

What About...? Misogyny in This Buddhism?

Q: I've heard that other schools of Buddhism teach that women cannot attain enlightenment, but that the Lotus Sutra teaches that they can. But I read a few passages in the writings of Nichiren Daishonin that made me wonder if there's prejudice against women in his teachings. One passage states: "Women are fainthearted and your wives have probably given up. You must grit your teeth and never slacken in your faith" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 140). How should I interpret this?

A: First, I've talked with some women who say they're willing to forgive what they perceive to be "a little" prejudice against women in their religion because such attitudes are so pervasive in other religions and in society in general. But I'd like to stress that there's no prejudice against women in the Daishonin's teachings — not even a little.

The Daishonin's statement about women being fainthearted was made to particular individuals facing specific obstacles in faith and probably reflects the prevailing attitude toward women of that era and culture. In his effort to encourage the Ikegami brothers to take full responsibility for their lives and faith, he stated what they most likely already had heard or believed. But is this the view of women in the teachings of the Daishonin? I don't believe so.

Nowhere in the history of Buddhism — or any other philosophy — is the equality of *all* people more firmly stated than in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren Daishonin. Our perspective of the above statement should be based on our confidence in the absolute equality which the Daishonin upheld.

Knowing that the wives of the Ikegami brothers would read what he had written, he may have been trying to stir them to not be fainthearted. He later tells the wives to have no regrets about the persecution they were facing from their father-in-law due to their husbands' and their own practice of Buddhism.

The message is not about how women and men are. Rather, the Daishonin's teaching is: Do not rely on others, even your spouse, in matters of faith. I think it's safe to say the Daishonin understood that faintheartedness is something to which all human beings are susceptible and that we should each resolve to live with courage.

What's more, the allusion to faintheartedness can be juxtaposed with other statements made by the Daishonin. For example, to Nichigen-nyo, he wrote: "A woman who embraces this sutra not only excels all other women but also surpasses all men" (MW-5, 157). And to Senn'ichi-ama he wrote: "Your faith is weightier than the great earth, deeper than the great sea" (MW-6, 256).

The Daishonin sometimes cites the prevailing societal view of women, while tempering such views with the teachings of equality elucidated in the Lotus Sutra. It was an expedient for him to embrace the culture of the people he was talking to and then take them to the higher level of the Lotus Sutra.

It would be a mistake to take isolated passages and generalize about the entirety of his teachings based upon them. If we look at them in the larger context of his philosophy (and his other statements regarding women), it is clear that they are not indicative of his beliefs.

In "The True Entity of Life," he states: "There should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo in the Latter Day of the Law, be they men or women" (MW-1, 93).

— DAVE BALDSCHUN, SGI-USA Study Department Staff