

Today is Saturday 24th February 2024

5 short pieces written as notes for free talks given at the SDFUK Lantern Festival event



Introduction

With the rising of the first new moon on 10th February 2024, the Year of the Dragon began. Of all the animals in the Chinese zodiac, the dragon (the only 'mythical' one) is perhaps the most revered.

At a basic level, the dragon appears once every twelve lunar years. However, each animal (including the dragon) also has one of the five elements attributed to it. Therefore, a complete cycle (12x5) takes sixty years to complete. Furthermore, these also alternate between being yin and yang. Because twelve is an even number, a cycle ends on the same yin or yang characteristic that it began with.

I was born in the Year of the Dragon. Accordingly, I was sixty years old when 'my year' (that of the year of the black metal yin dragon) returned following my birth. This will not happen again until my one hundred and twentieth year. So, it is effectively a once in a lifetime occurrence!

Note: My son Joe was born in 1988, when I was twenty-eight years old. This means that he is also a dragon! To calculate the Chinese zodiac sign a person was born under, exact dates are at first irrelevant. These are not needed until one needs to identify the assigned colour and element. However, because our birthdates are divisible by the even number of twelve, I can be sure that he is, like me, a yin dragon



Today is Saturday 24th February 2024

I decided long ago that this (Today is Saturday 24th February 2024) would be the first sentence in one of the pieces that I intended to present at our 2024 Lantern Festival. As I mentally went through what I planned to say, I started each time at the beginning; and I must have said it in my head a few hundred times by now. However, it is only on this day that this is a factual statement - it really is Saturday 24th February. But, just how accurate is it to say that?

There was in fact no Saturday 24th February in 2023, but there was a Friday the 24th. In 2022 it was a Thursday the 24th, in 2021 the 24th fell on a Wednesday ... and so on. This anomaly is a consequence of the Gregorian Calendar, and this slippage is compensated by inserting a leap year (366 $\frac{1}{4}$ days) every four years; and having months of different lengths. (Note: The first syllables of October, November, and December refer to the numbers eight, nine, and ten!)

This year is a leap year, and so February has twenty-nine days, as opposed to the normal twenty-eight. Accordingly, there will not be another Saturday 24th February until in 2031. But this is all actually quite irrelevant because, according to the lunar calendar, the night of the first full moon in the new year of 2025 will occur on Wednesday 12th February. This means that the first new moon falls in January (on the 29th), which is quite rare. The lunar new year can fall anywhere between late January and early March. This is due to the discrepancies between the Gregorian and lunar calendars.

For instance, in the days of the Julian calendar (named after Julious Ceasar), Easter had slipped into the month of May, and the main purpose of establishing the Gregorian (named after Pope Gregory XIII) was to align the Easter season to the phases of the moon, and to the religious observances beginning with Lent, including Good Friday, Easter Monday and Christ's resurrection on Whit Sunday. This is set to fall on the seventh Sunday after Easter; observed as a feast in commemoration of the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles fifty days following Easter.

The same discrepancy applies to every event that we celebrate on the same date every year. New Years Day, Saint Valentines Day, Halloween, Guy Fawkes, Christmas. The only significance in their placement in time is that they are (on average!) 365¼ days apart. The Gregorian calendar is a human construct. It is a mathematical algorithm and as such, it is not a true and real measurement of time.

The organisation that is now called the SBFUK held its first meeting on 14th Feb 1996. Twenty-eight years and ten days ago today ... more or less! In this year, the lunar year began with the rising of its first new moon on the 1st of Feb. Therefore, the full moon that followed fourteen days later (24th) marked the night of the Lantern Fest, and it is at this time our attention turns towards the lovely and the holy Kuan Yin.



The Lovely and the Holy Kuan Yin

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My Valentine

For reason far too complicated and personal to go into now, I have to say that the relationship I had with my mum was not a good one, and I have very few memories of her involvement in my childhood. It was obvious to me that things between my parents was not as they ought to have been, and I felt relieved when their inevitable divorce came, when I had just turned fourteen. While they both went about looking for new accommodation for themselves, I went to live with my gran. I was staying there most weekends anyway.

Since my grandad died (I have no solid memories of him either) my gran lived alone in a crowded terrace of two up 'two down workers cottages', close to Portsmouth Harbour and the Royal Navy Dockyards.

By the time I was fifteen, my dad had remarried, and I moved into a semi- three-bed semi in a leafy suburb with my new step-mum and her two (younger than me) daughters. This didn't work out, and I left on my sixteenth birthday. I got myself a bedsit in Portsmouth city centre – and started drinking. My consumption was excessive, but I learnt how to hide the truth.

In 1993, I was on the brink of my second divorce. There comes a time in the life of most alcoholics and addicts in general, when they become sick and tired of being sick and tired -and finally own

up to having a problem; most importantly, they begin to come to terms with the fact that they themselves are the cause of their problems was not 'everyone else', but them alone.

That time came for me in 1994, a few months before my gran died. Her funeral was the first social event I attended sober in more than twenty years.

In 1995 I became a confirmed Buddhist; and at the turn of the year, I began renting a small room in which I could meet with friends to meditate and study Buddhism together.



And in the End

I have now complete a cycle of sorts and brought us back to Saint Valentines Day in 1996, which coincided with the first full moon in the new lunar year ... and that time when we turn our thoughts towards the lovely and the holy Kuan Yin.

I had been living alone for nearly ten years, and I had become quite comfortable in that lifestyle. In short, I was not looking for any new long-term relationship. However, whenever Valentines Day came around, I did deep down inside somehow still crave a sweetheart, female compony, a lady friend. Someone I could send flowers too. It was then that I decided the object of my affection would henceforth be ... the lovely and the holy Kuan Yin. Soon, the spirt of the bodhisattva also manifested herself as my gran, and then most unexpectedly, my mum!

Now, twenty-eight years later, Kuan Yin has become a part of my life. But graciously and gradually, she has shuffled aside a little and ushered for Amida Buddha to take centre stage.



Shakyamuni Triad: Buddha flanked by Manjushri and Samantabhadra