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Religion is Deeper Than Culture: On Being An African–American Buddhist

By M. LaVora Perry

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Perry

The following commentary ran in the Religion Section of the Cleveland–based Plain Dealer, Ohio's largest Newspaper, Saturday, August 19, 2000.

"Your father didn't teach you right, THAT'S your problem," I am told.

It's late January, 1999. I sit in a small, maternity ward meeting room at Hillcrest hospital in Mayfield Heights, a suburb of Cleveland. I nurse my baby girl, while sharing childbirth stories with two other post partum moms. The three of us are African American. Our talk turns to religion. I say I'm Buddhist. Next thing I know, my Baptist–preacher father is being called a bad parent. He isn't even around to defend himself.

Almost 13 years ago I emerged from a life of hellish suffering. I had been in and out of battles with eating disorders, suicidal depression and substance abuse, and I had dropped out of college. I found unshakable happiness within myself by embracing Nichiren Buddhism as a member of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI–USA).

If I had talked to that mother on the maternity ward a bit longer, maybe she would have blasted me for choosing a religion that's not "Black enough," like others have. When I'm labeled a cultural sell–out for not being Christian, I reply that, like many Blacks, I believe that Jesus probably had African ancestry, but most folks also believe he lived in the Middle East, and that area's not known for having much American–style "it's–a–Black–thing" flavor.

More importantly, I think that religion should be about something deeper than cultural identity. Religion should squarely address the three fundamental questions we each need to ask—"Where did I come from? Why was I born? And what happens to me when I die?" Religion should also enable one to live each day joyfully, and with the inner resources it takes to move both mole hills and mountains. In Nichiren Buddhism, all of these requirements are met to my satisfaction.

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[Buddhist Teachings]

This Buddhism teaches that our lives are eternal and that on the deepest level we are all Buddhas, or people enlightened to the ultimate truth of life. It teaches that each one of us is worthy of the greatest respect.

Nichiren Buddhists pray by chanting the phrase Nam–myoho–renge–kyo. We do this as often as we like, but traditionally, at least every morning and evening. In addition to chanting, we recite sections of the Lotus Sutra. This scripture was preached in India roughly 1,000 years before the Christian era by Shakyamuni. He is also known as Siddhartha Gautama, or simply the Buddha, which means "The Enlightened One." The Buddha called the Lotus Sutra his highest teaching. In it, he declared that his true purpose was to show all people that they are Buddhas who are in every way equal to him. He predicted the future birth of a Buddha who would complete his teachings.

Around 2,500 years after the Buddha's death, a thirteenth century Japanese teacher named Nichiren formulated the practice of chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra. "Myoho Renge Kyo" is how the Japanese pronounced a Chinese translation of the title. Nichiren added "Nam." Nam is an Indian Sanskrit word that means "Devotion." Nichiren Buddhists are literally chanting, "Devotion to the Lotus Sutra," but the deeper meaning of this phrase is beyond words. We revere Nam–myoho–renge–kyo as the unchanging and eternal Mystic Law of Life. We tap into this law by chanting.

In revealing Nam–myoho–renge–kyo, Nichiren gave rise to a revolutionary religion that promises to enable anyone to bring forth the absolutely happy, courageous, wise, compassionate, creative and powerful condition called Buddhahood from within.

So was the post–partum mom right? Was there something wrong with my upbringing? Did I miss some parental, spiritual lesson that would have saved me from Buddhism? No. My Christian parents taught me to treat others like I want to be treated, reach out to people with compassion, forgive, withhold scornful judgment, love, stand against injustice and be a person who creates peace. They taught me to work hard, learn all I can and think for myself.

[Full Expression]

Being the daughter of my bible–reading daddy and church–going mother, the teachings of Christ will always hit a resounding chord within my soul. I feel that through Buddhist practice I fully express the heart of those teachings. I believe that these same teachings are the essence of what it means to be human.

For me, Nichiren Buddhism enables me to bring these core values to life every day. I think this is why there have even been times when my mother has picked up on a bad vibe I'm giving off and asked, "Have you been praying?" Ma hasn't asked me this often, but whenever my funky mood has led her to do so, truth is that I've hardly been praying at all. In her Southern Baptist, mother–love way, Ma leads me back to the faith of my choice where I sit before my family's altar and chant Nam–myoho–renge–kyo until my heart is content.

M. LaVora Perry's words can also be read on the Kids and "Peace Through Prayer" pages of her website: www.FortuneChildBooks.com

In 1995 author M. LaVora Perry became American Greetings'® (AG's) first African–American greeting card writer. Since then, her words have appeared on gift items worldwide. Today LaVora writes a column for "Friends for Peace," the children's section of the World Tribune—the U.S.A's leading Buddhist weekly. Her first children's book, "Taneesha's Treasures of the Heart" can be ordered on her website: www.FortuneChildBooks.com

African American Women Need Earlier Screening for Breast Cancer

By Drahcir Semaj

Breast cancer is the second leading cause of death for women, ages 40–55, and African American women under the age of 45 are more likely to develop breast cancer than any other group of women in the US.

Every three minutes a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer; every 12 minutes a woman dies from breast cancer and every year over 5000 African American women die from the disease.

Although the cause of breast cancer is still unclear, researchers have determined that African American women tend to develop breast cancer at earlier ages than white women and they typically develop more aggressive types of tumors.

Breast cancer often occurs in African American women under the age of 40 and as early as age 25.

In a study of breast cancer tumors in African American and white women, conducted by the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in 2004, researchers determined that breast tumors in young African American women were more likely to be fast–growing and more aggressive than those found in white women.

"One of the important conclusions from this study is that even when you correct for stage — that is, look at tumors of the same stage from white women and African American women — tumors from the African–American women tend to have features characteristic of more aggressive and rapidly growing cancers," said Dr. Peggy Porter, lead author of the study. "If their tumors tend to grow more quickly, this may help to explain why their cancers are being diagnosed at later stages, which can lead to poorer outcomes."

Other studies have indicated that there are other possible reasons that African American women suffer high death rates from breast cancer: unemployment or underemployment, lack of health insurance, and lack of proper health education have all been cited as possible socioeconomic contributing factors.

Overall, over 16 million women nationwide lack health insurance coverage and African American women are twice as likely to be uninsured as white women; over 30 percent of African American women live in poverty, and African American women are less likely to get mammograms.

Regardless of the socioeconomic factors that may contribute to the high death rate for African American women, medical professionals agree that early detection is paramount to surviving breast

cancer and they've issued a number of recommendations to help African American women detect the disease in its earliest stages and improve their chances of survival.

Medical professionals recommend that African American women should: Practice monthly breast self–examinations (BSE) starting at age 20. Have a clinical breast examination, done by their

physician, at least once a year. Have at least one mammogram completed, between the ages of 30 and 35. Have a mammogram completed every one to two years until age of 50. After 50, African American women should have an annual mammogram.

Breast cancer is a common disease among women of all races in America. This year, more than 200,000 women will develop the disease and 40,000 of them will die from it. Though African American women have less incidence of developing the disease, once diagnosed, their chances of survival are less than their white sisters.

To increase their chances of surviving breast cancer, African American women need understand the risk that breast cancer poses to them and get screened for the disease earlier and more often.

For more information about breast cancer and your risk, please contact your physician or visit:

National Breast Cancer Foundation:

Draheir Semaj is a freelance writer who writes about issues impacting the African American Community. He can be contacted at his email address:

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African American Women Need Earlier Screening for Breast Cancer

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