

BUDDHISM IN DAILY LIFE THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF WOMEN

In many Buddhist sutras, it was taught that women could never become Buddhas. The Silver-Colored Woman Sutra reads, “Even if the eyes of the Buddhas of the three existences were to fall to the ground, no woman in any of the realms of existence could ever attain Buddhahood” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 96). This no doubt reflects the prevailing view of women in India in the fifth century B.C.E., where they were considered more or less the property of their husbands. However, it is said that in response to requests from his aunt and other women, Shakyamuni allowed women to become nuns and carry out monastic practice after establishing eight rules that they should follow.

According to Indian studies specialist Dr. Hajime Nakamura, “The appearance [in Buddhism] of an order of nuns was an astonishing development in world religious history. No such female religious order existed in Europe, North Africa, West Asia or East Asia at the time. Buddhism was the first tradition to produce one.”

However, in the following centuries, prevailing perceptions of women began to reassert themselves and it was commonly believed that women would have to be reborn as men and carry out endless painful practices before being able to attain Buddhahood. The *bhikshuni sangha*, or order of Buddhist nuns, declined and nearly disappeared.

Nichiren Daishonin, the 13th-century Buddhist monk whose teachings SGI members follow, was a firm believer in the equality of men and women. He wrote, “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” (WND, p. 385). This was a revolutionary statement for his time, when women were almost totally dependent on men. The “three obediences” dictated that a Japanese woman should first obey her parents; then she should obey her husband; and finally, in old age, she should obey her son.

Nichiren Daishonin sent letters of encouragement to many of his female followers and gave several the title of “Shonin,” or saint. The strength of faith and independence of spirit shown by these women impressed him deeply. To Nichimyo Shonin, he wrote: “Never have I heard of a woman who journeyed a thousand *ri* in search of Buddhism as you did.... You are the foremost votary of the Lotus Sutra among the women of Japan” (WND, pp. 324–25).

In the 12th or “Devadatta” chapter of the version of the Lotus Sutra cited by the Daishonin, Shakyamuni demonstrates that Buddhahood is within reach “even” for women. It is revealed that an 8-year-old female dragon has been able to attain Buddhahood quickly by practicing the Lotus Sutra.

This girl, often known as the dragon king’s daughter, appears and dramatically demonstrates her attainment of Buddhahood, illustrating the principle of becoming a Buddha in one’s present form. She overturns the prevailing belief that enlightenment could only be attained after carrying out painful practices over an extremely long period of time. The dragon girl has the form of an animal; she is female; and she is very young. That she should be the very first to demonstrate the immediate attainment of Buddhahood is striking, even shocking.

The Daishonin stresses that “among the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, that of women attaining Buddhahood is first” (WND, p. 930). And, in another letter he writes: “When I, Nichiren, read the sutras other than the Lotus Sutra, I have not the slightest wish to

become a woman. One sutra condemns women as messengers of hell. Another describes them as great serpents.... Only in the Lotus Sutra do we read that a woman who embraces this sutra not only excels all other women, but also surpasses all men” (WND, pp. 463–64). The Daishonin vowed to share the Lotus Sutra’s hopeful message with all the women of Japan.

Buddhism views distinctions of gender, race and age as differences that exist in order to enrich our individual experience and human society as a whole. The Lotus Sutra is sometimes called the teaching of nondiscrimination because it reveals that the state of Buddhahood is inherent in all phenomena. There is no difference between men and women in terms of their capacity to attain Buddhahood, as both are equally manifestations of the ultimate reality. If we consider the eternity of life, it is also clear that we may be born as a man in one life, and as a woman in another.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda states: “The important thing is that both women and men become happy as human beings. Becoming happy is the objective; everything else is a means. The fundamental point of the ‘declaration of women’s rights’ arising from the Lotus Sutra is that each person has the innate potential and the right to realize a state of life of the greatest happiness.”

Courtesy of SGI Quarterly