



Nature wellbeing guide, Claire de Boursac says that although our lifestyles have changed, we still need to recognise the shifting energies of the turning of the year

Winter Solstice

Ancient sacred sites suggest that the winter solstice was celebrated at least as far back as Neolithic times and across the globe.

Whatever your lineage, it is likely that some of your ancestors gathered in community to mark this point in the year. So, what is the solstice and is it still relevant for us in 2019?

Most people know the winter solstice as the shortest day of the year and its mention typically conjures up images of soulful gatherings around ancient monuments. From the winter solstice, the days lengthen and the celebration of

the returning sun is central to the design of several important ancient sites. On the winter solstice, the sun sets precisely through a small gap in the middle of Stonehenge (right), while at Newgrange, a beam of light penetrates the roof-box and travels up the 19-metre passage and into the chamber. As the sun rises higher, the beam widens so that the whole chamber is dramatically illuminated.

The absolute precision of the positioning of the stones reveals how much the people of this time understood about the movement of the earth around the sun and phenomena we measure today with sophisticated technology and complex calculations. I am often amazed

by this while at the same time recognising that for them, this understanding was crucial to their way of life and even survival. The sun was the source of light and warmth and vital to grow crops and feed a family. We can really appreciate why its return was a cause for celebration. »



Worldwide Festivals

The solstice represents a transition, the ending of one cycle and the starting of a new. The word solstice has its origins in Latin and means ‘sun standing still’. For days before and after the solstice, the sun appears to stand still in the sky at its noon-time elevation.

While the different festivals at this time of year have their own meanings and rituals, themes of honouring the ancestors, marking a transition and celebrating the returning light and warmth echo across cultures and around the globe.

The winter solstice marks the start of the new year for many cultures, including Native American peoples and the Incan empire; Inti Raymi (Quecha for ‘sun festival’) was one of the most important festivals and their new year.

The ancient Romans had several celebrations around this time of year, including Saturnalia, a week of feasting in the run up to the solstice.

In Druidic traditions, the Winter Solstice is thought of as a time of death and rebirth when Nature’s powers and our own souls are renewed. It marks the moment in time when the Old Sun dies

and when the Sun of the New Year is born. The birth of the New Sun is thought to revive the Earth’s aura in mystical ways, giving a new lease of life to spirits and souls of the dead.

A central ritual of the Feast of Juul, celebrated across Scandinavia, is the lighting of fires to symbolize the heat, light and life-giving properties of the returning Sun. A Yule – or Juul – log was brought in and burned on the hearth in honour of Thor, whose role it was to bring the sun’s warmth back.

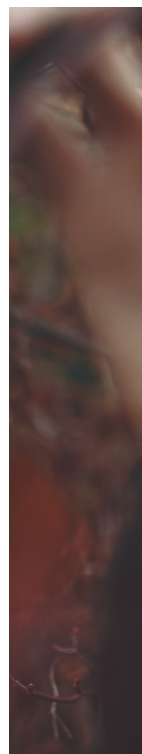
The Dongzhi Winter Solstice Festival is one of the most important



SOLSTICE RITUAL

Create a comfortable and sacred space for yourself and make sure you won’t be disturbed. This could be as simple as turning off your phone and sitting in your favourite chair or you may wish to create an altar, smudge the room or bless the space before you start.

- ☀ Follow your heart and do what feels right for you.
- ☀ Light your candle and spend a few moments focussing on its glow as you take some mindful breaths, connecting in to yourself.
- ☀ Review your year since last winter solstice. As you journey through the months, notice your response to the events you remember. If you become aware that you are carrying something that is not of service to you, graciously release it.
- ☀ When your review is complete, blow out the candle. Sit in the stillness and take a few breaths focussing on the space around you.
- ☀ Turn your attention to the year ahead. What do you wish to experience, create, be? Allow yourself to dream.
- ☀ Light the candle and intend for its glow to feed and nourish your intentions.





festivals in East Asia, celebrated in China, Japan, Taiwan and Korea. It's thought to have its origins in the philosophy of yin and yang. The returning sun and lengthening days are associated with the strengthening yang or masculine energy. It's a time to honour the ancestors and to gather as a family to celebrate the past good year with a dumpling feast.

Honouring the Returning Light

In our modern, industrialised times of electric lighting and supermarkets to meet not just our needs but our whims, even through the harshest winter months, it may be tempting to think that we no longer need to concern ourselves with the position of the sun in its seasonal journey through the sky. I would suggest otherwise, and that although our lifestyles have transformed almost beyond recognition since the industrial revolution, our biology has changed very little and that our body and being is influenced by these natural forces and the shifting energies of the turning of the year.

Marking the solstice provides an opportunity to tune in and feel what is happening energetically around us and within us. At a time in history when there is much division and conflict between people of different cultures, there is a place for a celebration that goes beyond this. Also, at a time when we are painfully disconnected from nature and the simple beauty of her rhythms, it can speak to some ancient knowing part and provide a grounding and connection back to the earth and our place in the universe.

Suggestions for celebrating solstice

☀ It's a wonderful time to come together in community and celebrate in tribe, whether that's an organised gathering or a meal with friends. It's also a great opportunity for some sacred self-care. Here are some simple ideas to help you connect with yourself and the energies of the solstice.

☀ The 'still point' mentioned above is an interesting astronomical feature and a helpful invitation to pause. So often we move from one phase to the next; from one activity to the next; from one job to the next, taking very little, if any time to pause and honour the space between. Solstice is the perfect time to do just that. Take some time to be in stillness and silence. This may be a challenge, particularly at this time of year when diaries are full of festive parties and the media is telling us all the things we should be doing and buying. You might find the stillness a delicious and welcome balm or it could feel challenging. Either way, receive the teachings offered.

☀ As mentioned above, the sun is an important character at Solstice and a simple way to honour this festival is to watch the sunset and/or sunrise.

☀ Any transition is a great time for a ritual cleansing of the home. You may want to include some decluttering or simply cleanse your space with sage or incense, inviting any old energies, which no longer serve, to leave and inviting in the new.

☀ If you keep a journal you may want to use the long, dark evening to sit in a cosy spot and read through the pages of

What exactly is the solstice?

Most of us know that the winter solstice marks the shortest day of the year, with its counterpart the summer solstice marking the longest. The variation in day length has to do with the earth's journey round the sun and the fact that it tilts on its axis – by 23.5 degrees. This tilt means that each of the hemispheres faces the sun for half a rotation (half a year); during this time they will experience longer days and summer months at the peak.

The date of the winter solstice varies from year to year, and in the Northern hemisphere can fall anywhere between 20 and 23 December, with the 21 or 22 December being the most common dates. The reason for this is that the tropical year – the time it takes for the sun to return to the same spot relative to Earth – is slightly different from the calendar year.

Solstice marks the moment – yes that's right, the moment – when the North Pole is aimed furthest away from the sun on the tilt of the Earth's axis. This is also the time when the sun shines directly over the Tropic of Capricorn.

This year the solstice falls on Sunday, 22 December at 4.19pm in London. With a predicted sunrise at 8.04am and sunset at 3.53pm – this day will have 8 hours 49 minutes less daylight than on the summer solstice back in June.

the year so far, taking time to notice any feelings or reflections that emerge as you do so. ●

* **Claire de Boursac** is a psychotherapist and nature-wellbeing guide. She offers a range of groups and workshops to help people deepen their connection to self, others and the natural world. She credits nature-connection and seasonal alignment to her staying grounded and well in the hustle and bustle of London life and loves to share these practices through her carefully crafted sessions.

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