

Celebrating Light & the Winter Solstice the World Over

By K. E. Eduljee

PART I – CELEBRATING LIGHT

Festivals of light brighten and bring joy to the shortened days of late autumn and winter in the northern hemisphere. Light, one might say, is the connecting thread that weaves itself through these festivals – adding by human hand what nature seeks to hide. While some festivals of light celebrate the passing of the winter solstice – the shortest day and longest night of the year – this initial section describes those that celebrate other events with light.

1. Diwali

The Hindu festival of lights, Diwali, celebrates the victory of Lord Ram over the demon Ravan, symbolically representing the victory of good over evil, light over darkness and wisdom over ignorance. These existential and moral dichotomies are, if we might be permitted to say so, very Zoroastrian. While the day on which Diwali falls (usually October-November of the Gregorian calendar) is determined by the Hindu lunar calendar, it stands between the two solar events celebrated by the Aryans – the autumnal equinox and winter solstice.



Lamps of Diwali, a festival of lights. Image credit: 4to40.com

The Jain Dev-Diwali marks the end of the Diwali celebrations and the end of the rainy season as well.

2. Burmese & Thai Festivals of Light

In Myanmar, the festival of lights called Tazaungdaing is held on the full moon day of Tazaungmon, the eighth month of the luni-sidereal (moon and star-based) Burmese calendar. While Tazaungdaing also marks the end of the Buddhist Kathina (rainy) season, its celebration predates the introduction of Buddhism to a time when Myanmar followed a calendar based on a version of the Hindu calendar. This association automatically conjures shared roots with Diwali.

In Thailand, the festival of lights is called Loi Krathong or Yi Peng. As with Myanmar's Tazaungmon festival, the Thai festival is held on the night of the full moon – in this case the twelfth month of the Thai lunar calendar. Loi Krathong/Yi Peng similarly marks the end of the rainy season.



Festival of lights as celebrated in Thailand & Myanmar. Both cultures are creative in the deployment of lights, using floats, rice paper hot air balloon-lanterns that rise in the sky and lotus-shaped candle holders. Image credits top to bottom: Nanut Bovorn at Flickr; washingtonpost.com & briff.me.

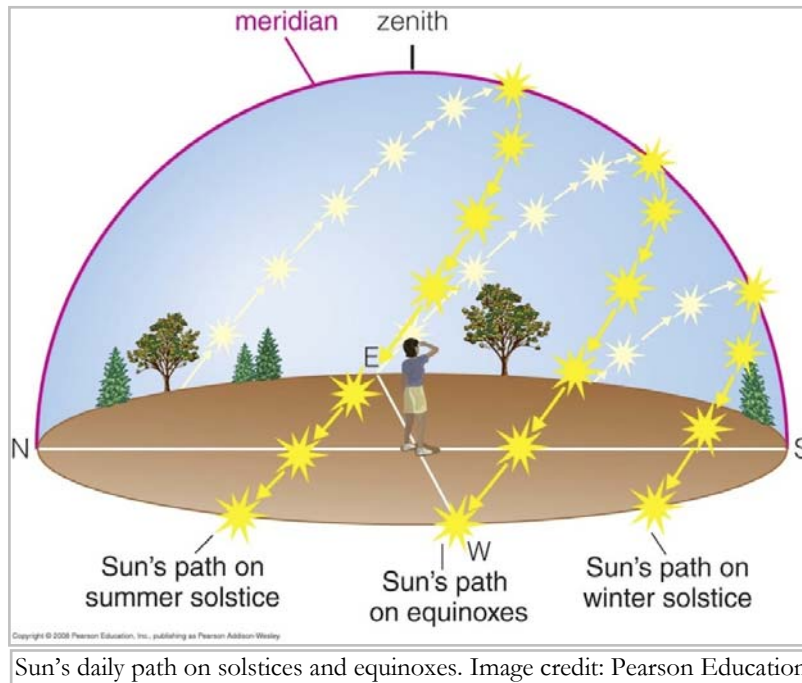
3. Hanukkah

The Jewish faith uses a lunar calendar as well. Hanukkah (meaning dedication) celebrates an historical event – the 165 BCE success of the Jewish revolt against their Seleucid overlords and the rededication of the defiled Temple of Jerusalem. A ritual of the festival – also called the festival of lights – is the lighting of one additional candle or oil-based light over eight nights starting on the 25th day of the Hebrew calendar’s month of Kislev. The festival had reached sufficient prominence by the time of Jesus for the Gospel of John (at 10.22-23) has Jesus in the Temple of Solomon during Hanukkah when a group of Jews confronted him demanding to know if he was the Christ.



Candles ablaze on Hanukkah menorahs. Image credit: Time Square Chronicles.

PART II – CELEBRATING THE PASSING OF THE WINTER SOLSTICE



For communities that experience the four seasons, a solar year's four solstices and equinoxes are primary markers of the passage of calendric time. Traditions that mark these events with festivals are traditions that use the Sun to mark the passage of calendric time.

Amongst the four solstices and equinoxes, our particular interest at this time is the winter solstice. A solstice is by meaning a solar event – it is the day the Sun 'stands still'¹ in its annual path (so to speak) toward the southern horizon. On the first full day after the winter solstice, the Sun's daily path through the sky reverses and begins to move up towards the northern horizon. The following are some of the events from different traditions that mark the passing of the winter solstice.

1. Wiccan Yule (& Stonehenge)



Sunset at Stonehenge, England. Photo credit: Simon Wakefield at Wikimedia & Flickr.

The Wiccan faith is a modern revival and synthesis of several pre-Christian ‘pagan’ faiths of Europe. Wiccan celebrations follow both the lunar cycle (the esbats associated with their Goddess) as well as the solar cycle (the sabbats and associated with their God). Yule, celebrated on December 21 or 22, celebrates the birth of their God as the winter-born king. Modern Wiccans and related groups in England celebrate the event at Stonehenge, which is thought to have served as a prehistoric solar observatory and gathering place to observe the solstices, equinoxes and other solar events from around 2000 BCE.

Yuletide was anciently celebrated by the pre-Christian Germanic and Scandinavian peoples.

2. Dongzhi/Toji

Oriental calendars are based on both the solar and lunar solar cycles. Solar cycle Oriental calendars name the winter solstice (and its passing) as Dongzhi in Chinese, Dongji in Korean, Dong-chi in Vietnamese and Toji/Tohji/Toji-no-hi in Japanese.

We read that Koreans traditionally regarded Dongji as ‘a small New Year’s Day’. It is nevertheless one of the year’s major festivals and is celebrated widely with the serving of special foods accompanied with rites to dispel bad spirits. New Year’s Day for its part is determined by the lunar cycle – the second new moon after the winter solstice (the third if an intercalary month is employed) – and it is generally observed on the same day throughout the Orient.

A website promoting the winter festival of lights in Vancouver, Canada, states, “For many cultures the Winter Solstice marks a very important day and in Chinese culture it is more important than the Lunar New Year. On this night *yin* reaches its darkest and coldest quality, and from this point on *yang* begins to restore balance with light and warmth. Cold hands, glowing light, warm hearts. (Credit: we paraphrased information from vancouverchinesegarden.com.)”

A Toji custom is to take a Yuzu bath called Yuzuyu. Here, several Yuzu (a lemon-like citrus fruit) are placed in a tub of hot water. A Yuzu bath is said to help prevent catching a cold in the ensuing winter months.



Top: Sun Yat-Sen Gardens, Vancouver, Canada, Dec. 21, 2010. Image credit: Julius Reque. Bottom: Winter Solstice Lantern Festival labyrinth, Vancouver, Canada, Dec. 21, 2013. Image credit: Huffington Post.

3. Shinto Toji/Tohji-Taisai. Parallels with Mithraism

The Shinto faith of Japan marks the winter solstice with Toji/Tohji-Taisai, the grand ceremony of the winter solstice that celebrates the end of the yin period of the Sun's decline in strength and the beginning of the yang period's of the Sun's growth in strength.

Toji/Tohji means winter's reach.



Lighting candles on Tohji-Taisai. Image credit: wildernesscommittee.com

The Sun features prominently in Japan's national identity, its stories and customs as it does in Mithraism. For the Japanese Shinto, Toji/Tohji-Taisai also marks the re-emergence of Amaterasu² Omikami, the female Kami (deity/Goddess – we note that Mithra is the name of a woman in Iran) of the Sun and Cosmos. (What we see as similarities or parallels between Amaterasu Omikami and Mithra, others see as a direct connection.) Amaterasu who is represented as the rising Sun in the Japanese flag, is given dominion over the sky and

other deities as well.

The myth concerning Amaterasu Omikami's re-emergence is retold during the winter solstice as part of the orthodox ritual. In the myth, Amaterasu Omikami's brother the Storm God (cf. Indra in Aryan mythology) and God of the sea, Susano-o Mikoto, went on a thunderous rampage across the earth (another story has him throwing a flayed horse skin among the divine) causing Amaterasu to retreat into a cave, the Ama-no-Iwato meaning heavenly rock cave.

Amaterasu's retreat brought darkness to the earth and life forms began to wilt and die.



Amaterasu's re-emergence and Uzume's dance. 1887 Painting by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi.

The pleas of the other gods for Amaterasu to come out of her cave went unheeded. Then Uzume, the Goddess of Happiness and Joy began to dance in a manner so comical that the laughter of the other gods grew to raucous roar. A curious Amaterasu emerged from her cave (cf. the cave of Mithra) bringing sunshine and life back to the earth. Uzume for her part became the goddess of the dawn.

The myth can be used as a mediation tool. According to Rev. Koichi Barrish of the Tsubaki American Shinto assembly, Toji/Tohji-Taisai is a day for a type of Chinkon, Shinto meditation, dedicated to the rejuvenation of Taiyo the Sun and Solar Progenitor. The meditation gives rise to the feeling of a special connection to Taiyo in one's hara, the second chakra. For those familiar with the discipline called furube-no-kamu-waza of Chinkon Saho, the day of Toji/Tohji-Taisai is a special day for its practice. The uninitiated can face the Sun and invite chi (life force or beneficial spirit) to come into their minds and bodies.

4. Closing Thoughts

While the breath of distance or the depth of time may separate us human beings, part of our collective consciousness is the innate desire to celebrate light – be it existential or spiritual. There is perhaps no time more apt to celebrate this wonder of creation than on the first morning after the passing of the winter solstice with its promise of the coming spring.

Khojeste baad! Best wishes to all!

Notes:

¹ The English 'solstice' is derived from the Latin '*sol-stitium*' meaning 'Sun stands still'.

² According to Akira Matsumura ed. of *Dajirin* (online, 1995), the name Amaterasu is derived from *Amateru* meaning 'shining in heaven'. Amaterasu-Omikami, means 'the great august *kami* (god) who shines in the heaven'. '*Ama*' means 'heaven'; *tera* is an inflectional form of *teru*, 'to shine'; *su* is an honorific auxiliary verb which shows respect for the actor. Thus, *amaterasu* means 'to shine in the heaven'. Further, *ō* means 'great' and *mi* is a prefix for noble and august beings.