

UBNBV EP 6 Mahazi Roundtree.mp3

Introductory chant [00:00:01] Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, nam-myoho-renge-kyo.
Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, nam-myoho-renge-kyo,
nam-myoho-renge-kyo, nam-myoho-renge-kyo. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:00:38]

Welcome to the podcast series *Uplifting Black Nichiren Buddhist Voices*. Today's episode focuses on the emphasis on education, particularly study of texts within Nichiren Buddhist traditions. Nichiren Buddhists tend to do deep dives into the *Lotus Sutra* and the writings of Nichiren Daishonin as a way to cultivate their inherent Buddha nature.

In today's episode, I talk with Mahazi Roundtree. She has been a Nichiren practitioner for 38 years. She's a study leader in the Nichiren Buddhist Association, Buddhists of African Descent. She lives in Harlem and is a corporate paralegal by day and a jazz vocalist and bass player by night. She loves dancing to soulful house music, traveling, and taking advantage of all that New York City has to offer.

Welcome, Mahazi, to the podcast. Thank you so much for being here today.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:01:41]

Thanks for inviting me.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:01:42]

I am really just so pleased to talk with you about your practice in Nichiren Buddhism and your participation in Buddhists of African Descent, and everything that is inspirational and has kept you in this lineage for quite some time. From my understanding, talking to other members of your community, I hear that you are quite the teacher. You've delved deep into the texts and have imparted great wisdom.

And I'm so thrilled to be able to talk with you about your love for the texts, the *Lotus Sutra*, and your practice. I've been able to hear you chant, and so welcome, welcome, and welcome.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:02:22]

Thank you. Thank you.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:02:24]

I wonder if you might tell us what drew you to Nichiren Buddhism?

Mahazi Roundtree [00:02:31]

Hmm, that's a good question. I started practicing in 1987. I grew up in the Black church, Baptist church, and somehow got disillusioned with that. Loved to sing, but just disillusioned with some other things that were going on. And I just started searching. I've always loved having a spiritual practice, so to speak. I always believed in something.

I read Tina Turner's book *I, Tina*, and in the passages where she talked about becoming a Buddhist and what she was going through, I was going through some of the same things in my personal life. I also wanted to be a singer. So that really drew me.

Soon after I read the book, I started meeting people on the street who would go, "Oh, have you ever heard Nam-myoho-renge-kyo? Do you want to come to a meeting?"

Being from the suburbs in the city, I thought, I don't know you, I can't go with you. And this went on for months. People were saying this to me and I was like, what is going on?

Then I met a gentleman and we started dating. On our first date, I went to his house for dinner. The first thing he did when he walked in was run into a room, and I heard him going, "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo." And I thought, oh my goodness, that's the thing Tina Turner does.

And so he said yes. One thing led to another. He told me a little bit about it, but I was just so intrigued that he had his altar, and that's where he chanted. He introduced me to some people and invited me to a meeting. I went to the meeting and I liked everything I heard. They told me I could try it, and if I didn't like it, I could do something else. I thought, okay, cool. What do I have to lose?

I tried it, and within three months I really started seeing things that only I knew were changing. That's what hooked me.

The elders and seniors, when I asked them if there was something like a Bible—because that was all I knew—they said, "Oh yeah, it's the *Lotus Sutra* and the writings of Nichiren Daishonin." And I just started reading, because I always believed I wasn't going to have someone telling me what I should believe or how I should believe. They would say, "This is what the word says." But I wanted to go to the word.

That was my issue as a youngster in church. I would always ask all these questions, like, I learned in school that blah blah, and they would just tear me down. So when I found out I could read on my own, I thought, oh. And I started feeling what that power was, how strong it was. It validated for me what I always felt—for lack of a better word, because this is what we said in church—that I was saved.

I couldn't really explain it to people, but I just knew I was saved. I felt like the chosen one for some reason. And it was in Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and practicing that the validation came to a reality. Like, well, this is why.

Here I am, 30-some-odd years later.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:06:10]

Yeah, a long time. You mentioned something after three months was shifting that only you could attune to or notice, and I wonder if you have language around that?

Mahazi Roundtree [00:06:29]

I was challenged when I went to the meeting. They said, "Write down a list of things you want to see happen."

I had been going through a lot. I was very angry, very mad at the world, all kinds of stuff. Single mom, hard life, hard survival. I just wanted some ease in my life.

I think one of the first things that happened was I needed some money to either get my daughter in school or something. No one knew, because I didn't really know these people, so I didn't share my personal business. But they said, "Oh, you can chant about it." So I chanted about it. I visualized it and all that. And one day, I got the exact amount of money in the mail. It was a tax refund. You know how, when you fill out your taxes, you never know when you're going to get that refund. But it came right when I needed it.

For me, that was like, whoa, what? No. Huh? And no one knew this was going on in my life. So I thought, let me put this thing to the test. What else can I do? How else can I understand it?

Now I realize it wasn't magic, it was synchronicity—things coming at the time you need them. I was pleasantly surprised. So many other things have happened in my life. There's nothing you can tell me that would make me not practice Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:08:39]

The word that comes to mind is alignment. It reminds me of other conversations, like Jacci [Thompson-Dodd] talking about a life force—a deeper energy that you tap into or attune to. The manifestations of your life, even the practical parts, the resources we need to take care of our children, the environments around us, the conditions, the causes and conditions, align with that deeper energy.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:09:11]

Yes. And I really wanted to get rid of that anger I was holding onto for years. This practice helped me to understand where that anger came from—not to blame myself for it. I can't be responsible for other people's actions.

It also gave me a sense of compassion for the person I was holding the anger toward, and for what that person had experienced in their lifetime. It wasn't about fault; it was all that person knew.

There are certain lessons in the teachings, like you're one with your environment and you can change people's lives by chanting for their happiness. That's what I was told when I was angry: "Chant for their happiness." I had never thought about that. Why would I chant for that person to be happy? That was my attitude.

But once I started chanting for their happiness, I realized it wasn't for that person—it was for me.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:10:30]

Your heart.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:10:31]

My heart, yes. No need to hold on to grudges. Just let it go into the universal, let it take care of everything your life needs. Someone does you wrong, you let it go. Cause and effect is very exact. That term stuck with me. I thought, oh, that's just like "you reap what you sow." They said, "Yep."

I thought, okay, I got that. I don't have to seek revenge or think, "I'm going to get you back," because that's how I used to be when I was younger. I don't have to do any of that.

It just makes things so much lighter, and you attract what your life needs. You see things for what they really are. That's why I studied a lot—because I wanted to know, why does this work?

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:11:30]

Yes. Well, let's maybe look into that. I mean, I feel like I could talk to you about compassion practices and what they do for us, and how they lead us to form more supportive relationships or let go with greater ease. Maybe we'll circle back to that.

But I wonder if you might tell us about the studying you've done. Because again, I hear you are quite the teacher, and I'm so excited to hear that you've gone really deeply into the *Lotus Sutra*. Are you able to explain and impart the wisdom of what might be perceived as somewhat dense or complicated or obscure? I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:12:14]

That's interesting that you would say dense and complicated, because at the beginning of my practice some people would say, oh, it's too difficult to understand. And the person who I am—question authority, I grew up in the question-authority era—I thought, oh really? A challenge. I need to read it then.

Quite honestly, I never really read the *Lotus Sutra* until COVID. But the other writings of Nichiren Daishonin—I would read them. I was fortunate to be around some really strong, pioneering Black women at the beginning of my practice. Some of them were narcotic cops, they had been around during the 60s and the 70s, during the civil rights movement. They brought that energy to practice.

I was always attracted to strong Black women. If you were kind of on the weak side, I was looking for the strong ones. And they were just so precise. We called it strict—and it was strict. Strict to the point where it was like a map. No BS. Go straight to the source. You want to know how it works? Go to the source.

And when you go to the source, when you read the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, I was told: don't read it like it's a novel, because it's not a novel. These are letters Nichiren is writing his followers. Get over the fact that it's 13th-century, 12th-century Japan. Read it with your life.

These letters were written in that time period, but those people went through the same things we did. They had problems with relationships, they had money problems, sometimes their husbands died and left them as single parents. All the same issues. And he would encourage every single one of them: really depend on the *Lotus Sutra*, because in it—it's so powerful—you are perfectly endowed with everything you need in your life. Just keep believing, keep practicing the law, uphold the law.

There was a chapter I read called the "Supernatural Powers" chapter in the *Lotus Sutra*. That opened me up. I felt like the sun had opened, the moon had opened. Knowing what I know about us as African Americans, coming from Africa and how powerful our ancestors were—the ones who are here now are the survivors of those who endured the Middle Passage—it showed me we were superhuman. We had superpowers.

So when I read this chapter, I thought, there it is. There's actual proof. This is why I feel like I have a supernatural power.

Just in those kinds of studies, I heard what the ladies were saying. That was one of the things I really enjoyed in the practice—that I had the opportunity to be a "leader," quote-unquote, and I got to encourage people in their practice.

One of Nichiren's goals was to make it accessible for everyone, so everyone could realize their unlimited potential. It wasn't about practicing and being morbid and sad and suffering. It was to release you from suffering. Practice from joy. Practice from appreciation. Practice from there. Because if you practice from "oh well," that's what you get. Exactly what you get.

There's a story—one of the Gosho. So if I go back and forth saying "writings" or "Gosho," it's the same thing. It's either a letter to Matsuno or a letter to Sairen-bo. Nichiren was encouraging this person who had questions about their faith because things weren't going the way they wanted.

Nichiren himself was being ostracized. He was exiled, they were trying to kill him—all kinds of craziness—because he was saying, look, *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* is the truth. All these other practices before will not have power. *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* and the *Lotus Sutra* are for now, in the latter day of the law.

They were like, no, we can't have you telling people they can be free and happy. We can't have that, we gotta kill you.

So he tells this person—Sairen-bo or Matsuno—"If you really practice the *Lotus Sutra*, these are the great things that can happen in your life." He lays them out, boom, boom, boom. But then he says, "If you don't believe you are worthy and can do these things for yourself, nothing I can do. Don't come back to me and say it doesn't work. You didn't hold up your part."

When I started practicing, that was one of the things they said at the intro meeting that made my ears perk up: "You are responsible for your happiness. You're responsible because every action has a reaction. Cause and effect. You're responsible."

At that time, I had a very complaining nature. You couldn't ask me a question without me going, "Oh, no..." I was just Debbie Downer.

One leader said to me, "Nothing's happening for you? Look at how you present yourself. Exactly how you are is exactly what's happening in your life."

I thought, oh, what?

The analogy they gave me was: imagine your life is a bucket, a bucket of fortune. The water in the bucket is your fortune. Every time you complain, a hole is punctured in that bucket and your fortune leaks out. That was the best visualization I've ever been given.

From that point on, I started catching myself when I began to complain, and I would stop. Later I learned from other books—Stephen Covey, Tony Robbins, those kinds of people—that it takes 21 days to break a habit. I really put that to the test.

Even in today's world, I catch myself if I start to go there. Most times I don't, because I feel the energy in my body. Not like I'm always "up, up, up"—there are times when I'm not—but I ask myself different questions, like, what is this from? What is this for?

When I'm chanting, I ask: what am I supposed to be learning? I ask myself that, because your self gives yourself the answers. What am I supposed to be learning from this right now?

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:20:30]

Oh, that's so powerful. I hear the level of power and agency you are claiming for yourself, and it does remind me of Tina Turner, quite frankly. And these strong Black women you're talking about—you have the capacity to rewire. Much has been given to you, but it's up to you in how you meet it. You can train yourself.

So often I think of Buddhism—the different lineages, the different turnings of the wheel—as training. Training how we train our minds to work with habitual patterns.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:21:06]

Yes.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:21:07]

And you're right, it is tremendously freeing to see them and to know that we all have the capacity to pause and respond differently.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:21:19]

Yes.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:21:20]

One of my dear friends, who I also consider a teacher and mentor, said to me once—when I was spiralling, confused, not sure what was happening, in a dynamic that felt really heavy—they just said: *be non-reactive*.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:21:40]

Mmm.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:21:41]

I heard that the way you heard the leaky bucket: be non-reactive.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:21:46]

Wow.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:21:48]

That is the most powerful teaching I have deeply absorbed. Two words.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:21:54]

Mmm. What?

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:21:55]

To look at whatever it is, and to cultivate that capacity to pause and respond.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:22:02]

Mmm.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:22:03]

Oftentimes the practice of compassion—starting with myself, but also with others who are being harmed, and who are also harming.

Yes, I really hear that. And I understand it within my own lineage—different teachings, but deeply the same message.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:22:24]

Yeah. And I'm so grateful for COVID, in a way, because that's when my practice took on another step.

Even before COVID, though, I was doing Tony Robbins, Stephen Covey, all these different kinds of people—because they all had the same common message. One of the things I realized about myself was I had negative self-talk. I didn't know anything else.

So even though I was reading the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Gosho*, I still didn't have the language for myself. Through chanting, I started meeting people who turned me on to different books and seminars.

I always loved Tony Robbins—something about his energy always turned me on. And then he would have Joseph McClendon, I think his name was, or Dennis Kimbro—one of those cats. They started bringing in Napoleon Hill's books, but from a Black point of view. Right up my alley.

I needed the language. I needed to replace the negative self-talk I was repeating. And it was through those books that I started hearing the language, seeing the language, learning how to write it out for myself. Before then, I just didn't have that.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:24:26]

Thank you.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:24:27]

And I attribute my practice to opening me up to other possibilities of what I needed. And that was what, through chanting or in my practice, chanting, it brings exactly what you need. I said I wanted to get over my anger. So I started — different books started coming to me to read, different people who were on that same mindset. Mindset training, all kinds of things of that nature. And I then, in turn, used that within my Buddhist practice because that's what I was seeing. Some of the people who I'm helping — quote unquote helping them with their practice — they also don't have the words. So I'm giving them different words or I'm saying these words. I'm using the *Gosho*, but I'm also using some other words, so they too can start different things in their own lives. Yes.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:25:33]

Well, you may know — and I'll just say this for our audience — I learned Dharma in a particular lineage called Insight, but I learned practices actually first through the lineage of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Plum Village, for about a year. Yes. But I settled into this lineage I'm in now, which is called Insight, largely because I was able to work with Black Dharma teachers.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:26:04]

Rrrrrrrr.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:26:06]

It was very important for me, and still is. And now my work is to bring Black voices to the center of Buddhism and illuminate, to shine a spotlight on these very powerful voices for all the reasons you're talking about. Yep. Yeah. And these joyful practices or working skillfully with our offering, finding language and ways to articulate ourselves. I wonder, because you're part of this community called Buddhists of African Descent, is there a way of being together that's especially meaningful for you? Because it's a community that privileges Africanist images and brings together African-American traditions within Nichiren Buddhism. I wonder for you personally, what is compelling or appealing?

Mahazi Roundtree [00:26:58]

All of that, and all of that, and all. You know, one of the reasons why I really enjoyed what I was doing before I joined B.A.D. was because of the freedom. I really believe that *Nam-myoho-enge-kyo* for Black people would finally free us from the mental slavery that had endured all our lives. And once we get that freedom, then we can start healing from post-traumatic slave syndrome, all those different things. Quite honestly, I wasn't seeing

that with the organization I was practicing with. Individually, as individual practitioners who were Black, we would talk amongst ourselves about this thing, but it wasn't all the time.

And during — it was during COVID, it was right after George Floyd was assassinated — a young group of Black practitioners decided upon themselves that they were going to start studying the major writings, the Gosho, because they were going on marches, they were protesting. I would say 98 per cent of the time someone would always do a Christian-type prayer or an Islamic-type prayer, and they felt that they weren't prepared to do what they wanted to do as Buddhists. So they figured, well, we need to study more because people are going to ask us questions. So that's what they did.

And somehow someone called me and said, hey, we're doing this. I'm like, oh sure, I'll do that with y'all. Because if you're studying the truth and the Law, you can't go wrong. Because the Law is the Law. That's why we have it. That's what we have.

So also during COVID, because of Zoom, I was able to communicate with people in different countries who I knew — Black people in different countries, in the islands, contact with people in Africa who were practicing. And we were just like, what's going on in your country? What's going on in your countries? We wanted to know. This is the way that we as Black people come back together as whole. Because we didn't see it happening. We didn't really see it happening, that trying to really get us together, because they don't — and I want to say they didn't understand, but for lack of a better explanation, they're not really understanding the 400 years that we worked together, how that really affected us. So we have to get to know each other in these different countries again.

So when the opportunity came up, a friend of mine who I used to practice with, who unfortunately has passed away, Pat Nelson, sent me an email. It's like, hey, would you be interested in practicing with some Black folks who are, you know, down, and they're all about the culture? And we also study cultural stuff. And she listed a few things and I was like, when? Where? Tell me when. And I was thinking, oh, this is perfect. It's not only studying, but then they're bringing in different books from Black folks that had nothing to do with Buddhism, but it's about our culture. And I'm like, oh yeah. Oh yeah. Yes. Yes and yes.

That's when I said, you know what? Bye. I think it's time for me to become an independent practitioner because there's so much out there. Like, I didn't know because of COVID there was — and you might have been on this broadcast — there was a Black and Buddhist symposium that went off. Yes. I didn't know there were other Black Buddhists. Oh yeah. It didn't matter the lineage. It was just the same, basically the same kind of thought processes. No one was saying, oh, my Buddhism is better. Because I had told a few people, I was like, oh no, we can't. Oh, I'm like, no, no. It's not about proselytizing. It's about we as Black Buddhists. How are we gonna bring peace to this world? How do we want to bring peace to ourselves? How are we going to emancipate ourselves? That's what this is about. And it was mind-opening.

And so then I was like, well, I need to start getting *Tricycle* and *Lion's Roar*, and just finding out about all these different types of Buddhism that I did not even know. I only knew Nichiren Buddhism. I didn't know that. And so it really opened up my lens. Black and Buddhist was amazing. And anything they did, or anybody who was part of that did, I'm on their websites looking at it. And I was like, there is a whole big plethora of stuff out here, but no one's talking about Nichiren Buddhism. I said, wow, you know, this is why we have to really study, so we can bring that to the table. So we can bring it to the table — not like you got to do what we say, but just so we have an understanding. Because everywhere

else, people come out of the Plum Village, they know what their stuff is about. And I dig that. I dig what they're talking about. And it's like, yeah.

And I think as Black practitioners, we stand to gain more by just having an understanding of the options. And I really believe there are a lot of Black people who are looking for Buddhism, regardless of what sect. But I really believe they're looking for it, because they feel it. They feel it in our lives. They feel something very centered in us, that walk very centered. And our steps are ordered, you know, and just the way we communicate, you know. I mean, some of the books that we have studied, I mean, that's how I heard about you. It's like, wow, this book is heavy. What? National, what? Radical, what? Anything radical, I'm like, yes. With that, you know. So yeah.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:33:35]

That's great to hear. I wonder if there's anything else that comes to you as we draw to our conclusion that you feel you really want to impart to a would-be person who has maybe heard of Buddhism, likely comes out of the church, but doesn't really know what Buddhism is about. Like at this point, having done so much study, having embraced rituals that are deeply meaningful, having co-created rituals that are deeply meaningful — if there's something you would say to that curious person, very succinct. Like, oh, like this, this is what it's about.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:34:21]

I would say truly, if you really want freedom, if you want freedom in your life, try out Buddhism. And I would also say you don't have to give up your belief in God or Christianity, because that's not what it's about. You can add it. It'll just make you a fuller — more complete is not a good word, I hate that word — but complete. But it'll just give you such a fullness. It will round you all out. Because that's what I'm finding in reading the Lotus Sutra. I do know the Christian stories. I do know parts of the Bible. I'm like, oh wait a minute. That's the same as, holy what? What? It's the same. So we all get there. They may have the Bible, we have the Lotus Sutra, the Islam people, they have their book, but we're all saying the same thing. We want to relieve suffering and we want peace in this world. We're all getting there a different way. But in Buddhism, it really talks about aligning everything.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:35:35]

Thank you.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:35:35]

Aligning everything yourself. And you are in 100 per cent control of everything in your life because you are perfectly endowed in everything that you do. Everything.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:35:55]

I hear that Buddha-nature message loud and clear, and it comes through, Mahazi, in your exuberance, and your life, and your story, and in your passion to bring this to other people. Deep bows to you.

Mahazi Roundtree [00:36:05]

Back at you.