

UBNBV EP 3 Ben Harris.mp3

Edited for clarity

Introductory chant [00:00:01] Nam-yo-ho-ren-ge-kyo, nam-yoho-re-n-gekyo.
Nam-yoo-ho, ren-gek-yo, nam yoo-hoo-ren ge-kyoo, nam-yooo-ho re-n ge-kyo.
Nam-myoho-ren-ge-kyo

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:00:37] Welcome to the podcast series, Uplifting Black Nichiren Buddhist Voices. The third episode of our series explores a tenet of Nichiren Buddhism that is known as faith in action. The word faith is not usually associated with Buddhism, but this term is used consistently in the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, the founder of the tradition Nichiren-Buddhism. He wrote prolifically about persevering through difficulties with faith. This is also referred to as faith in the mystic law. The use of the word faith has helped a number of practitioners in the West understand Buddhism in a new way, and, I would argue, has also helped them make connections between their Christian heritage and their Buddhist practice. My conversation partner today, Ben Harris, is one such practitioner. He has made connections between seemingly very different religious traditions. Ben is one of my former students, I'm happy to say, very proud to say and a recent graduate of Union Theological Seminary's inaugural Master of Social Justice program. He is a former military officer who now lives in the DC metro area and he has practiced Nichiren Buddhism for the past nine years.

Ben Harris [00:02:06] Nam-Nya-Ho-Ring-Ye-Ko, Nam- Nya-ho-Rin-Ye Ko, Nam Nya Ho-Ri-Ng-Ye Koo.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:02:23] Thank you, Ben, for chanting and opening our time together with something that is so sacred for you. I am so glad to welcome you to the podcast today and to delve a little bit more deeply into what Nichiren Buddhism means to you as an African-American man who has embraced a number of different traditions. Over the years, what specifically has led you to turn toward Nichiren Buddhism at this stage in your life? What drew you to Nichiren Buddhism?

Ben Harris [00:03:01] First, I would say what drew me to Buddhism is the practice of Buddhism. I've always been spiritually and religiously multiple, and I grew up as a Christian, and I converted to Islam when I was in college. I reclaimed my Christianity later on, and eventually found Buddhism. I think more than anything, it was a frustration with my Christian tradition in the church. In its history of social oppression that caused me to want to look elsewhere. However, I was initially drawn to Buddhism and Eastern religions in the context of studying and practicing martial arts for many years. As such, I researched Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Tai Chi, meditation. And all of them had, to some degree, have tentacles or relationships to Buddhism. So that kind of got me started. What brought me to Nichiren Buddhism in particular? I kind of look at it as a process of sowing, watering, and reaping, and the power of the feminine. Let me explain. Many years ago, as a young college freshman on summer vacation in New York City, I was approached by a young Japanese girl in an early evening. Very courageous. If this was the 70s, I had a big afro and you could imagine this feminine young lady approaching me to say, would you like to come to a meeting? And the meeting she invited me to was the Nichiren Buddhist meeting, in which time I had my first exposure to Nichiren Buddhism. However, after that, I pretty much, you know, time went along, didn't give it very much thought. And then, so she kind of planted the seed, if you will. And then a black woman, Tina Turner, in the movie, "What's Love Got to Do," it kind of watered my appetite for Nichiren Buddhism as she practiced Buddhism in that movie that became, you know, a real success for her. And then, oh,

about eight years ago, I was in the Pentagon, which I worked, and they were hosting a Nichiren Buddhist meeting in the library, in the auditorium. And they was also offering free lunch. So of course.

Speaker 2 [00:05:49] Of course you. Of course. Of course.

Speaker 4 [00:05:52] Never pass up a free meal. Anyway, so I went and I heard the presentation and it piqued my interest a little more. And so I started, found a local Nichiren Buddhist organization. And fortunately, I dialed into the SGI Nichiren Buddhism meeting because there are other Nichiren Buddhists temples here in the Washington DC area. And during that meeting, another Japanese woman, addressed one of my biggest concerns at the time, and that was how do I rationalize or integrate this Buddhism with my Christian tradition? And she called me out of the meeting, and after the meeting it took me to the side, and she offered this point. She said, We're not asking you to give up your tradition. However, if Nichiren Buddhism could make you a better Christian, why not give it a try? And so I've been trying Nichiren Buddhism for the last eight years. But more specifically, I was really attracted to the SGI philosophy, the SGI members' experiences, and the practice of chanting. In terms of the philosophy, the first president, Tsunaburo Makoguchi of the SGI, started the Soka Gakkai almost a hundred years ago. And Soka means value creation. And he defined value creation as creating that which is beauty, gain, and good. And so, that kind of resonated with me. But then the second president, Jose Toto, took it one step further and said, the purpose of any religion is people's absolute happiness. And this is obtained through human revolution or individual transformation. And then finally, the third president, Daisaku Ikeda, addressed the issue of world peace. He said, in addition to happiness, peace is a fundamental requirement of religious tradition, and world peace is established through dialog, education, and culture. So that was the philosophy that drew me to Nichiren Buddhism. But the power of the actual proof of this Buddhism in people's lives, the experiences that are often given during the meetings, which people speak to how this Buddhism has enabled them to address different challenges and obstacles, illnesses. Hardships, family dysfunctions, you name it. And I was like, oh, this may really work. And so that was a big selling point for me. And then finally, chanting. It just, the chanting just convinced everything that a practice of engagement, of chanting to the Gohonzon and using it as a mirror to reflect the true aspects of the phenomenon that are going on in your life. And so. Yeah, so it was the praxis of chanting, the philosophy of SGI, and the experiences.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:09:30] That was so clear, Ben, thank you. And can you tell us what a Gohansen is?

Ben Harris [00:09:36] Gohonzon is the object of devotion. It really is a scroll, a sacred scroll or mandala that we actually chant to. And in this mandala, it is written in Chinese and Sanskrit letters. And it depicts various aspects of scenes and principles within the Lotus Sutra. And down the middle of the Gohonzon, is Nam-myoho-rence-ko.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:10:08] And tell us about the Lotus Sutra. You just referenced it, and I know that's central to this particular lineage.

Ben Harris [00:10:17] At the risk of heresy. I personally tend to look at the Lotus Sutra like maybe the New Testament or the Last Testament.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:10:24] Oh, okay.

Ben Harris [00:10:25] And it has been purported that the Buddha taught the Lotus Sutra the last eight years of his life. So it was his final teaching. And in that teaching, you see the respect for life in all its formations, in all of its variety and all of its diversity. And that Buddhahood can be obtained in this lifetime, in this form. So, yeah. So the Lotus Sutra was the fundamental Buddhist doctrine that Nichiren Buddhists follow. However, there are other writings from Nichiren that we also follow.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:11:10] I want to return to something you mentioned earlier about how the proof is in the actualized experience. And it sounds like for you personally, the proof of how effective chanting and practice in this particular lineage of Nichiren Buddhism is - for you and also for members of your community – [is evident in your actualized experience]. And I wonder if you can tell us, especially as someone who has suffered from racism, as you have sometimes talked about your biracial identity and what it was like to grow up mixed race in the United States. I wonder if you can talk about how this practice has helped you to address or to turn to or to work effectively with the impact of racism.

Ben Harris [00:12:00] I would say that I didn't turn to Nichiren Buddhism [because of racism explicitly]. It's a complex answer. I didn't turn to Nichiren Buddhism as a result of my experience as a Black male here in America. What attracted me to it was the fact that Nichiren Buddhist was inclusive. It has respect, as I mentioned earlier, for all manifestations of life, genders, age groups, races, and there are no priests or clergy. And so that attracted me. But it also was teaching that life is suffering, but it can be useful suffering, can be used as a fuel to gain victory over life's obstacles which as a Black man, I've experienced many obstacles, but that was as I began to practice Nichiren Buddhism, I learned that those obstacles can be used as fuel and fire to actually obtain victory in life. And so that would attract me. Now, the added benefit of that was, when I looked up and saw all these Black people in the meetings, I was like, wow, this is not too bad. So I kind of, you know, by default, [landed smoothly] because Nichiren Buddhism really is the first Buddhism that I actually ever practiced, even though I have researched and I've read about Buddhism, this is the first Buddhism that I've actually practiced. So by default I kind of landed in a good place.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:13:42] I know that it's been transformative in relation to your Christianity and that you have a very deep desire to commit to social justice activism. And more recently, as a graduate of the Master of Social Justice program at Union Theological Seminary, you've also been researching and engaging indigenous traditions. And I wonder, Ben, for you, how Buddhism intersects with these other traditions that you also find so meaningful.

Ben Harris [00:14:16] Dr. Rima, as you know, is the advisor to my final thesis.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:14:21] That's right.

Ben Harris [00:14:23] That effort took a look at and took a concept in Nichiren Buddhism that says life is expressed in three realms. The realm of self, the realm of society, and the realm of environment. And for me, Buddhism, using a Buddhist lens really zeroes in on the internal workings of an individual. Whether it's silent meditation or human revolution through Nichiren Buddhist chanting, self and environment are considered one in the change and one individual can cause a change in their community and their world. So it really is the power of one that I see when I look at the internal aspects of Buddhism. Nichiren Buddhism, however, presents a unique principle in that the universal law of life is eternal, and the purpose of religion is happiness and peace in this life and in the lives to

come. And so, nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Translates into devotion to the mystic law of lotus sutra or cause and effect. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the actual, the universal law of life. Okay. And so, yeah, so even though in many Buddhist traditions, there is the belief that there is no such thing as self. Okay. Or that the self doesn't exist or the self is transitory or what have you. But then I looked at the society and I looked it through my Christian lens. And interesting enough, Christianity introduces a concept rarely spoken of in Buddhism. It's called love. Now, we kind of get close when we talk about compassion.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:16:29] That's what I was just thinking.

Ben Harris [00:16:31] Okay. But love presents a certain personal dimension in relationship in Christianity between the creator and the created. And so, even though Christianity has a strong internal mystical aspect to itself, it's in the social dimension of Jesus' ministry that I find greatest value or the social gospel: The salvation of society, not just the individual, but also the salvation of the collective. And this can only be experienced in community. And so for me, Christianity presents a love, a personal dimension, and a communal dimension that not necessarily is absent in Buddhism, but that I find to be a driving element of the Christian tradition. And then finally, the environment. Indigenous beliefs expand our concern in spiritual relationships beyond the human to encompass the non-human. In a sense, it expands the notion of Christian community to include intimate and personal relationships with all life, the water, the trees, the suns, the plants. These are all considered other family members, if you will. And I don't believe that my Buddhist tradition and my Christian tradition have done a great job of focusing on the other dimension of the environment, the natural environment, which sustains it from which we all gather our sustenance from. And I believe that the indigenous wisdom is going to be necessary [wisdom] as we need to survive the perils of this ongoing environmental destruction that we witness each day. So, for me... Self-Buddhism, society Christianity, and environment indigenous beliefs present multiple lenses for getting at the issues of social justice as they occur in these different realms.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:18:45] I know you've thought so deeply about it to the degree where you wrote an entire master's thesis on it. And I know that at the time, we had long conversations about whether Buddhism as a tradition, not maybe perhaps only Nichiren Buddhism, but Buddhism more broadly could be expanded in this context to address some of these social and environmental aspects. At this time, having written your thesis and defended it, and also because this practice is so personally meaningful to you, and because you have seen it be so meaningful within your Buddhist community, I wonder if there are aspects of the Buddhist tradition that you do see as socially oriented, even if we don't have Buddhist organizations in the same way that Christian organizations have evolved. Are there are aspects of doctrine or aspects of being together that speak to social justice. It's something I think a lot about personally.

Ben Harris [00:19:50] Well, yeah, even in Nichiren Buddhism, even though I kind of focus it on the individual, but in the SGI for years, President Ikeda has been promoting world peace through different addresses to United Nations on nuclear disarmament. Okay.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:20:10] Right, that's right.

Ben Harris [00:20:12] And that's been a big area of emphasis. And probably as a result of the experience of World War II in the Japanese culture and Japanese society, the only ones that ever really suffered the results of a nuclear holocaust. And so nuclear disarmament is a big social issue in the SGI. And I would also say world-class citizenship.

That in the process of understanding that we are all interconnected, and that there's unity and diversity. And like some might believe otherwise, that we are stronger for it. And we need to start considering ourselves as world citizens and not just Americans or Canadians or Africans or whatever, because the world is getting smaller and we're going to have to engage one another. And this is probably one of my big reasons for my interest in interreligious engagement, is that you are going to run into people of different faiths. And, you know, in order to have a productive engagement, you have to be willing to not only listen, not only learn from, but learn with other traditions.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:21:35] That makes so much sense to me. And also what you pointed to with regards to the focus on disarmament and opposing any kind of nuclear engagement. And yes, being together and being willing to be different together. And what actually is coming up most in this response and where my mind has gone as I've listened to you is the writing I've just done on Audre Lorde. I am thinking about how Buddhist doctrines are expressed through our Black queer luminaries who have been so influential in social movements in the United States in particular, but they were also very global in their outlook. And Audre Lorde talked a good deal about useful suffering as did James Baldwin, but also Audre Lorde talked a great deal about honoring difference. That was core to her. You could say theory of difference or her philosophy of difference, to honor that and to embrace that and to say that if we don't, we are essentially using the quote unquote master's tools to continue or to maintain a homogenous but also culturally oppressive society. So it strikes me that this practice gives us more capacity to be together in our social movements. That's what I hear you pointing to, that there's more capacity, but there's also this great outlook as to the way the world should look. What kind of society should we be in? What kind of society should we build together? And that is inherent to this practice that we do think of as more individually focused, we do you think of as focused on the mind, but I think those broader questions of how to live together, what we call social ethics are right there. We just haven't done a great job and you've pointed to this already. We haven't done a good job in this country of expanding Buddhist social ethics. So this is actually my primary motivation in life right now. How do we think about Buddhism as a set of doctrines, as a practice, as something that can inform the way we live together, but also something that can help us envision the way we want our world to be? I think it's more vital than ever at this moment in time. As we're seeing such onslaught to our institutions, a kind of demonizing of certain populations like undocumented immigrants, LGBTQ identified people. What kind of world do we want to live in?

Ben Harris [00:24:15] Yeah, I think that what I see in the Nichiren Buddhism and in the meetings and in the organization is really a rainbow coalition, if you ever were to define one. As I mentioned earlier, from all colors and hues, all genders, all sexual orientations, and everyone is respected equally. Because of the Buddha, I respect the Buddha in you. So in each of us resides the Buddha nature. And so to honor the Buddha and nature in each individual, regardless of difference is so, so critical.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:24:57] I love that. And that's such a great ending point for us to honor the Buddha nature in one another and to build a world in which we have conditions for all people, for thriving, for growth, for suffering that can be used for further growth, not to ignore the human condition but also to say we want to build an environment, a world around us where people can thrive. And we need to work on ourselves for sure to be able to make progress towards that, but that's also not solely an individual endeavor that it's meant to be much broader. Well, I look forward to where you go next, Ben, now that you have finished your thesis and you are thinking about this deeply.

Ben Harris [00:25:52] Well, yeah, I'm going to take a, I think you guys call it a sabbatical.

Rima Vesely-Fladd [00:25:58] Yes, I'm ready for that.

Ben Harris [00:26:01] I really need to take some time off, step back, sit what would become almost like a funnel under the master's program of information and just sit with it and really do more study as eight years in the Buddhist and Nichiren Buddhism, I'm still cutting my teeth. And so there's a lot of studying of the Nichiren Buddhist doctrines and writings and in comparison to my other faith practices. And how all that comes together or doesn't come together, but at least being able to respect the difference in each and every one of them. So yeah, I'm going to take about a year to try to just, you know, like absorb it, go on a few retreats, you know, silent retreats. I just came back from one not too long ago, my youngest daughter. And yeah, so she's going to go to one this summer up at Barre.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:26:59] Oh, yeah.

Ben Harris [00:27:00] Massachusetts and thinking though she's a fundamentalist Christian.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:27:05] Yes, you've talked about this.

Ben Harris [00:27:07] She's, nevertheless, she's going to go to a Buddhist retreat. And as I said earlier, as long as we can respect each other's differences, we may not agree, but then I think we have a strong foundation for moving forward as community and as a collective.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:27:25] Beautiful. Thank you, Ben. Deep bows to you.

Ben Harris [00:27:28] Thank you so much for having me. It's been truly an honor.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:27:32] The honor is mine. Thank you.