

Understanding the Winter Solstice: The Expansion of Light

On the first day of Capricorn, at the end of December, the Winter Solstice occurs. This is the shortest day of the solar year. It is the first day of winter. In the ancient world, this day was of profound importance.

At first glance, this would not seem to be an occasion for joy or gladness. Winter marks the time of hibernation. The land lies fallow. Animal life retreats. The days are short and the nights are long. Cold and storm dominate the landscape for months. The picture is not one of much encouragement, necessarily. However, there is a deeper meaning in this season of the year, a greater spiritual perspective.

In Western religious tradition, this time of year marked the sacred turning point, the reemergence of light from darkness. In pagan religions, the solstice marked the re-birth of the sun, the death and reemergence of light.

The eight days of the Channukah mark the triumph of faith. They commemorate the defeat of the forces of religious persecution and intolerance, the rebuilding of the sacred Temple in Jerusalem and the reestablishment of the worship of God. The Channukah period is referred to as the Festival of Lights. It is celebrated by lighting a growing number of candles daily, to signify the importance of increasing light in the world.

In Christian tradition, Jesus was born at this juncture in time, at the time of the solstice. His arrival on the physical plane was at the time of great darkness and deep despair. At this decisive point in human experience, he appeared. A great light emerged to point the way to salvation and grace. The Messianic mission was to heal the world and thereby to illumine the path to God.

In the yin-yang principle of Eastern Thought, nothing is a black and white issue. Everything is in the process of change and evolution. The seeds of one side of life lie at the heart of the other side. Not only within every joy is there some pain, but within every despair and disappointment, there is some hope.

In the Jewish mystic tradition, the Kabbalah, light and dark are not seen as positive and negative forces, but rather as expansion and growth on the one side and contraction and definition, on the other. As the yin-yang symbol illustrates, there is a continual flow from light to dark and back again. At the heart of each is its counterpart.

From the perspective of the flow of life between the two poles, several truths seem apparent. In the view of the Kabbalah, light and dark, the power to give and the power to receive, are mutually dependent on each other. One cannot exist without the other. Both sustain each other. Hence, there is perpetual movement, as the relationship between them is continually changing and evolving.

As in the yin-yang paradigm, the Kabbalist view is that at the core of both, is the most concentrated form of its counterpart. This concept has two very important implications. First, both light and dark, love and limitation are the same thing. They are merely different polar dimensions. Which is dominating which, at any given time, is a matter of perspective. It is, simply, a matter of how one is perceiving it.

Second, there is also the reality expressed that there is nowhere, where one can be, that is devoid of either light or dark. When dark is at its height, light is present at its core. It may be concealed and contained, but it is most definitely there. What is more, the light is present there, in its most concentrated form. The practical implication here is, that even in times of darkness, one can remain in the light. It is a matter of focusing one's life on the light and remaining centered there.

Eventually, the domain of light will expand and will come to dominance. The winter solstice is the point when the light is at its most restricted. Yet, it is also the moment when the light begins its ascendancy. The light will from this point on, continue to increase gradually. For that reason, we should look at this season of the year with anticipation and hope. It offers us over the coming months, the opportunity to grow spiritually, to increase the light within ourselves.

During the winter, this is accomplished by focusing on the light within. Winter should be a time of soul searching, introspection and inner development. We can use that base of expanding inner light to cope with the outer darkness, the struggles and limitations of life.

As the Chinese say, this is the time of rest, when force is allowed to build up internally, when replenishment takes place, waiting for the great arousal of spring. Nothing externally can be created, developed or fulfilled, without sufficient internal energy to fuel it, and to sustain its growth and development.

Spiritually, life energy is replenished by quietude. Focusing on the inner light, working with it and letting it grow through meditation, prayer, self evaluation and introspection, nourishes joy through difficult times and sows the seeds for future growth.

May we kindle our inner light during the coming season. May we allow ourselves the room to grow spiritually. May we nurture the flame within and prepare diligently for the inevitable coming of spring.

By Rabbi Steven Fisdel