

Myokei Caine-Barrett, Shonin

*Living the Lotus Sutra*

Week Three: "The Transformative Power of Chanting "Namu Myoho Renge Kyo""

February 15, 2020



I'm Myokei Caine-Barrett continuing our conversation on living the *Lotus Sutra*. Today's topic is the practice of chanting. Nichiren Shonin believed the odaimoku is where the soul of Shakyamuni Buddha was to be found. The *odaimoku* means "respectful" or "sacred title."

Nichiren Shonin believed that when we chant the Odaimoku, we are chanting the entire *Lotus Sutra*, even though we may not believe it or perceive that we are doing so. The *Odaimoku* consists of seven Chinese characters. The first "Namu," which means "devotion" or "respect for." It can be said that we are promising then to hold on to the Odaimoku for dear life. "Myoho": "myo" means "wonderful," "ho" means "dharma." So, we have "wonderful dharma." This is the truth of the world in which we live. For example, how the earth rotates around the sun or how gravity operates. These are truths that we don't even have to think about in the same way the Odaimoku is a wonderful law. "Renge" means lotus flower. And the lotus flower is the only plant in botany that produces the flower and seed at the same time. That tends to indicate the simultaneity of cause and effect, but also the fact that there's no difference between cause or effect. And it also is indicative of a plant growing in a muddy swamp and arising out of that swamp clean. It's not covered with mud when it comes out of the swamp. "Kyo" means sutra. So, what we then have is "Devotion to" or "Respect for the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma."

Each time we chant "Namu myoho rengo kyo" it's like attaining a new life, because each time we chant we are beginning again. Some have suggested "myo" also means "resuscitation" or "being brought back to life" or being re-born. "Myo" also means to open. So, it means, reborn or to open one's circumstances, to open one's life. Chanting the odaimoku is also a duty, a filial duty. It has been said that when one practices, we are impacting generations, seven generations back and seven generations into the future. So, that everything that we do based on chanting the odaimoku affects generations of our families.

It's also known as "Bosatsu-gyo" or "Bodhisattva practice." When we chant, we're not simply chanting for ourselves, we are also chanting for others. And this is a very simple way to practice the bodhisattva way. Chanting the odaimoku is also a practice to make amends for past actions. So, by chanting about our past actions, we can also eliminate their effect in our lives so that we're cleaning up whatever we did previously.

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Chanting the Odaimoku also fuels the growth and development of our buddhanature. If we examine the ten realms of existence, we know that each of us has a life condition based from Hell all the way to buddhahood, based on these six realms and the four heavenly abodes. And buddhahood is the top. Through chanting we're able to elevate the condition of Buddha in our lives, so that it becomes a foundation. So, that even if we are in the world of anger, for example, that we have the ability, through our practice, to access Buddha rather than anger and even to turn the anger from something negative into something that can be used for a positive result.

Chanting the Odaimoku repetitively also allows the true meaning of Odaimoku to develop in our lives. We develop the compassion and wisdom of the Buddha. When we look at chanting, there are several ways to look at it.

We can look at chanting as a ritual. And when one first begins to practice we're encouraged to establish a space, to set up an altar, which can include an object of focus or veneration, such as a statue of the Buddha, a picture of the Buddha, a stupa of the Odaimoku, an ofuda or talisman—anything to get you started so that you're in the habit of chanting in a particular place that becomes a sacred center in your home. It can include offerings of flowers, water, incense, and candles.

The preparation of beginning to practice is also quite important because it establishes the mindset, it puts you in a place that you need to be so that you can focus on the act of practicing the Odaimoku, of chanting the odiamoku. It's not something to be taken lightly. And ritual affords us the space and opportunity to look at our practice as a sacred event, a holy event, so that we're thinking about, acting upon, putting our lives in tune with the Buddha. A beginner's practice can consist simply of chanting the odaimoku for five or ten minutes or even more. This is known as "Shodaigyo." "Shodai" is chanting and "gyo" practice. It can be done twice a day, so that we're establishing the ritual and a new habit in our lives.

Chanting as a ritual is also a choreographed progression of entering into oneness and entering the path of awakening through the chanting of the Odaimoku. Now, chanting can also be considered meditation, as it occurs when one's mind is fully engaged with the sound and rhythm of chanting. And one might ask, "How could you meditate when you're talking?" And "What happens when

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you're chanting these words and focused on your breathing, the rhythm of chanting the Odaimoku, the pace, the sound?" All of it takes you away from your mind. And one can say that we master our minds this way rather than letting our minds be our master, because it is completely focused on the proper chanting of the Odaimoku.

Chanting is also a learning process, bodily, and mentally, as it establishes the connections to the three treasures: the buddha, the dharma, the sangha. Chanting is also an offering to the Buddha. In essence, it's like a one-on-one conversation with the Buddha. And it's not that you're begging the Buddha. It can be that you're just pouring out your heart. And what's really interesting I think is that when one is chanting, the emotions that arise are always perfect. One could be chanting out of anger. I know I've done that myself many times. It's been a way to calm my anger and provide distance between the reason for my anger and my response to it, so that I'm able to see it more clearly. And then eliminate the anger.

And there are times that I think all of us have the need for the Buddha as a parent, the Buddha as a teacher, or the Buddha as a sovereign, the one who governs how we behave in the world. So, we can access that through the simple act of chanting the odaimoku.

Chanting also creates a deep interaction with all of the teachings found in the *Lotus Sutra* as we become increasingly familiar with it. Now, this is one thing I think that often seems difficult to understand or even access, that we could chant words that have no meaning in our minds or in our lives, but somehow gain deep understanding of fundamental concepts in Buddhism without even realizing that that's happening. Chanting the odaimoku brings forth the wisdom in one's life.

Chanting is also a fundamental element of sangha-building as it allows each participant to connect with others in a way that requires unity and harmony as we get together and try to chant with one voice. It's not an easy thing to do, to chant with one voice, to also chant in harmony, to not be annoyed by somebody's tone next to you, or to not be bothered by a rhythm that doesn't quite fit with yours and continuous chanting together, which is one of the practices that we do, chanting the Odaimoku together, is very important to creating harmony. And unity seems to come out of that as a result.

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Now, chanting Odaimoku as a practice may seem monotonous, so we can also add in, as you go along, chanting of the entire *Lotus Sutra* itself, be we do have a Romanized version of the *Lotus Sutra*, which allows us to enter into full ritual and ceremony in such a way that we are celebrating the life of the Buddha, celebrating the *Lotus Sutra*, and also celebrating and transferring merit to those around us. A really beautiful way to transfer merit is during our prayers, as we conclude our ceremonies, and conduct a mettā prayer at the end of it.

Generally speaking, as one continues to develop as a practitioner, we chant Chapters 2, 16, and 21, or fairly significant portions of those chapters on a daily basis, twice a day. We may also chant chapters of the *Lotus Sutra* every day, entire chapters, or portions of those chapters. The *Lotus Sutra* has been divided into 31 days so that we can chant a portion, a significant portion every single day, if that's what we choose to do. And that is often done at the head temple in Japan and in various temples around the world, and that might be morning service. Or evening service would be a more abbreviated service. But the point is to connect with the *Lotus Sutra*, either through chanting the Odaimoku or chanting the sutra itself. And that's an amazing practice as well to chant the sutra itself. On retreat, we can indeed chant the entire thing in about seven days and that's pretty awesome to do. Every single practitioner of the *Lotus Sutra* is free to conduct service in their homes, any way they'd like. In temple, however, we do have a standard practice of chanting portions of the *Lotus Sutra* interspersed with readings of Nichiren Shonin and our prayers for transferring merit and for peace and for our ancestors. This type of practice is quite liberating as it allows one to choose the path that works best for him or her or they.

And simply chanting the Odaimoku every day is something that can be done without ritual, it can be done wholly inside yourself whenever you need to, if you are at work, if you're on the bus, if you're in a crowd. It is a fundamental lifeline to the Buddha's teachings and also to a sense of well-being.

This week's topic on chanting the Odaimoku and practicing the *Lotus Sutra* can be summed up as the fact that chanting is an act of ritual, it's an act of meditation, it's also an act of sangha-building. But there's so much more to it as it impacts every aspect of one's life and creates a lifeline to the Buddha's wisdom and compassion.