

## The Winter Solstice

*'from darkness comes light'*

For thousands of years people in the Northern Hemisphere have celebrated 21 December, the shortest day of the year.

In ancient Greece the winter solstice ritual was called Lenaea, the Festival of Women. Originally, it is said, the harvest god Dionysos was represented by a man, who was actually torn to pieces and eaten by a gang of women. The god would then be reborn as a baby. By classical times a goat was killed instead of a man. In ancient Egypt Osiris was said to have died and been entombed on 21 December. At midnight a baby would be brought forth from the shrine representing new birth.

The Ancient Romans celebrated the feast of Saturn (Saturnalia) on 17 December, close to the solstice. This was a major fair and holiday. Houses were decorated with evergreen boughs, lamps were burned to keep away evil spirits, good-luck gifts were exchanged and people danced through the streets. The Inca's celebrated Inti Raymi at the solstice. This was the festival of the sun, in honour of the sun god Wiracocha.

The Druids called the winter solstice 'Albian Arthuan'. For them it marked the end of the month of the Elder Tree and the start of the month of the Birch. This was seen as a magical time when the sun god travelled through the underworld to learn the secrets of life and death and bring out souls to be reincarnated.

In Iran many still celebrate Shabe-Yalda, the rebirth of the sun. The Hopi celebrate the winter solstice, as the sun returns giving strength to budding life.

In Britain today many pagans celebrate the winter solstice. It is generally seen as the time when the new god king is born to the goddess, bringing the promise of spring and new life.

There is a common theme throughout many of these festivals – the birth of a god bringing new hope. It does not take much imagination to connect this to the Christian story of the birth of Jesus, celebrated only four days later. So why has this day been celebrated by so many people for so long? Of course we are dependant on the sun for our lives. It may be easy to forget this in our modern, technological world, but without the sun there would be no life on Earth. In ancient times people would have been much more aware of their reliance on the sun for food and heat. If the spring didn't return then there would be no food and people would starve. By acting out the rebirth of the sun, in the form of a sun god then people may have felt that they were in some way ensuring the return of the sun, of longer days, of spring. The details would vary according to the belief system of the time. Sometimes a sacrifice was made to a god to ensure the sun's return, prayers might be offered, or it might be believed that having many people focusing their intent on the return of spring would ensure a successful outcome.

Those who celebrate the solstice today may view the festival differently. Our understanding of astronomy allows us to be certain that, short of some cosmological disaster, the sun will return and spring will follow (even if our own actions may cause our climate to change to some extent). So for many today the festival is more of a celebration, a way of giving thanks. It is also a time for contemplation. During the winter we naturally spend more time in doors. If we are in touch with our natural cycles then the darkness outside naturally brings us to a place of quiet where we can reflect on the previous 12 months. This is a good time for inner reflection, for mediation, visualisation and inner journeys.

Of course the shortest day actually marks the beginning of winter for many of us. The coldest weather is still to come. So maybe a celebration can help us to keep our spirits up over the coming months.

How can you celebrate the winter solstice? Well there are no rules, but here are some ideas:

- throw a party,
- visit Stonehenge:
- watch the sunrise wherever you are
- at sunrise light a candle to represent the returning sun and meditate
- plant a tree seed in a pot, watch it grow as the months pass and plant it outside when it is mature enough
- burn incense - Bay, Juniper, Cedar, Pine or Rosemary are recommended
- decorate your house with mistletoe, holly, red, green , white, gold, dried leaves and fruit, and/or a traditional yule log
- give gifts
- dance
- have a bonfire
- hang decorations – maybe little moons, stars and suns - on an evergreen tree
- feast
- create your own ritual

*by Nancy Hine with thanks to.....*

### ***References***

[http://www.religioustolerance.org/winter\\_solstice.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/winter_solstice.htm)

<http://www.shambhala.org/arts/fest/unconquered.html>

<http://www.wiccantradition.org.uk/yule.html>