the word *presence,* as a substitute for *presents*, a play on words that reorients attention to the process of mindfully choosing how to interact with others, based on the principles of kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, generosity, and equanimity. The presence begins with your own introspective investigation of your decision-making process, as well as your presence while interacting with others—family, coworkers, clerks in stores, customer service representatives (whose accent may or may not be workable for you). Most Americans carry a significant credit card debt load—how many of your gift purchases originate from avoiding the shame or resentment that comes from feeling obligated to provide a gift or reciprocate one?

We can find in the Buddhist commentaries *The Four Clear Comprehensions*, which are intended to provide a dedicated meditator with guidelines regarding how to develop insight into the three characteristics, impermanence, the dissatisfaction resulting from craving/clinging, and the absence of an enduring/autonomous self. Here is a quote that describes this wise attention, from “The Four Foundations of Mindfulness”, a book by U Silananda, on page 52:

There are four kinds of clear comprehension mentioned in the commentaries. One is the “clear comprehension of what is of benefit.” The second is the “clear comprehension of what is suitable.” The third is the “clear comprehension of the meditator’s domain”, and the fourth is the “clear comprehension of non-delusion”. Meditators have to understand and observe each of the small actions of the body with these four kinds of clear comprehension in mind.

I was impressed by this “decision tree” model when I first read this book over 30 years ago, because I believe it can also be applied to situations that involve goal setting or efforts to realize a particular value, while still being integrated with the original spiritual ethics. Here is my modification of the four comprehensions:

***Clear Comprehension of What is of Benefit*** can be reworded as ***What is a Worthy Goal?*** in a particular situation. For example, in terms of the above mentioned principled valuation system, what would be the most appropriate gift to give someone? This valuation system would consider what is affordable and what is appropriate for that person’s circumstances—I wouldn’t want to give a very expensive bottle of brandy to a recovering alcoholic! Is the expense of the gift more important than your economic stability? Alternatively, in terms of values, I might decide to not talk about politics or debate a contentious issue at a social gathering, no matter how provocative the situation might be.

***Clear comprehension of what is suitable*** can be reworded as ***What is the most appropriate means for achieving the goal or realizing the value?*** For example, if I am contemplating buying something, what is the most economical approach—to drive to a store (or several different stores), or to order the gift online? Is the gift the least environmentally damaging? This considers both the item involved and my environmental values. Interpersonally, I can also realize my value of not being argumentative to honor the principle of Right Speech.

***Clear comprehension of the meditator’s domain*** can be reworded as ***Mindfully monitoring the process of decision making and actions*** regarding gift giving or interpersonal circumstances. While pursuing the purchase of the gift I can monitor how I react to a sales pitch or to my impatience regarding being in a crowded store or traffic and modify my reactions appropriately. Socially, I can monitor how I am being affected by someone else’s speech or body language to reduce my own reactivity and maintain a more wholesome interpersonal exchange.

***Clear comprehension of non-delusion*** doesn’t really need to be reworded, involving the application of Right Speech and Right Action to whatever the secular circumstances might be.

It is important to realize the degree of craving and clinging involved in the situations that will occur during the season. For many, it might be harder to be consistent in meditation practice due to a crowded schedule, family gatherings, etc. There is a bit of irony in these circumstances, as the ability to effectively apply this decision-making process is enhanced through the development of insight and self-discipline that occurs while meditating. This increase in introspective investigation also reveals more clearly how we get hooked into consumerism or interpersonal conflicts during the rush of the season.