

Spirituality & Health Podcast

Zenju Earthlyn Manuel

TRANSCRIPT

Rami: From *Spirituality and Health Magazine*, I'm Rabbi Rami, and this is the *Spirituality and Health Podcast*. Our guest today, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, is a poet, author, ordained Zen priest, and medicine woman of the drum who holds a PhD in social science. She came to Zen Buddhism after 15 years in the Nichiren Soka Gakkai's Buddhist tradition. I want to talk to her about that a little bit, but mostly we're going to talk about her forthcoming book called *The Shamanic Bones of Zen: Revealing the Ancestral Spirit and Mystical Heart of a Sacred Tradition*. A review of the book appears in the January, February issue of *Spirituality and Health Magazine*. Zenju, welcome to *Spirituality and Health Podcast*.

Zenju Earthlyn Manuel: Thank you for having me.

Rami: It's my pleasure. I was looking into your past, Zenju, [laughs] **[unintelligible 00:01:01]** where you came from and lots of people that I meet who enter Buddhism who come from the west and become Buddhist, leave behind their religious affiliations. As I understand, from what I've read about you, you seem to bring all your spiritual bones with you to Zen. Tell us a little bit-- this could go for the whole half hour, and we don't want to do that, but tell us a little bit about your religious upbringing. I'm very curious about your time with Nichiren Soka Gakkai, because I also spent some time chanting with them, and why you moved on to Zen.

Zenju: I started out in the Christian Church with my parents and the church of Christ non-denominational. I was there, I was very active until my young adulthood. Then I ran into the gateway of African ceremony and tradition with a tribe that had arrived at Los Angeles, which is where I'm from. I practiced just a little bit with them. I was mostly just doing what they do, do the ceremonies. It's not a lot of talking or training necessarily. After that, the gateway opened for Buddhism and it started out with the Soka Gakkai. I had no interest in Buddhism and no interest in Buddha either when I entered Nichiren. I was pulled in by some friends. They were wanting to hang out and go to dinner, but I had to go to a meeting with them first.

That's how I got involved, because I wanted to go out to eat. I got involved with Nichiren and in reading those books there, I was amazed when I actually started reading the Buddhist teachings. I always say that that's where I found God, in Buddhist teachings. That's all what I've been wanting to hear the whole time I was in church. I didn't hear that kind of talk and teachings about love and kindness, about peace, about tranquility. I heard more about hell and brimstone. That didn't work for me being a very, very extremely sensitive person. [chuckles] It was hard to be that kind of [crosstalk]

Rami: That probably [crosstalk]

Zenju: That's a particular kind of Christianity. There're all kinds.

Rami: Jesus spent so much of his time in the gospels talking about fire and brimstone. They miss the point when they go in that direction. My guess is that Soka Gakkai is not a form of Buddhism that most people are familiar with. Can you give us just a brief introduction?

Zenju: It was a practice brought from Japan to this country, United States, right after World War II. It was brought here by widows and widowers of people who had been killed in World War II with the bomb. They came with this already set philosophical lay community called Soka Gakkai. It was connected with priests. That's where they get the scroll and the chanting, Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. They also chant the Lotus Sutra, which is the basis for their practice. Nichiren himself was a Zen priest and then moved into his own teachings and considered himself a latter-day Buddha.

The reason why Soka Gakkai has always been welcoming to everyone is that the Nichiren tradition wanted everyone to experience Buddhism, not just priests, even though the priests were still attached. Then later on, the priests pulled away from the Soka Gakkai, pulled away from the lay organization, but there's where I learned concentration in Shamatha. They wouldn't call it that, but that's exactly what's happening.

Rami: You gave us the chant, the basic chant that's done over and over again, Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. Actually, can you let us hear how it actually sounds and then translate it for us?

Zenju: It's Nam-myoho-rence-kyo [chants] meaning dedicated to myoho, the mystic sound of truth. In that whole mantra, Nichiren felt was all the teachings in that one mantra, and that that's all you needed to do to bring the Buddhist teachings into your life.

Rami: I think most people, when they think Buddhism, they think meditation. **[unintelligible 00:06:11]** I shouldn't have put it that way. When they think Buddhism, they think sitting meditations. I love meditation. In Soka Gakkai, it's this mantra chanting. In Pure Land Shin Buddhism, it's Namu Amida Butsu, calling on the compassion of the Buddha, of infinite light. There're diverse ways to practice Buddhism.

I want to ask you about this in just a little bit, but chanting is, in my mind-- Let's take it up now and we'll come back to another aspect of it later. Chanting, in my mind, is the most accessible practice for people. Not everyone can sit zazen, even if you sit in a chair. What's your sense about the universality of chanting practice?

Zenju: Meditation was left to those who wanted to be a monk or a nun, to live in the monastery, to leave the world and live in that world of meditation, and to come awake through that kind of daily practice. Chanting was mostly shared with the lay people, lay practitioners. It is more accessible. I think that's what makes Nichiren so successful. Something happened in the transmission of Buddhism.

Folks saw those Zen masters and said, I want to be like them and pull their meditation, and pull meditation as a practice. If you go, which I have been to different

countries, Asian countries, and you go to Buddhist communities, they are not doing meditation. They are chanting and singing and those kinds of things. If I sat in a crowd of nuns, most of the ones who would be sitting would be just the Zen people.[laughs]

Zenju: It's not really widely spread as we might think. It's very, very rare. I think it's not for everyone, one, because there's no measurable outcome that you can count on. I'm going to go in here for 20 years and come out this way. It just doesn't happen like that. Well, neither is chanting, but chanting is like drumming. You can feel the rhythm. We're used to rhythm of the earth, rhythm of our hearts. Rhythm. That we know. That's what makes, to me, chanting more accessible practice for people.

Meditation is for those, to me, that want to take a deep path into places that we can't see with our eyes or hear with our ears to go into that place and make it our path. Actually just living in that darkness and discovery, whereas chanting is not that.

Rami: Chanting can take you very-- Chanting can open you up to [crosstalk]

Zenju: That's right.

Rami: I'm trying to avoid the word enlightenment.

Zenju: I talk about it in the book, that I chanted in Nichiren for seven years. It's where an Oracle came in a dream to me.

Rami: I wanted to ask you about that, so go ahead. Tell us about the dream.

Zenju: We've got 10 minutes.[chuckles]

Rami: Oh, no, we have time.

Zenju: Okay. I was suffering at the time and had made a prayer and went to bed that night. Then I woke up with all of this, at 4:00 in the morning with all these words in my head from the dream. Someone was speaking in the dream. I began at four o'clock, went to my desk and started writing down what those messages were. I didn't know what it was about. They were going on and on and on. I just cut it off because I wanted to go back to bed.

The next morning, I went back to it and I looked at it. Then I saw that it also had some kind of artwork, which is very ancient like in Egyptian traditions or other traditions, where they did a lot of worshiping around stones and caves. There's always some drawing of the practice. That felt like, to me, the Oracle came straight out of Nichiren, straight out of my chanting, and I have been chanting very intensely for seven years.

It was surprising that that's what came out. I don't think if I sat down and said, "This is what I want," it would've come. It was waking up to myself. I had already been having dreams. I just didn't pay attention to them until the Oracle came through.

Rami: When you're linking chanting to dream and chanting to the drum, and you are a medicine woman of the drum, that seems to be where the shamanic comes in. Is that fair?

Zenju: It can be, for some people.

Rami: How do you understand the notion of shamanic?

Zenju: For me, shamanic is just that experience of awakening. It has many, many definitions, and it's a word that's been borrowed. I do explain that right away in the beginning of my *Shamanic Bones of Zen*, which is already out. It came out February 8th to the public. People should hopefully have it in their hands. Those who pre-ordered. I think that the drum and chanting, like I said, provide rhythm. You're getting in touch with the earth. Anything in awakening is being in touch with the earth in which we live, which is to be in touch with ourselves, because we ourselves are of the earth.

For me, I think it was pretty simple. I didn't just decide I'm going to do Buddhism, I'm going to drum myself into awakening, I'm going to do all these things. I'm not the type of person to go out and search for modalities in things. I actually shy away from them. I'm always surprised about how many places I've been, because I tend to shy away from where the crowd goes. Anyway, all I can say for me, is that the rhythm just puts me in touch with myself. Like I said, we have that in our own bodies, our hearts are beating.

Rami: Let me share a quick story from my own experience and see what you think of this. I was once at a EU conference, European Union conference in Prague. Pretty sure it was in Prague. At one point during the conference, I guess it wasn't going the way that the leader wanted it to go. They asked me if I would do some exercise with the group, and everyone spoke different languages. We had translators, but I don't know what they expected I was supposed to do. They just dropped it on me. What I did do was, I invited everyone to congregate in the center of the room, a clump.

Then just apropos to what you were saying, I had everyone tap their heart. Find their heartbeat, make a drum out of their chest, and tap their heart rhythm. Then it became very clear that there was an alignment of rhythm tapping. People saw that their hearts were all beating together. Then we did a chant. Now, in this case, we did the Om Namah Shivaya from the Hindu tradition.

They weren't spiritual people necessarily. They certainly weren't Hindus. There was only one other Hindu there, maybe two. Anyway, the group started chanting Om Namah Shivaya and we did that for just a little bit. It changed the consciousness of the group. It brought people into alignment. When you do chanting with a community, does it have the same effect? [crosstalk]

Zenju: Yes, of course. It's singing. The alignment is in the sense that we're now not in our heads, in our story, in ourselves, we're in the sound. If we're doing Om together, we're in the Om of the sound, and these are all ancient mantras too, very old, and so they had purpose, they were designed with purpose, they were designed to bring harmony, to bring compassion. You could be chanting next to your enemy and you might possibly fall in love with that person. Like, "I think I love that person. I don't dislike them anymore while we're chanting." As soon as you stop chanting, you go, "Oh, yes, I remember why I didn't like that person."

Rami: No, that's very great. That's a tremendous observation for people to hear, because first of all, it's true and it's testable. In the book, I expected, just for no real good reason, I expected when you were going to give an example of chanting, it would have been the Heart Sutra, which in the 10 years that I was in the Zen world, we chanted the Heart Sutra every day. You instead, share with us the chant of great compassionate mind. I wasn't familiar with this chant, and I'm interested in a couple of things around this.

One is, if you would just chant a bit. It's a long chant. If you could just chant a line or so, just so people get a sense of what it sounds like. Then I'm going to ask you about the text itself.

Zenju: Okay. So that folk know, there's an audio of the book and the chant's on the audio book. [chanting]

Rami: Okay. All right, so this is in Japanese.

Zenju: Yes. Anything that's Japanese, it's medieval Japanese. It's ancient, so even a Japanese person today could just jump up and translate that.

Rami: Oh, okay, so give us a sense. I'm not going to ask you to translate it, but what is the message of the chant of great compassion [crosstalk]

Zenju: There is no translation.

Rami: Oh, okay. There we go.

Zenju: That's why I chose it because it's totally about the sound. While you're chanting, that's why it's always good to try to chant it in the language that it's been written in. The Heart Sutra, you can get it in English, in Japanese, and Korean, all kinds of languages. Everyone chants the Heart Sutra.

Rami: The mantra at the end is always in Sanskrit, Gate Gate Paragate, right?

Zenju: Right.

Rami: [unintelligible 00:17:33] the same reason.

Zenju: I chose the Dharani because it is no meaning, and it's just meant to move you in a way that words could not. So it has the most, to me, Shamanic depth to it. That's why I chose that chant. Dharanis are very magical chants that are created. They're like spells. They create a spell as you're chanting. Even deeper than if you were to do, say, the Heart Sutra has some of that, but I picked the Dharani. There's a lot of Dharanis, and they don't have a lot of meaning other than the sound themselves are to transport you into that place that meditation could do, or dancing, or drumming or any of those things.

Rami: Okay. That is a very helpful explanation of the Shamanic Bones that you're talking about in a book titled *The Shamanic Bones of Zen*. That is very helpful, and when you're doing it, and we're going to close out the show so people can hear this again. That was a small part of this chant. My sense is that if I could do it with you, that there would be a resonance because I'm chanting with you, but even not, even

listening, there is some kind of resonance that arises from the sound of your voice, using just these sounds, that is already all embracing.

People must feel a part of this, especially if there's no translation I have to worry about, and no meaning I have to derive. I'm just being present in with, and I would imagine ultimately, as the sound itself.

Zenju: I think some people have tried to translate Dharanis, and you'll see, if they do, it still doesn't-- it's like oh, Lord, oh, Lord, oh Lord. Oh, my, oh, my, oh, my. It still doesn't happen even if you try.

Rami: That's not going to help [crosstalk]

Zenju: It's not going to give you that text or literature that you're looking for.

Rami: Yes, I don't know if you remember this from your Christian days, but there's a text in 1st Kings where, in the Hebrew, they talked about Kol d'mama daka, which means that-- sometimes it's translated as this, what's it called? Something voice of silence, this still voice of silence or something like that. In Hebrew, it's the voice of maybe fragile silence, there's no great translation. There is a practice where you're trying to listen to whatever that sound of silence is. In Hinduism, they have something called Nada Yoga. It's also actually in Buddhism, where you're listening for the primal sound of the universe.

Some people make the sound using the sound of the om, but oftentimes, in the way I was taught, it's simply listening to the sound, which is always the universe is chanting this, if you want. From the beginning, the universe is chanting, almost like John 1:1, in the beginning, was the Word and the Word was om, something like that. There is this primordial and primal sound that permeates the universe that we can all tap into and listening to this chanting, seems to be tapping into that same energy. What's the response, do you think? When you're leading a group and the group is chanting, the chant of great compassionate mind, see a transformation in people or your eyes are closed and you're not--

Zenju: Well, you're not looking at others. You are within. Everything is meditation, offering the incense, walking, bowing, sitting, chanting, it's all zazen, it's all breathing, there's no break in that, although people do break, because they don't know sometimes that to hold that meditative state that's developed in zazen, then you get up and you walk with it, you chant with it, you offer incense with it or flowers with it, or food, whatever's happening in the ceremony.

I think it could take someone one minute, for their heart to burst open. For some people, it may take 10 years, because it depends on where the mind is and where the mind will go, and what you will allow to come into your life. I think I walked in after 15 years of Nichiren and then walking into a Zen center, I was already prepped for the opening. It was going to happen right away and it did. It happened right away.

Rami: We're going to have to close this out. Let me suggest to listeners, if you're interested in this book, and you should be, let me suggest, absolutely go get a copy of *The Shamanic Bones of Zen*, but is there a place or should they also get the

audiobook so they can hear you do the chant or is that chant [unintelligible
00:23:00]

Zenju: Yes, I think if they want to. I was very surprised they did an audiobook. It's great because it does give you a chance to listen to me chant. The chants are also available at many Zen centers and a San Francisco Zen center, in their teaching, a section on the website, there are many chats on there as well.

Rami: Okay. That's very helpful. We're going to have you chant the same text again, the same little bit that we had time for. As we do that, people will hear that-- I just want to remind people that our guest today, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, is the author of *The Shamanic Bones of Zen: Revealing the Ancestral Spirit and Mystical Heart of a Sacred Tradition*. You can read a review of the book in the January/February issue of *Spirituality and Health Magazine*, and you can learn more about her work on her website zenju.org. Zenju, thank you so much for talking with us on the *Spirituality and Health Podcast*.

Zenju: Thank you. [chanting]

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The *Spirituality and Health Podcast* is produced by Ezra Bakker Trupiano and our executive producer is Mallory Corbin. I'm Rabbi Rami. Thanks for listening.

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[00:25:52] [END OF AUDIO]

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