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## The Four Gifts

Home Study Guide



### *The Four Gifts by Dr Petra*

The Holiday Season is upon us with its music, lights, shopping, family time, gift giving, and traditions. During the Month of December, we celebrate Hannukah (Judaism), Bodhi Day (Buddhism), Winter Solstice (Pagan), Christmas (Christian), Kwanzaa (African-American), and depending on the way the calendars align we may also celebrate Ramadan (Islam) and Dwali (Hinduism). In addition, we celebrate Santa Claus, St. Nicolas, the tree, family, and community. For some these days are exciting and magical, while for others they are exhausting and tainted with consumerism.

Yet all of our traditions spring from a deeply human desire to connect, mark the passing of time, and celebrate Spirit in its many expressions. There is a yearning to experience the wonder and mystery of Life within each heart. So many of our religious, spiritual, and cultural traditions revolve around an unerring intuition about the deep Truths of life. These truths are displayed in ancient rituals continually recreated in current times. This year we focus less on the separate rituals and their cultural or religious significance; rather, we seek out the inherent Spiritual Truths that are shared and reinforced through this magnificent diversity.

Join us as we celebrate the spiritual gifts shared with us from all around the world. We begin with The Four Gifts:

**JOY** – *Creation is for the delight of the Divine.* - Sri Aurobindo

Heaven and Nature sing of the Glory of Love made manifest as creation, the body through which Spirit moves in the cosmos. We are reminded of Joy through our children's innocence and wonder. We even allow our own to shine through. Every decoration, ritual, or gift is an opportunity to express Joy in the beauty and bounty of Life, no matter how big or small it may be. We are invited to release comparison, which inevitably kills Joy, and simply be in the beauty of every moment whether it's a song, a candle, a smile, or a feast. In celebrating the Joy of Life through these annual traditions, we are reminded that there is Joy in our lives, each and every day. We are invited to move beyond cynicism, apathy, and anger. We are reminded to take time to perceive the sacred in the ordinary while deliberately creating beauty and wonder in everyday life.

### *Conversation Starters:*

Which annual holidays did you grow up with and which are your favorites?

What do you love and what do you dislike about the December holiday season?

Share 1 or 2 of your favorite family holiday traditions for this time of year.

What spiritual or religious practices did you observe as part of these holidays and did they mean something to you?

### *Exercise #1*

Discuss the difference between joy and happiness.

# The Four Gifts

# The Fifth Gift

**Peace** – “Peace on Earth and Good Will to all...” – Luke, New Testament

There is an amazing WW1 story about a magical moment which happened on the front lines, between the English and German soldiers. On a cold and snowy Christmas Eve, Christmas songs began to be sung on either side of the no man’s land between them, until both sides sang “Silent Night” together, in their own native tongue. Men began climbing out of their foxholes into that no man’s land where they shared brandy and cookies and even played a soccer game. They were under the spell of that glorious Peace. With enlightenment comes the growing desire for a cessation of conflicts and the restoration of inner peace. As we spiritually awaken an awareness of our Oneness, with each other and with all of Life, peace becomes the only possible way. Peace begins within our own hearts, when we see both the humanity and the spiritual essence of every person, and all beings everywhere. Then the loving-kindness we strive for throughout the holidays, whether with family or through service to strangers, becomes a way of life. Being reminded of Peace, during conflict, lifts us out of the morass of human greed, scarcity, and lack. We become the instruments of Peace wherever we go - at home, at work, in the community, and in the world.

**Light** – “Celebrate light and honor the wisdom of the shadows.” Dacha Avelin

The longest night of darkness, celebrated by the candles on the tree, menorah, kinnara, advent wreath, and in our windows, remind us of the ending of seasons and the natural cycles of life. These cycles swing between light and dark, warmth and cold, summer and winter. The yin/yang symbol teaches that the light and the dark are not contending against each other but rather are birthed, endlessly, from one another. There is illumination in the light and a wealth of deep wisdom in the darkness. In the snow of winter, when all looks dead, there is teeming life underground. In the darkness, below ground, life is extending its roots, strengthening itself for the renewed push of creation come the spring. And the spring does inevitably come as surely as the sun rises again the east. So darkness is embraced and the light is renewed every year, just as it is in the seasons of our individual lives and in the ongoing life of the human race. No matter the darkness we may traverse, there is much to learn in it, and there is always the promise of the light coming again. Living in the eternal cycle, we are unafraid of the darkness and are the Light-workers wherever we go throughout the entire year.

## *Exercise #2:*

Take 2 minutes and quietly imagine being in noise, stress, perhaps even an uncomfortable situation...

What makes it difficult to be at peace and find good will towards others?

What can you do you do to be at peace?

## *Exercise #3:*

Turn off all the lights and sit in the darkness together for 5 minutes.

Explore how it feels. How can you make friends with the dark? What might be here in the dark for you? What does the light bring?

Share together.

## Exercise #4

How can you make love real where there is divisiveness in the family or inequity in the community or conflict between peoples and nations?

**Love** – “Ujamaa means partnership and community, and its meaning is one of the few places where the complexities of individual and common callings find a home together.” Faith for Justice

Gift giving, sharing food, helping those in need, coming together in family and supporting each other in community are some of the ways our love and interdependence are expressed. Love, which is the very impulse of Life to express and create, is the source of the love we give to each other. It is our nature to give, our desire for connection, and our sense of belonging which is the experience and expression of Love. Even with imperfect love in our families, we continually seek ways to connect, share and lift others, whether with family, strangers, or kindred spirits. Let us whole-heartedly examine how often we seek to prove our love or have someone prove their love for us. Let us openly experience those spontaneous and precious moments when love simply oozes out and surrounds us with pure grace. Releasing commercialism while embracing acts of love and giving is a powerful spiritual practice, bringing the sacred back into the human desire for intimate connection, sharing and mutual support. Learning to not be fooled by outer appearances, but to become deeply aware of the inner flame which burns within every person is how we become instruments of Love in our workplaces and in our communities. We fan the flame so that Love may, in fact, be the way of healing our hearts, connecting our families, lifting our community, and embracing the world.

There is one more gift to receive during the holiday season which may be the most precious of all. Not because it comes from one tradition or is practiced in one particular way. But because it is the way all the other gifts are actualized and embodied in humanity, keeping them from being purely abstract ideas which can be ignored when it's inconvenient to live them out..

**The 5th Gift: Incarnation** – “We are the only son who the Father has eternally begotten out of the hidden darkness of the eternal mystery” and “We are all meant to be mothers of God...for God is always needing to be born.” Meister Eckhart

Universal Spirit, absolute potential, is forever incarnating in the cosmos, and is slowly awakening to this as humanity awakens. We are individualized expressions of the One Infinite Universal Reality; we are the place where this Universal Spirit is actualized. This is the 5<sup>th</sup> gift - the incarnation of Universal Spirit as us and the recognition of this truth. As Matthew Fox proclaimed, “We are the second coming.” Awakening to the awareness of Oneness and the Nature of Reality as also the truth of our own spirit is to become aware that the opportunity and responsibility for living in alignment with this Truth falls squarely upon our shoulders. The Incarnation is the reality that we are co-creators, growing and expanding life with every word, choice, and deed. Spirit, in form, is always being birthed into creation and we are now participating and contributing to this birthing. Honoring the incarnation is remembering who and what we are. It is the recognition that everything we think, say and do is a birth - in our life and in the lives of those around us. We celebrate the power of this awareness, the Truth that illuminates our path, and the hope that we, and all humanity, become living incarnations of Joy, Peace, Light and Love.

**Exercise #6** – What does being the Incarnation of Universal Spirit mean to you? How do you want to live that as your reality? What difference does that make in how you show up in the world?