UBNBV EP 7 Jacci Thompson.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 [00:00:37] Welcome to the podcast series *Uplifting Black Nichiren Buddhist Voices.* In today's episode, we are exploring the role of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the title of the Lotus Sutra, which is also called the Daimoku.

Nam means devotion, or offering our life to the Lotus Sutra. This was known as the final sutra written by Shakyamuni Buddha. This taught that the Lotus Sutra incorporates the tenets of all of the Buddha's prior teachings.

Myoho means mystic law, the energy that pulsates throughout all life. There are three properties to *myo*: to open, to unlock infinite possibilities; to be fully endowed, to recognize our lives encompass unlimited capacity; and to revive, to liberate people from suffering, to enable us to reveal our innate Buddhahood.

Renge means lotus flower. It is the only flower in nature that simultaneously produces flowers and seeds. It is a symbol for cause and effect. Buddhists often say that it is significant that lotus flowers only bloom in muddy water. This symbolizes that the muck we experience every day is actually the fuel needed for our Buddhahood to blossom.

And *kyo* means sutra or teaching. It is the fundamental law permeating life and the universe. Another meaning of *kyo* is the vibration or sound that this teaching makes as it pulsates through life.

This explanation of the Daimoku was given to me by Jacci Thompson Dodd, my guest today. She's a pioneer in creating several landmark curricula for women healing from life-altering illness and trauma. Her nationally recognized program, *Thrivership for Breast Cancer Survivors,* has been offered by cancer centers and organizations across the country.

Jacci's latest project, *Realign,* takes self-care to the next level. She offers powerful tools to help women curate life-affirming experiences and adopt practices for building a new foundation to balance their minds, bodies, and spirits. She has been a practitioner of Nichiren Buddhism for more than 50 years.

Jacci, welcome to our podcast series on Black Nichiren Buddhists. I'm so, so pleased to have you here today and to be in conversation with you about your journey and your practice. We have had some amazing people join us for this limited series and they've each brought a very distinctive perspective. And I'm so eager for yours, in large part because you are influenced from so many different directions.

First, I want to ask—this is especially in light of your statement, "Being Black and Buddhist is wonderful"—what brought you to the practice of Buddhism?

Jacci Thompson [00:04:32] Well, thanks for having me, first of all. My undergraduate college roommate first became interested in it, and she told me about it. And when I went back to Boston, where I was going to graduate school, just on her word, I checked it out.

I was immediately struck by the philosophical underpinnings of Nichiren Buddhism, and it just seemed cool. I liked the rhythm of it. I liked the sound of it. So I just kind of instantly decided to give it a try.

And that was 50 years ago.

Rima Vesely-Flad: Five-zero. That's amazing.

Jacci Thompson-Dodd: Yeah. I joined in 1975.

Being Black and being Buddhist, to answer your question, I was actually in Boston getting a degree in African-American studies as part of my social work degree program. So academically, the study of our people, our culture, our literature has always been a centerpiece of my upbringing. How I was raised is also very Black and a connection with my ancestors, knowing my story. All of that was a centerpiece and still is.

So I never understood or could connect with the notion that I would have to set aside my Blackness to be Buddhist. I was kind of like, no, that's not going to fly.

Fortunately, I was mentored by some incredible women over these years, many of them Japanese women, who grounded me in the writings, the Lotus Sutra—which is the founding sutra of Nichiren Buddhism—and also the writings of Nichiren, like the Gosho.

From the beginning, I kind of had a feisty, independent attitude. It's like, no, I'm Black, going to be Black, proud to be Black. So if I'm going to be Buddhist, that's got to be a part of it.

What's really beautiful—there are two things that sustain my practice. In the Lotus Sutra, it talks about the fact that solitary practitioners are embraced. So you don't have to be a part of an organization or a sangha, or whatever you call it. Those of us who are independently minded and come to this as solo practitioners are enfranchised in practice, which was very important to me.

Also, in the writings of Nichiren, the veneration of ancestors is very, very important. That was exciting to me because that's how I was already living my life.

What's so beautiful about one of these Gosho about the ancestors is it talked about our practice giving benefit to those seven generations before us and seven generations into the future.

What has been purposeful about my practice with regard to that is that with the birth of my grandson, I now have been able to research and be in connection with the seventh generation. I've been a bridge between my great-great-great-grandparents up until my grandson. And now my grandson has that under his feet. That's moving forward. And maybe his great-great-great-grandchildren will also benefit by this bridge that we're connecting.

So that's a centerpiece of my practice. It's given me purpose and a sense of flow.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:09:21] It checks off all the boxes for me. Yes. That's so beautiful.

I'm wondering, in the ways in which you practice, if you distinctly bring in personal ancestors in addition to the ancestors within the broader Nichiren tradition, and also any

kind of African imagery or imagery that is distinctive to African-American culture. Has that been an important part of your practice?

Jacci Thompson [00:09:56] Yes, definitely. My altar, for example—the center of my altar has the Gohonzon, which is an object of worship, set with fresh flowers and other things. But to the side, I have pictures of my ancestors. All the way back as far as I have pictures—I have a picture of my great-great-great-grandparents right there.

And I pour libation daily, in concert and communication with them. I made pilgrimage to their gravesites last summer. I actually had the benefit of not only visiting my grandparents' gravesites, but also both sets of their parents are buried there.

To wash their headstones, to offer cowrie shells and other talismans that I created with African beads—I placed those with flowers on their gravesites.

So it's not just the pantheon of African deities like Yemanjá and others, or those in the Buddhist tradition.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:11:23] Yes. It's amazing that you not only identify the space within the rituals of this practice you have lived into, but you are also expanding it in these really distinctive and deeply personal ways. I'm especially thinking of the pouring of libations.

There's an expansion of what you consider your Buddhist practice. Within the interviews I've done for the *Black Buddhists* book and other conversations, Black Buddhists are evolving this traditional Buddhism in this amazing way. And it's congruent—it comes together. It's not an either/or, it's kind of evolving, if you will, kind of breathing in, like the chest expands—an expansion of the tradition. It's quite amazing.

I'm wondering if the chanting in particular speaks to you in a way that brings to life maybe other areas of your life. And I'll tell you where this question comes from. I interviewed Ralph Craig III, who wrote a biography on Tina Turner.

I had actually read this book. I endorsed this book. I've been on a panel about this book. But it wasn't until I interviewed him for this podcast series that I drew this explicit connection between Tina Turner and her music, and what chanting in the Nichiren tradition meant to her.

And I wonder if you hear some of that in your own practice.

Jacci Thompson [00:13:11] Well, understanding—what is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo? It is that primordial creative energy and vibration that's the underpinning of everything in the universe. So it is everywhere—that rhythm, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo—it is everywhere.

Even the Gosho talks about the fact that there's no separation between anything, whether it's matters of government or how nature works or how our body functions. We are all manifestations of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. So it's everywhere.

To be able to connect it with anything and everything that I do in my daily life—that's the purpose of practice. To bring yourself in alignment with that Nam-myoho-renge-kyo inside your life and inside the life of everything around you.

It creates kind of like—you've heard of a slipstream?

Do you know what a slipstream is?

Rima Vesely-Flad I don't know that term, no.

Jacci Thompson In nature, you see birds flying in the sky in a flock. It's effortless. They catch the wind and know how to move. Same with fish in the sea—you see schools of fish, and effortlessly they can follow the tide. That's because they are connected to the rhythm of where they live.

Well, we as human beings have that same capability. If we connect with that Nam-myoho-renge-kyo within our lives and with whatever we encounter, then we're able to kind of be in the song, live in its own.

It doesn't mean everything is perfect—it means we're so grounded in the law, in the vibration, in the rhythm, that we are able to navigate in a way that is more enlightened, more informed, more productive.

That's the beautiful outcome. In our troubled times, it doesn't matter what this government is doing or all the craziness. This is a supply chain—Nam-myoho-renge-kyo—that's unassailable, inexhaustible.

As long as we continue to be connected and centered in that, then whatever we encounter, we're able to maneuver in a way that is towards our benefit.

So even in recreational activities—you know, I happen to really love swimming and swimming in the sea. I lived in the Caribbean for five years. Even at the swimming pool, before I get in, I make a quiet offering. I may even offer flowers.

Before I immerse myself in the water, that water takes on something even more profound. Because the water within my body, the water that surrounds me—we are in sync.

It is everywhere. It is not just something I practice in front of my altar. It is the lifestyle that I live.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:17:10]
A way of being in the world—absolutely, absolutely. That makes so much sense to me. I'm thinking of how your words echo James Baldwin. In *The Fire Next Time* he talks about encountering suffering. He says that people who cannot suffer can never grow up, while those who learn how to suffer skillfully do. And then he explains that this encounter with hardship, with whatever comes at us, brings about a kind of unshakable authority. That is my favorite part of the book—really, of everything Baldwin has written. It's what I come back to again and again.

And that's what I hear you saying about chanting—that this way of being, this offering, this encounter allows you to turn toward what is, whether it feels good or whether it brings deep crisis, and remain grounded because of that practice. And the other thing I hear you saying is that the daily practice—whether it's in front of your altar or in front of the ocean or the swimming pool—is a kind of refuge. You can return to it, not just in moments of crisis, but as a steady foundation you've cultivated for five decades.

Jacci Thompson [00:18:56]
I think what's important to talk about in sustaining an independent practice is that I'm not just making this stuff up. I'm not cherry-picking pieces and creating my own Buddhism. Everything about my practice is grounded in the writings of Nichiren and in the *Lotus*

Sutra. Nichiren Daishonin wrote about everything—whether it was government, how our bodies function, how to deal with grief. The *Gosho*—his letters and treatises—cover so much, and many of them are written in a question-and-answer format. So it's not about blind belief. We're always seeking. If I don't understand something, I go to the *Gosho*, because human nature has not changed much since the 13th century. It's always fresh, because human behavior is pretty predictable.

What he wrote then is still alive for us now. And for me, study is one of the most exciting parts of practice right now. I've been connecting with other Buddhists of African descent, and that community of independent practitioners is centered on study. The *Gosho* teaches that without both practice (chanting) and study, there is no Buddhism. So study always has to be central.

Through that, I even found your book. We studied it together. We also study contemporary Nichiren scholars who expand our understanding of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*—including ways it connects with science, like quantum physics. And we also explore African spirituality, seeing how Buddhism and our ancestral roots inform each other. Buddhism is a portal that opens the door to ancestral knowledge, our knowledge of nature, of plants, of the universe, of science.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:22:11]
That's such an amazing way of thinking about it, because we so often relegate Buddhism to "religion" or even "philosophy." But I hear you saying that in addition to practice resulting in a deeply grounded way of being, there's also inquiry at the center—particularly in Nichiren Buddhism. And that inquiry opens up these domains of questioning and discovery, where answers appear that might not be visible otherwise.

That makes you very alive, and you are already a very well-educated person, so I can imagine how that speaks to you as a Buddhist. I hear you pointing to a model that says: don't just ask the experts—practice and study for yourself. And the Q&A structure of the *Gosho* really models that balance: yes, we want to consult the wisdom of those who came before, but we also need to discover truth in our own lived experience. For you, it all aligns beautifully.

Jacci Thompson [00:23:31]
The first *Gosho* I ever read—and the one I've returned to for 50 years—is *On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime*. It says that if you seek *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, or Buddhahood, outside yourself, you are not truly practicing Buddhism. *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*—that wisdom, that energy—is within your own body. You are the embodiment of the Law.

So we always have to look inside and connect—linking the micro and the macro. We connect ourselves with the writings, with the energy of the universe, with the life force within us. That cycle of inquiry is what keeps this Buddhism alive, fresh, and relevant across decades and into the future.

I have no doubt that being Black and being Buddhist will only grow more relevant and celebrated. It will be central to how society remakes itself to become more humane. Buddhists of African descent—especially the incredible women I've met, like Tembe and Hazy—are extraordinary scholars, teachers, and companions on this journey. I'm so glad you're including us.

Rima Vesely-Flad [00:25:31]
I am so grateful, Jacci. I really could hear and feel your passion and how fully this makes sense for you across so many domains. It's truly inspirational. You are someone who has practiced longer than almost anyone I've encountered in my research. In identifying long-term practitioners and teachers, you are among the longest-practicing. That's profound. I feel honored.

Jacci Thompson [00:26:12]
This practice has been such a meaningful part of my life. It's been a wonderful opportunity to celebrate what I love. Thank you for including me, and thank you for doing this series.

Rima Vesely-Flad Deep bows.

Jacci Thompson Deep bows.