

## FROM THE GENERAL DIRECTOR THE CENTURY OF WOMEN

Greetings to all the readers of *Living Buddhism*! I hope that all of you are safe and healthy during this severe winter.

At the final headquarters leaders meeting of 2000, SGI President Ikeda said, “The bright dawn of the century of women has arrived. Not only in the SGI, but also in society as a whole, women are extremely active and serving as an invigorating force. Wherever there are wise women, one finds a steady tide toward peace and harmony being created. Nichiren Daishonin says, ‘Women will open the gateway’ (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1566). In the unending advance of our kosen-rufu movement, it will be women — and especially the members of the young women’s division — who will open the gateway of good fortune and benefit, of hope, of eternal victory.”

This year also marks fifty years since President Toda first established the women’s division in Japan and eleven years since SGI President Ikeda’s historic guidance to American women in February 1990. It seems appropriate to consider the meaning of “century of women.”

President Ikeda repeatedly emphasizes the importance of women in the twenty-first century. I know that women possess many qualities, and it is difficult to characterize all women in a single way. Nonetheless, I believe that women introduce heart and compassion into matters of business and governance.

It is vital that women play increasingly significant roles in all affairs of society. This is true in the United States and around the globe as women gain social and political rights.

But I don’t think President Ikeda sees this as a superficial change. When women’s opinions are heard, when women’s talents are freely displayed and their wisdom expressed, it will benefit all humankind.

This doesn’t imply that men don’t have a role. Indeed, it is a basic tenet of Buddhism that each human being has a precious mission or purpose in life, men and women equally. But the contributions of women have been overlooked by history. In fact, women have not been allowed to fully display their talents and abilities. Despite this, women have been at the forefront of the struggle for human rights.

It was less than a hundred years ago that women were granted full political rights in the United States — a challenge led by women such as Susan B. Anthony. Women led the movement to establish child labor laws and to protect and guarantee the health and education of our youth. Women fought on the front lines of the battle to end slavery in the nineteenth century. In this century, countless unnamed women were heroines in the struggle for civil rights, as symbolized by Rosa Parks.

In the same speech that I quoted above, President Ikeda asked all the men of the SGI to protect and cherish the women of our organization.

The spirit to cherish, praise and support one another is basic to our SGI organization. In *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, there is the passage “Women support others, and thereby cause others to support them” (“Letter to the Brothers,” 501). This reflects the social reality of thirteenth-century Japan, where women were bound by the “three obediences” of Japanese culture, which dictated that a woman should first obey her parents, then her husband, and in old age, her son. But the Daishonin’s passage conveys a deeper reality that is true for all people: When we support the happiness and growth of others, we are making the cause to gain happiness and receive support ourselves. This is based on the principle of cause and effect and the truth that our attitude determines everything. To cherish and support one another is the

bodhisattva spirit.

But I hope that — based on President Ikeda’s guidance — all of us warmly support and care for one another. This is the path toward harmony, growth and our own self-development.

I would like to share some quotes from great American women of the twentieth century who worked for human rights and for peace.

Jane Addams was a social activist who worked among the poor in Chicago during the early part of the century. She is also the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. She said: “We see all around us a spirit of materialism — an undue emphasis put upon material possessions, an inordinate desire to win wealth, an inordinate desire to please those who are the possessors of wealth. Now, let us say, if we feel that this is a menace, that with all our power, with all the spirit of a soldier, we will arouse high-minded youth of this country against the spirit of materialism.”<sup>1</sup>

The Reverend Dr. Anna Howard Shaw — a Methodist minister and leader in the struggle to gain voting rights for women — said in a May 1919 speech in support of the League of Nations: “We women, the mothers of the race, have given everything, have suffered everything, have sacrificed everything, and we come to you now and say ‘The time has come when we will no longer sit quietly by and bear and rear sons to die at the will of a few men. We will not endure it.’ Could there be any cowardice, could there be any injustice, could there be any wrong greater than to refuse to hear the voice of a woman expressing the will of women at the peace table of the world and then for men not to provide a way by which the women of the future shall not be robbed of their sons as the women of the past have been?”<sup>2</sup>

When we reflect on these women and their lives, we can see that indeed, it is women who will lead us in our common effort to create a century of life.

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1. Jane Addams, *In Our Own Words: Extraordinary speeches of the American Century*, (New York, Tokyo and London: Kodansha International, 1999), eds. Robert Torricelli & Andrew Carroll), p.9.
2. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, *In Our Own Words: Extraordinary speeches of the American Century*, (New York, Tokyo and London: Kodansha International, 1999), eds. Robert Torricelli & Andrew Carroll), p.54.