

Myokei Caine-Barrett, Shonin
Living the Lotus Sutra
Week Four: "The Daimoku as a Teaching of Equality"
February 22, 2020



I'm Myokei Caine-Barrett, Shonin. This is our final talk on living the *Lotus Sutra*. Today, we'll talk about faith and chanting the *Lotus Sutra*.

When we do our daily service, there's a particular phrase that shows up in the verses for opening the sutra. It says, "Honor be to the sutra of the lotus flower of the wonderful dharma, the teaching of equality, the great wisdom, the one vehicle." This speaks to the great significance of the *Lotus Sutra*. And it's significant in today's world—something I think that we cannot ignore—what does it mean when we say, "the teaching of equality"? What practical application does it have in our lives and the lives of others?

I often think of the practice of chanting the *odaimoku* as a teaching of equality, because anyone can do it. It does not matter where you come from, whether you are educated, whether you are male or female, old or young, hearing or non-hearing. Even if all you can feel is the rhythm of the chanting, there's still something happening, there's still an access of faith. Some people don't like to talk about faith. So, we can say that from the beginning, when one starts to practice chanting *Odaimoku*, chanting the *Lotus Sutra*, that one only has a level of expectation that something might happen. And it can be handled in much the same way as one would do a scientific experiment: to chant, particularly for five minutes, and then see what happens. And do it maybe for 30 or 100 days to see if anything changes.

What we do know is that the impact it has on a life can be deeply profound and, again, accessible to anyone and, possibly, to every living being. One thing I can share is that the animals in my life truly love chanting the *odaimoku*. And, in fact, one of my dogs starts to howl every time we start chanting on a late night. And it's a really ghost-like howl, but he does it every single time. And there have been other animals that come in and sit as we chant. And even small children, all kinds of beings, tend to congregate when chanting is happening. And I think it's because it's a vibration, it's a song, it's an energy that reaches out.

And, as a teaching of equality, when the Buddha said in the *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 5, The Simile of Herbs, "I see all living beings equally. I have no partiality for them. There's not this one or that one, to me. I transcend love and hatred. I am attached to nothing. I am hindered by nothing. I always expound the Dharma to all living beings equally." Chanting the *odaimoku* is expounding the dharma to all living beings. We may never know the results of people hearing it for the first

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time or even if they continue to chant for a long time. What is radical about the practice is that you can share it with everyone, no matter what. And it does, indeed, plant a seed in their lives, because, upon hearing it, something takes root.

From personal experience, I can tell you the numbers of individuals I've encountered over the years who have come back to chanting the odaimoku, because they heard it once many years ago. Or maybe their girlfriend or boyfriend's parent chanted and somehow they were hooked onto the sound of the Odaimoku. But it's not simply that. Because of doing an experiment in your own life and seeing what happens as you chant-- and as I said previously, when you chant, it's like a snake in a tube whose life automatically straightens up. The same happens to us. Chanting the odaimoku as a teaching of equality plants in our lives the essence of the prayer that says, "Sentient beings are innumerable. I vow to save them all." And this is something that we grow up with, as practitioners, that sometimes we may say by rote. But, as we become deeper and more heavily engaged in our practice of chanting, the one thing that begins to happen is that the relationship that we have with ourselves deepens and strengthens, and we are more prone to look deep within to find out what's happening.

Many times, I have heard from members that they keep having the same experience over and over again, the same loss. And what we know from our practice is that it is our life speaking to us. And, often, it can be said that we're not listening; that when your life is talking to you, at first, it may come as an itch; then it may come as a bite; and, eventually, when you're not listening still, it might come at you like a two-by-four up against the side of your head. And then, finally, you can say, "Oh, I'm listening. Okay, what's going on?" But all of us can then begin to see the efficacy of chanting simply to open our lives, simply to open our minds, simply to put us in touch with the Buddha's teachings in a way that opens up the entire world, that makes us more apt to consider others when we walk out the door, then think the world is only about us.

We have an expression called "Changing poison into medicine," and this is something that was given to us by Nichiren Shonin, because he took every incident in his own life and used it as a vehicle to move his life forward. We can do the same. We don't have to be knocked down by things that happen in our lives. A question we can ask when something happens that may be negative is "What is the good here? What can I learn here? What truth can be found here?" And, if we do that, if we constantly question, then we are more likely able to see ourselves in others, to

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find resonance with other people in terms of dealing with their issues, and develop the heart that says, "I see you. I'm with you. I am you." That's the greatest thing about Buddhist practice, I believe, is our ability to radically engage each other, because that's important. We tend not to do that on a normal basis. But if I'm considering that I'm spreading the Dharma, it demands that I consider putting out radical hospitality, that I envision that my behavior is so important to another being, because I could change the trajectory of their entire day. So, being a Buddhist, chanting the Odaimoku demands that I always put my best foot forward, that I always act in terms of my faith, that I act as the Buddha, that I say I see all beings equally. I don't see this one or that one. And that's some of the most difficult kinds of practices that we have to do today, especially in the climate that we're living in right now. And I would say Nichiren Shonin's practice of chanting the Odaimoku is perfectly suited for this day and time. It is simple, it requires nothing more than our effort to engage the chanting of the Odaimoku, to engage the *Lotus Sutra*. Because the teachings do come to us somehow through chanting, because chanting polishes the mirror of our lives so that all the cloudiness we may encounter about who we are, how we are, where we are in our lives is cleared up. It's another form of meditation. And sometimes it may be easier than trying to sit silently, but all forms of meditation are quite excellent for advancing your life. It's just finding the one that fits the way you are. And I submit to you that trying this form of chanting Odaimoku can be very helpful, can open up your world, can open up your life.

And the teachings that Nichiren Shonin gave to us in terms of how to live, in terms of how to think, so that we take responsibility for everything that happens to us. I'm often fond of saying that Buddhism is the teaching for grown-ups. It demands that we look at our lives, we look at ourselves, and take responsibility. And that simple act of changing how we view ourselves can be astounding. It can open up everything. If I take responsibility for my life, then I don't have to blame anyone. I don't have to target anyone. Because I know that the realization of happiness and joy in my life is strictly and entirely up to me.

I've had many encounters in my life that have proven to me the value of chanting the Odaimoku. And I can sincerely say to you in the words of Nichiren Shonin that if you chant the Odaimoku, the power of the Buddha, the practice will be with you, like a lantern in the dark, like a demon armed with an iron staff, that you will be protected, you will be uplifted, and you will grow and become a Buddha in your own life. And if you wonder about the demon with an iron staff,

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remember through fairy tales and all kinds of mythology that demons cannot handle iron. So, a demon armed with an iron staff is extremely powerful. And that's who will be there with you when you need it, when you can call on the power of the Odaimoku, the *Lotus Sutra*, and your faith in it to guide you and strengthen your life for the journey ahead while living every day to its fullest, chanting, "Namu-myoho-renge-kyo."

Thank you very much. I hope you've gained some insight into the power of the Odaimoku in your own life and are willing to perhaps take a chance and try it. Because, as I've said, the Odaimoku can open up the world. And the character "Myo" means to be reborn, to open your life, your heart, your circumstances through the power of the Buddha's teachings in the *Lotus Sutra*.