

PERSPECTIVE: The March Continues

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In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha stated, "From the start, I pledged to make all people equal to me." At the time, such an inclusive remark was beyond the grasp of most people. In the final years of the 20th century, Shakyamuni's words are considerably less revolutionary but still praiseworthy. Equality is difficult to grasp, as history and current events indicate.

I am writing about this because it is March — National Women's History Month. In addition, March 8 was International Women's Day. On March 8, 1857, hundreds of women workers in New York's sweatshops staged a strike against low wages, long working hours and inhumane working conditions. In 1977, the U.N. General Assembly voted to observe International Women's Day, citing two reasons: "to recognize the fact that securing peace and social progress and the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms requires the active participation, equality and development of women; and to acknowledge the contribution of women to the strengthening of international peace and security."

It's significant that the United Nations recognizes that women must have full equality and participation in society to establish a peaceful, stable world. At the U.N.-sponsored international conference of women, held in Beijing in 1995, women's rights were declared to be human rights.

Shakyamuni said much the same thing thousands of years ago, in the 12th chapter of the Lotus Sutra. The story of the dragon girl's enlightenment takes place in this chapter and is really a declaration of gender equality. In this story, the Buddha's disciples, all men, did not believe that the dragon king's daughter could reach enlightenment. After all, if she could reach Buddhahood without first becoming a man, it meant that she and all other women were their equals, which seemed incomprehensible to them.

The July 1997 *Living Buddhism* discusses the story of the dragon girl in detail, and SGI President Ikeda addresses the resistance to equality as it has played out in the history of Buddhism. "When explanations are tailored to the biases of society," he said, "there is a danger that even people of sincere faith will become attached to those biases, leading to a distorted interpretation of the teaching. The effect often is that when a distorted teaching gets handed down it does nothing but exacerbate and harden the discriminatory attitudes of society. If we were to trace the historical view of women in Buddhism, we would probably find many such instances."

More than 700 years ago, in medieval Japan, Nichiren Daishonin addressed gender equality. He wrote many personal and doctrinal letters to women, such as "The Sutra of True Requit," given to Sennichi-ama. In it, he stated: "[A]mong all the teachings of the Buddha's lifetime, the Lotus Sutra stands in first place, and that among the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, that of women attaining Buddhahood is foremost" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 6, p. 250).

Another letter describes the obstacles facing women. In "Reply to Myoho Bikuni Gozen," the Daishonin encourages her through the story of the first Buddhist nun, Mahaprajapati, who gave up her status as a royal consort to seek enlightenment. Through the Lotus Sutra, Mahaprajapati does become enlightened and is named Buddha Beheld With Joy by All Sentient Beings.

This year, 1998, marks the 150th anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention, where progressive women and men demanded that women have social and political equality. This included the right to be educated, to own property, to have financial independence, health

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care and child custody, to file for divorce and, most shocking of all, the right to vote. You might say that the Seneca Falls Convention demanded that women have the right to have a life. At the time, nearly all newspapers around the country condemned the convention. Opponents picketed and attempted to prevent participants from entering. If some of their demands sound familiar, it is because they are still in contention today.

In studying this history of the women's rights movement, I've discovered that the movement was composed of all types of people, not just white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. It took 75 years and enormous effort for women to win the right to vote. In this country, at least, it was a bloodless revolution. This is something to take pride in. There isn't space to tell the individual stories of dedication and sacrifice, but they are there. It's important to be aware of this: In thinking about where we want to go in the future, we have to know where we came from and appreciate those who helped us gain many of the rights we now take for granted.

As SGI President Ikeda said: "The human rights declaration of the French Revolution [The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 1789] is well-known. Yet it defines *people* to mean men. A woman named Olympe de Gouges (1748–93) criticized this document and in 1791 announced a 'Declaration of the Rights of Women and Female Citizens.' However, she was branded an anti-revolutionary and sent to the guillotine.... The fundamental point of the declaration of women's rights arising from the Lotus Sutra is that each person has the innate potential and right to realize a state of life of the greatest happiness. Our realizing such happiness will ensure that this noble history of sacrifice and struggle has not been in vain. The goal is for each person, like the dragon girl, to set out on a voyage to attain absolute happiness, while helping those adrift on the sea of suffering do the same without anyone being victimized."

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