

What awakens you to Christmas?

When Buddha was in his later years,
And India was afire with his message,
People came to him asking what he was.
Not "**Who** are you?" but "**What** are you?"
"Are you a god?" they asked.
"No."
"An angel?"
"No."
"A saint?"
"No."
"Then what are you?"
Buddha answered, "I am awake."

What is your "Zen Christmas"?

What "awakens" you to Christmas?

How does "meditation" and "quietude" enhance your Christmas?

"... Some of the Asian religions place great emphasis on Yoga (meditation; literally, union with God). Followers of Zen Buddhism and Transcendental meditation (to name only two of many such movements) claim with good scientific evidence that their methods bring peace to many tense and troubled souls. This should be no surprise to Latter-day Saints, because our own leaders have taught us the importance of meditation. In 1967, President David O. McKay said in the Priesthood Session of General Conference: "*Meditation is the language of the soul... It is a private devotion or spiritual exercise... It is a form of prayer and one of the most secret, most sacred doors through which we pass into the presence of the Lord. Jesus set the example for us.*"

(New Era, October 1975, p. 6)

Zen is a form of Buddhism that places great importance on moment-by-moment awareness and “seeing deeply into the nature of things” by direct experience. The practice of Zen is rooted in Indian philosophy in which the Sanskrit form means “meditation” or “to see or observe.” It was introduced into China in the 6th century a.d. where the translation means “quietude.” Zen Buddhism moved into Japan in the 12th century and is now also practiced in Korea and Vietnam.

As I began my practice of T'ai Chi and Meditation, I had to question exactly what we were trying to accomplish. *What is meditation really?* So I asked, “Isn't meditation a form of prayer?” My instructor explained, “It's the *'be still and know that I am God'* aspect of prayer. It's finding stillness within motion, stillness within chaos, stillness within the never-ending thoughts we entertain in our minds constantly.”

For our Zen Advent celebration, everyone brought a dish from any of the countries where Zen Buddhism is practiced. We asked everyone to take time to ponder and meditate upon the things that make Christmas meaningful to them. They wrote them down and mailed them to me. I read them at our family party and we all tried to match the “Zen” to its person!

My Zen Christmas is not getting caught up in the frantic pace of the season. I decorate early, shop early, plan meals and parties and activities early, so that I can simply enjoy the season. For me, this is a month of reflection, gratitude, family, home, beauty, music, friends, peace, serenity, and thinking on Christ and His gifts to us.

My Zen Christmas is “la vita vera” = the true life = good food, good conversation, and everyone sitting around the dinner table together!
Ahhhh... La Vita Vera!



Something fun to get you to meditate on *your*
Zen Christmas Memories . . .

1. Egg Nog or Hot Chocolate?
2. Does Santa wrap presents or just sit them under the tree?
3. Colored lights or white lights on tree/house?
4. Do you hang mistletoe?
5. When do you put up your decorations?
6. What is your favorite holiday dish (excluding dessert)?
7. Favorite holiday memory as a child?
8. When and how did you learn the truth about Santa Claus?
9. Do you open a gift on Christmas Eve?
10. How do you decorate your Christmas tree?
11. Snow! Love it or dread it?
12. Can you ice skate?
13. Do you remember your favorite gift?
14. What's the most important thing about the holidays for you?
15. What is your favorite holiday dessert?
16. What is your favorite holiday tradition?
17. What tops your tree?
18. Candy Canes -- Yuck or Yum?
19. Which do you prefer, giving or receiving?
20. What is your favorite Christmas song?
21. What is your favorite Christmas carol?
22. Do you have a nativity? Where did it come from?
23. Do you do a nativity play starring your family members?
24. Which symbol of Christmas reminds you most of Christ?
25. Do you leave a gift for Christ under your Christmas tree?



What does Christmas . . .

Look Like?	Feel Like?	Sound Like?	Taste Like?	Smell Like?

When we involve all our senses, our learning is magnified. This is a fun look at Christmas you can do as a family or other group. You will always get some fun and silly answers. But when your “Zen” kicks in, responses can be profound and enlightening! Go back in time to the very first Christmas—the day of Christ’s birth, and ponder these questions. You may come to know Christ and Christmas with new eyes, new ears, and a new heart.

Have fun as you **AWAKEN YOUR SENSES** to Christmas!

Consider the poignant observations of that Holy Night by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland. Certainly the depth of his ponderings will awaken in your heart the awe and wonder of the season.

As a father, I have thought often of Joseph—that strong, silent, almost unknown man who must have been more worthy than any other mortal man to be the guiding foster father of the living Son of God. It was Joseph selected from among all men who would teach Jesus to work. It was Joseph who taught him the books of the Law. It was Joseph who, in the seclusion of the shop, helped him begin to understand who he was and ultimately what he was to become.

I was a student at Brigham Young University just finishing my first year of graduate work when our first child, a son, was born. We were very poor, though not so poor as Joseph and Mary. My wife and I were both going to school, both working, and in addition we worked as head residents in an off-campus apartment complex to help pay our rent. We drove a little Volkswagen which had a half-dead battery because we couldn't afford a new one (Volkswagen or battery).

Nevertheless, when I realized that our own special night was coming, I believe I would have done any honorable thing in this world, and mortgaged any future, to make sure my wife had the clean sheets, the sterile utensils, the attentive nurses, and the skilled doctors who brought forth our firstborn son. If she or that child had needed special care at the finest private medical center, I believe I would have ransomed my very life to get it.

I compare those feelings (which I have had with each succeeding child) with what Joseph must have felt as he moved through the streets of a city not his own, with not a friend or kinsman in sight, nor anyone willing to extend a helping hand. In these very last and most painful hours of her “confinement,” Mary had ridden or walked approximately 160 kilometers from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. Surely Joseph must have wept at her silent courage. Now, alone and unnoticed, they had to descend from human company to a stable, a grotto full of animals, there to bring forth the Son of God.

I wonder what emotions Joseph might have had as he cleared away the dung and debris. I wonder if he felt the sting of tears as he hurriedly tried to find the cleanest straw and hold the animals back. I wonder if he wondered: “Could there be a more unhealthy, a more disease-ridden, a more despicable circumstance in which a child could be born? Is this a place fit for a king? Should the mother of the Son of God be asked to enter the “valley of the shadow of death” ([Ps. 23:4](#)) in such a foul and unfamiliar place as this? Is it wrong to wish her some comfort? Is it right He should be born here?”

But I am certain Joseph did not mutter and Mary did not wail. They knew a great deal and did the best they could.

Perhaps these parents knew even then that in the beginning of his mortal life, as well as in the end, this baby son born to them would have to descend beneath every human pain and disappointment. He would do so to help those who also felt they had been born without advantage.

I've thought of Mary, too, this most favored mortal woman in the history of the world, who as a mere child received an angel who uttered to her those words that would change the course not only of her own life but also that of all human history: “Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women” ([Luke 1:28](#)). The nature of her spirit and the depth of her preparation were revealed in a response that shows both innocence and maturity: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” ([Luke 1:38](#)).

It is here I stumble, here that I grasp for the feelings a mother has when she knows she has conceived a living soul, feels life begin and grow within her womb, and carries a child to delivery. At such times fathers stand aside and watch, but mothers feel and never forget. Again, I've thought of Luke's careful phrasing about that holy night in Bethlehem:

"The days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and [she] wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and [she] laid him in a manger" ([Luke 2:6-7](#); emphasis added).

Those brief pronouns trumpet in our ears that, second only to the child himself, Mary is the chiefest figure, the regal queen, mother of mothers—holding center stage in this grandest of all dramatic moments. And those same pronouns also trumpet that, save for her beloved husband, she was very much alone.

I have wondered if this young woman, something of a child herself, here bearing her first baby, might have wished her mother, or an aunt, or her sister, or a friend, to be near her through the labor. Surely the birth of such a son as this should command the aid and attention of every midwife in Judea! We all might wish that someone could have held her hand, cooled her brow, and when the ordeal was over, given her rest in crisp, cool linen.

But it was not to be so. With only Joseph's inexperienced assistance, she herself brought forth her firstborn son, wrapped him in the little clothes she had knowingly brought on her journey, and perhaps laid him on a pillow of hay.

Then on both sides of the veil a heavenly host broke into song. "Glory to God in the highest," they sang, "and on earth peace, good will toward men" ([Luke 2:14](#)). But except for heavenly witnesses, these three were alone: Joseph, Mary, and the baby to be named Jesus.

At this focal point of all human history, a point illuminated by a new star in the heavens revealed for just such a purpose, probably no other mortal watched—none but a poor young carpenter, a beautiful virgin mother, and silent stabled animals who had not the power to utter the sacredness they had seen.

Christmas Doesn't Come from a Store

By Elder Jeffrey R. Holland
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles
Liahona, December 1995

Read Elder Holland's entire message [here](#).