

WOMEN & BUDDHISM

She Is an Envoy of the Buddha:

"A passage from the 'Teacher of the Law' chapter reads: 'If one of these good men or good women [in the time after I have passed into extinction is able to secretly expound the Lotus Sutra to one person, even one phrase of it, then you should know that] he or she is the envoy of the Thus Come One.'" ("A Ship to Cross the Sea of Suffering," *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 33)

The philosophy of Buddhism is egalitarian in theory, yet historically Buddhist women have faced many obstacles in the practice of their faith, placed in the way of their spiritual development by the very people who were supposed to lead them. Women have been denied the right to study the sutras, the right to teach and the right to lead services. But the Soka Gakkai International, by following the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and practicing as a lay movement, have overcome these obstacles, making this practice, while beneficial to anyone, especially well-suited for women.

Shakyamuni Buddha did not want to start an order for women. He only did so at the behest of Ananda, a favored male disciple, and even then female renunciates had over a hundred more rules to follow than the males. This included the directive that any monk, no matter how young and new to the order, possessed a higher status than even the most senior woman did. Many Theravada monasteries still operate this way today, even going so far as teaching that to be a woman is a curse, and the only hope for Buddhahood is to be reborn as a man.

Shakyamuni's injunctions, so strange for a compassionate, enlightened being to propound, are part of what is known as the provisional teachings — pre-Lotus Sutra teachings expounded during the forty-two years following Shakyamuni's enlightenment. Due to the prevailing attitudes and customs, Shakyamuni, knowing that most people of the time could not accept equality for women, preached this incomplete philosophy as a way of leading them to the ultimate, complete teaching, the Lotus Sutra.

The Daishonin, in "The Essence of the 'Medicine King' Chapter," explains, "...in the Nirvana Sutra he (Shakyamuni) says, 'Though the Thus Come One does not speak untruths, if I knew that by speaking falsely [I could help living beings gain the benefits of the Law, then for their sake I would go along with what is best and speak such words as an expedient means].'" Nichiren, while stressing that Shakyamuni Buddha cannot lie, nevertheless concluded, "In view of these passages, it would appear that the Buddha was speaking falsely when he declared that women could not attain rebirth in the pure land and achieve Buddhahood" (WND, 97).

The true teaching of equal Buddhahood for all sentient and insentient beings did not appear until the Lotus Sutra. It alone among the sutras preaches the attainment of Buddhahood by women, without having to be reborn as men. While women in other traditions are restricted in the ways they learn, study, and practice, the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin teaches, "Now, no matter what, strive in faith and be known as a votary of the Lotus Sutra, and remain my disciple for the rest of your life. If you are of the same mind as Nichiren, you must be a Bodhisattva of the Earth. 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. Were they not Bodhisattvas of the Earth, they could not chant the daimoku" ("The True Aspect of All Phenomenon," WND, 385).

Rather than being something thrust upon him by others, women's enlightenment was integral to the teachings of Nichiren. "Do not these interpretations make clear," the Daishonin writes in "The Sutra of True Requit, "that among all the teachings of the Buddha's lifetime, the Lotus Sutra is first, and that, among the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, that of women attaining Buddhahood is first?" Unlike Shakyamuni, Nichiren Daishonin never discriminated against his female followers. Many of his most faithful and dedicated followers were women, and he bestowed the Gohonzon and wrote to them on an equal basis with men. Forty-six works — almost a third — in *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* are addressed to female disciples. Compare this to other sacred literature, particularly that also written in epistolical form, like much of the New Testament. None of the letters included in the Biblical canon are addressed to women.

It is said that a sage must be able to see beyond his present place and circumstance, and the Daishonin's wisdom transcends his time. While other sacred writings tend to ignore issues pertaining specifically to women, the Daishonin freely discussed topics such as pregnancy, menstruation and parenting with his female followers — quite radical for a celibate monk living in an overwhelmingly patriarchal society!

Nor did Nichiren offer different spiritual advice for men and women. He did not tell men to fight for truth and propagate the teachings while telling women to stay at home and have babies. While Nichiren often celebrated marriage and motherhood, it was to praise their good qualities as havens of love, giving and compassion rather than to trap women into stereotypical and helpless roles. To both men and women, time after time, Nichiren had the same instruction — chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and bring forth your Buddha nature. Under no circumstances abandon your faith, even at the cost of loss of family, social status or one's very life.

The Daishonin's equanimity toward the spiritual development of both men and women, not to mention all sentient beings, reinforces the validity of the Daishonin's identity as the true Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law. The Daishonin was only concerned with a person's faith and practice, not any temporary karmic distinction. He saw beyond the restrictive mores of society and fearlessly taught the truth of the Mystic Law to all who sought it.

The Soka Gakkai carries forth this spirit in the present day. SGI President Ikeda has declared 2001 to be the beginning of the Century of Women. In his 2001 peace proposal, he states that if we are to transform a culture of violence into a culture of peace, women's contributions are essential: "In this sense, I am certain that the emergence of women in the twenty-first century has a significance that goes to the very core of human civilization." Alone among Buddhist traditions, the Soka Gakkai loudly proclaims the equality of women while recognizing the special gifts we bring.

Whereas women in some traditions — Buddhist and non-Buddhist — are not allowed to teach others the faith, women in the Soka Gakkai share the responsibility to be courageous and responsible leaders in all areas of our lives. As President Ikeda declares in his famous "Clear Mirror" speech, given at the first SGI-USA Women's meeting on February 27, 1990: "The purpose of Buddhism is not to produce dupes who blindly follow their leaders. Rather, it is to produce people of wisdom who can judge right or wrong on their own in the clear mirror of Buddhism...when the members of the women's division freely devote themselves to activities and provide a confident and strong lead for men, that will mark the dawn of a new SGI-USA."