

2020 Lockdown Christmas

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Essays · 2 min read

2020 Christmas Mantra “Try not to make things worse!”

How can we prepare for Christmas this year? We might not know till a week beforehand whether we will be able to meet friends and family. Should I book a flight home? Will there be twelve people for dinner, or will it just me and the dog? Would it be irresponsible to visit my gran? How will she feel if I don't? And don't even start thinking about New Year and Brexit!

Uncertainty is hard to bear. We sometimes see this in meditation when we explore neutral feeling. Because we can't decide whether the sensations are pleasant or unpleasant, we also can't decide which of our habitual reactions to choose: Should I be grasping at this, trying to hold on tight? Should I be pushing it away? The 'self' we construct in our attempts to navigate the world is in a dither! It can feel very threatened. Sitting with the fear, we learn the difficult but liberating truth of anatta 'not-self'. That we can stop constructing a belief 'this is me'; and when we stop this construction process, we stop grasping at pleasant feelings, struggling against unpleasant ones, getting into a dither about neutral ones. Such relief!

Then we get up from the cushion, remember Christmas, Covid, Brexit, and another self gets constructed in a flash, asking the same old questions, demanding answers! Until we're fully liberated uncertainty will be hard to bear. It brings out our habitual demons like irritation, depression, even total panic. These are made ten times worse because the expectation is for happiness at Christmas. On top of all that our lofty spiritual ideals might add in hefty doses of guilt and shame for every transgression. Because of living such a quiet life here at Satipanya, I'll be spared this turmoil. But if I was out in the world, I would start practicing my favorite mantra for hard times: "try not to make things worse than they already are!"

I'd take time to sit down and envisage what the 'festive' season will really feel like - probably more stressful than joyful; that I'll have to expect to be irritated, frustrated, exhausted much of the time; that I'll probably see myself shooting second and third arrows - grumbling & blaming and mulling over how unfair it all is. The motivation here is not to depress myself. It's self-care. If I'm expecting my demons, I'll be in the best place to look after myself wisely when they arrive.

I've heard the spiritual life described as one of ever decreasing expectations! Delusion easily persuades us that we can be good-humored and serene in all

circumstances. But this makes any fall from grace extra painful. With practice we learn to embrace our shortcomings. The mantra “try not to make things worse” provides a reasonable goal – not too lofty, but very practical.

When the demons appear I would recite my mantra, summon all my willpower to resist their temptation, find something purposeful to do, do it mindfully. Even when we have no practical answers to all our pressing questions, its amazing how a few moments of mindful action can lift the spirits, make us feel more hopeful,

stronger. With that I would change the mantra to “let’s make the best of things”.

Wishing for the best, preparing for the worst, it’s entirely possible that we might have a happy Christmas after all!

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