

# Buddhism and Women: Soka Gakkai International's Viewpoint

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## Introduction

**I**N Buddhist studies, women's issues have largely been ignored until the last 20 years. Depending on the age and geographic region, Buddhism has developed in various ways, but here, I would like to inquire into the view of women in the SGI (Soka Gakkai International).

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda's view of women is based on Buddhist thought—the Buddha, the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren. In his writings and speeches, SGI President Ikeda repeatedly refers to Buddhist texts and Nichiren's writings to support his view on women. He understands that Buddhism originally teaches gender equality, and with penetrating insight, has further developed these ideas, reinterpreting them for the current age and has reintroduced these views to society.

## 1. SGI President Ikeda's View Of Women— From A Buddhist Standpoint

### 1.1 “Whether Woman Or Man”—The Buddha's View Of Women

First of all, SGI President Ikeda evaluates the Buddha's view of women by pointing out, “Since Shakyamuni did not discriminate between clerics and lay people, he also taught laywomen the path to happiness. Shakyamuni's laywomen followers included Vaidehi, the wife of King Bimbisara of Magadha and mother of Ajatashatru; and Shrimala, the queen of Ayadhya, an ancient city in central India. But Shakyamuni treated these prominent women the same way he treated women from ordinary backgrounds.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition, he quotes the Buddha as saying, “Not by birth does one become an outcaste, not by birth does one become a Brahman. By action one becomes an outcaste, by action one becomes a Brahman.”<sup>2</sup> He comments on this quote, “In a fiercely discriminatory society, Shakyamuni staunchly refused to allow his actions to be colored by distinctions of class, gender, birth or religious role.”<sup>3</sup> And continues to explain, “Whether male or female, one's nobility or vulgarity depends

entirely on what one has done. Our actions and sincerity are what count. This is Shakyamuni's spirit."<sup>4</sup>

Ikeda further clarifies this last statement, "At the least, we can say that there is some uncertainty as to how much the early Buddhist sutras represent what was truly in Shakyamuni's heart. In any event, it is a fact that Shakyamuni allowed women to take clerical vows and to carry out strict practice. Naturally, the major premise of carrying out Buddhist practice is that you can attain enlightenment by doing so. If that were not possible, he certainly would not have allowed women practitioners. From this alone, we get a sense of Shakyamuni's egalitarianism."<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to some recent research pointing out how the Buddha discriminated between the sexes, Ikeda subscribes to the view that the Buddha had an egalitarian view of the sexes. His interpretation stresses that equality of the sexes was an original principle in Buddhism, and this view has garnered much interest from many quarters.

## **1.2 The Dragon Girl's Enlightenment As "A Declaration Of Women's Human Rights"**

Next, I would like to focus on SGI President Ikeda's thoughts on the enlightenment of the dragon girl depicted in the Lotus Sutra. He states, "From one standpoint, the discussion of the dragon girl in the 'Devadatta' chapter is a tale about how arrogant men are defeated by women ... It is also a grand declaration of human rights that refutes, by means of actual proof, ideas and beliefs that discriminate against women."<sup>6</sup> More specifically, Ikeda describes the significance of the dragon girl's enlightenment based on the theory of three thousand realms in a single moment of life.

Everyone, men and women alike, possesses the 'attainments that were inherent in her nature.' It is a jewel that exists in the lives of all living beings. This is the meaning of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds and three thousand realms in a single moment of life; this is the Lotus Sutra's fundamental revelation.

The Ten Worlds include the realm of Animals. The dragon girl has the form of an animal, and naturally the world of Buddhahood is also inherent in the realm of Animals. Her Buddhahood is invisible, however, to an eye that is tainted by prejudice.

The Lotus Sutra teaches that all living beings possess the world of Buddhahood. There is not even a hint of discrimination toward women. If it were true that women could not become Buddhas, then the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of

life would fall apart. To deny three thousand realms in a single moment of life is to deny the possibility of anyone's attainment of Buddhahood. Therefore, the dragon girl's enlightenment signifies not only the enlightenment of all women but the enlightenment of all men as well.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, Ikeda refutes the theory that women must first be reincarnated into men before attaining enlightenment in the following passage. "The dragon girl's enlightenment indicates the principle of attaining Buddhahood in one's present form. The crucial point is that she had already become a Buddha in her female form. The dragon girl's changing into a man is nothing more than an expedient means that she employs to drive home the fact of her Buddhahood to Shariputra and the others, who were convinced only men could attain Buddhahood. It does not mean that a woman can only attain Buddhahood by first turning into a man." He then continues, "In light of the truth of nonsubstantiality, which is one of the basic principles of Mahayana Buddhism, for one to fixate on superficial differences between men and women is pointless and unnecessary."<sup>8</sup>

Ikeda also suggests that the theory of women first reincarnating into men before they are able to attain enlightenment was created because the Buddha was aware of the difficulty for society of that time to accept this revolutionary idea. Ikeda says, "However, Shakyamuni must have foreseen that there would be great resistance to the idea that women could become Buddhas."<sup>9</sup>

He also states,

Fundamentally, Buddhism views all living beings as individual manifestations of a single great golden life. This is the truth to which Shakyamuni had become enlightened. This is what is illustrated by the principles of dependent origination and nonsubstantiality. This, in essence, is the Mystic Law. From this enlightened standpoint, it would be ludicrous to assert that one sex is superior to the other.

To cause that Law to spread and take root in society, however, the Buddha had to consider how to explain it in terms people would accept. Under certain circumstances, Shakyamuni, while fundamentally determined to teach the Law "according with the Buddha's own mind," had to employ wisdom and adapt his teaching to the capacities of his listeners simply to get a hearing; he had to draw others gradually toward his own enlightened state of life.

The explanation we find in Mahayana sutras of women turning into men could, therefore, be seen as a revolutionary doctrine refuting the Theravada notion that women could never become Buddhas.<sup>10</sup>

As his conclusion about the dragon girl's enlightenment, Ikeda states,

Because the dragon girl is a woman, she can more easily understand the sufferings of women and lead them to happiness. All of her sufferings as a woman fuel her ability to help others also attain enlightenment. Such is the power of Mystic Law. Herein lies the significance of the dragon girl's attainment of Buddhahood.

The dragon girl was perceived as having virtually no chance of ever attaining Buddhahood because she was a woman, was very young, and had the body of an animal. She was, however, the first to attain Buddhahood in her present form. This is very significant. The dragon girl's enlightenment in an oppressively discriminatory society amounts to a ringing declaration of human rights...

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. 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 to the same without anyone being victimized.

"All women have the right to become happy. They have to become happy without fail." This is the spirit of the Lotus Sutra.<sup>11</sup>

### **1.3 "There should be no discrimination...be they men or women" —Nichiren's View Of Women's Enlightenment**

Ikeda's ideas clearly carry on the tradition of Nichiren Daishonin, a Japanese priest of the 1200's who rejected the view that women had to be reincarnated into men before attaining Buddhahood. Ikeda explains, "The Daishonin's actions in this regard stand out as very much the exception in Japanese society and the Buddhist world of his day. Probably no other Buddhist figure of the time praised and respected women as highly as did the Daishonin."<sup>12</sup>

He also states, "Nichiren Daishonin's teaching is thoroughly egalitarian. For instance, the Daishonin says that 'all living beings possess the virtuous nature of the dragon girl'. In that sense, the dragon girl repre-

sents all people. That's why the dragon girl proclaims that her attainment of Buddhahood is also Shariputra's attainment of Buddhahood."<sup>13</sup>

In another respect, since ancient times, the Shinto view that emphasized "women were unclean"<sup>14</sup> was also refuted by Nichiren. In a dialogue between Ikeda and Professor Axinia Djourova (Aksinia Djurova) of Sofia University (Bulgaria),<sup>15</sup> the following exchange took place.

Djourova: Women, who are the bearers and nurturers of life, have for centuries endured persecution as being synonymous with evil. Therefore, it is completely understandable that from time to time, women would take a stand against such treatment, and in this age of scientific progress, they are fully entitled to return to the work force as was the case in matriarchal societies before... As I understand it, the degree of freedom for women in Japan may be an issue that still requires more attention.

Ikeda: I agree. Japan has much more room for improvement in women's status in society. In Shinto, women were regarded as "unclean". It is also true that Japanese Buddhism deeply influenced an entrenched bias against women as being impure. However, as you are aware, Buddhism originally espoused a view of men and women void of discrimination, as all men and women are seen equally as children of the Buddha.<sup>16</sup>

In Japan, there still exist some mountains that do not allow women<sup>17</sup>, and going beyond the realm of religion, use of the "unclean" view of women is used as a reason to shut them out from various aspects of society. The "unclean" principle plays a very real role in society, and the speedy dismantling of this viewpoint requires haste.

## **2. Characteristic Features Of The SGI's Women's Movement**

Under the leadership of SGI President Ikeda, women members have developed their activities across a broad range. Here I would like to touch on four brief points concerning the characteristic features of the SGI's women's movement.

### **2.1 Complete Gender Equality**

At the outset, it should be mentioned that complete equality of gender lies at the basis of the SGI movement. Yet, as previously mentioned, a large number of Buddhist schools and groups have historically marginalized women, thus, their starting point for working toward gender

equality is from below zero. Initially, the Soka Gakkai, which derives from a Buddhist background, had to deal with this issue as well, but due to Ikeda's leadership and stance as a proponent of female liberation within Buddhist thought, the SGI was not entrenched in traditional ways of thinking, and was able to adopt a modern view of gender equality.

There are several reasons for this fortunate outcome, including the historical fact that the Soka Gakkai largely developed after World War II, and that it was a lay movement of ordinary people. The Soka Gakkai was able to use historical timing to its advantage, and adopt a principle of gender equality appropriate for the times, and use this as a basis for carrying out its activities.

## **2.2 Self-actualization and Contributing to Society**

Next, the women of the SGI are ground in the Buddhist concepts of dependent origination and the Bodhisattva Way, which means they not only work for their own personal happiness, but also work for the happiness of others as well as for the general prosperity of society. Many members who joined the SGI, especially those during the pioneering stage, suffered greatly from poverty, illness and war. However, women who lamented their karmic fate awakened to a profound personal religious mission and worked to transform their negative life tendencies to one that lead to a life filled with happiness.

At first, the goal of Buddhist practice for most people was self-actualization and overcoming negative personal karma. Through Soka's philosophy, however, countless women have discovered previously untapped power inherent in themselves to overcome any challenges life had to offer.

After achieving a personal victory, they looked outward, to their friends and family and to society as they learned about the Buddhist concepts of dependent origination and the Bodhisattva Way. They knew that even if one were to become individually happy in the highest sense, they could not remain so if people were suffering around them, so they came to earnestly wish to become happy with all those around them. Just as the earth rotates on its own axis, as well as revolves around the sun, aiming for both individual happiness and the happiness of others carry equal importance.

In addition, when the connection with others expands from one's immediate circle of friends, awareness for the well-being of society and the world naturally come into view. The society which the SGI aims to create is one which is filled with the smiling faces of those living in a peaceful world. That is the reason why the women of SGI not only work

hard in their daily Gakkai activities, but also on larger movements such as exhibits and publications, and lectures and rallies, which have been received positively by society.

### 2.3 Diversity of Membership

Third, I would like to point out that the women of SGI come from a broad cross-section of society in terms of area of specialty, social standing, geographic location, and age. In general, women's movements tend to be carried out by a small group of intellectuals or activists, but the women participating in the SGI movement are from a variety of family types, workplaces, schools, regions, and social circles, making it a widely diverse group of people from across all walks of life and ages—a true grassroots organization.

Members often join as a family unit, so the children of parents that initially joined become second generation members, so now there are even third and fourth generation members as well. Therefore, it is natural to have members in all areas of society as each generation occupies their respective place in the normal course of living. For this reason, it is possible to affect a broad change across the entire society, as women in their respective areas are empowered.

The place where one can actually experience the diversity of the membership first-hand is at the local monthly discussion meeting called *zadankai*, an institution carried out from the very beginning of the Soka Gakkai. It is like a flower garden of happiness blooming with young and old, men and women. It is a place where everyone can express their best characteristics and come together to share their accomplishments and failures, learn from each other and determine once more to work earnestly for the betterment of society.

The diverse groups of women encourage each other, aiming toward a common goal, but from their respective standpoints. Although they are different in body, *i.e.* in standing and situation, they are of the same mind to improve society. This circle is ever expanding widely, and not limited to those who are members of the SGI.

### 2.4 Global Network

The fourth and final feature of the SGI's women's movement I would like to mention is its worldwide network.

Ikeda made his first overseas visit on October 2, 1960 to the United States—the year that he assumed presidency of the Soka Gakkai. There were only a handful of members living abroad at the time, but he encouraged them all to become first-rate citizens of that country. In the

U.S., where a majority of members were Japanese war brides leading difficult lives in a foreign land, Ikeda gave specific guidance for them to learn English, to get a driver's license, and to obtain U.S. citizenship, which has become a well-known episode.

About fifty years have passed since that time, and the SGI has expanded to 192 countries and regions worldwide. The respective organizations that started out being lead by Japanese people who immigrated to those countries, now have leaders who are native to that country.

There are members all over the globe now, with the same desire to improve one's own life, the life of others, and the condition of the world by manifesting one's full potential and contributing to society. It is natural not to want to go to war with a country where your friend lives. It is natural not to want to drop bombs there. The human heart easily crosses over national borders to establish deep and lasting ties with others. The SGI has sponsored Discussion Forums for Women in many different countries, and these events have attracted a large number of women outside the SGI who have the same mind to affect a positive change, and this global network is expanding.

## Conclusion

As seen above, there were many thoughts and systems that discriminated and suppressed women in Buddhism, but we can also find a tradition of respect and gender equality starting from the Buddha, reflected in the Lotus Sutra, as well as in the writings of Nichiren, and this tradition marks a line of thought for female liberation in Buddhism. SGI President Ikeda's view on women is aligned with this tradition.

On January 26, 2001, the Day of the SGI, Ikeda announced his annual peace proposal entitled, "Creating and Sustaining a Century of Life" and in it, he declared that the twenty-first century must be a "Century of Life" and a "Century of the Dignity of Life". In order to achieve this, he states, "I feel it is necessary to stress the extremely important role that women can and must play in realizing this kind of world in the twenty-first century"<sup>18</sup>.

We do not live in a world where everyone is completely happy. In fact, the human race faces a mountain of global issues that need solving. The twentieth century was a "Century of War and Violence" and it is imperative that we change the direction of human fate, that we make peace from a society filled with confusion, that we create a society that protects the dignity and value of life. Buddhism is rich with insights to alter the values of society, to offer an alternative to the present system,



to fundamentally change our ways of thinking to make society more humanistic, and to restore balance.

Ikeda is taking initiative to affect this change, and is calling on women to help usher in this new age. A person who knows pain can listen to others' sufferings, and empathize with them, and can see things from that person's point of view. So from this perspective, the role of women, which has gone largely ignored until now, is a rich source of possibilities for opening up the future. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that women finally started standing up and saying that they are willing and able to self-actualize and contribute to society.

The Buddha and Nichiren, however, had already declared gender equality in their lifetimes and recognized the ability of all people to self-actualize and contribute to society, and presently, a person who succeeds this way of thinking is Ikeda. To be a Buddhist does not only entail studying scriptures and texts, but to interpret those teachings for the modern age and put into practice those ideals, breathing life into the practice. Ikeda does this by first showing by example, and then re-interpreting and making Buddhist teachings accessible for the general populace.

Rooted in the deep philosophy of Buddhism, a network of women has responded to Ikeda's call, and has been expanding their efforts on a global scale. Their aim is to make the twenty-first century, a "Century of Life" where all people can be fulfilled with a sense of happiness which comes from knowing that life is highly valued and that both men and women share responsibility in actualizing their full potential so that they can contribute to society. An illustration of "living Buddhism" can be found in this vision, and also provides a key to constructing a framework for the way "Buddhism and women" can be viewed in the contemporary world.

In the ways mentioned above, the SGI embraces a philosophy of female liberation which dates back to early Buddhism, endeavors to actualize these principles in the present, and challenges itself daily in the creation of a new era. Therefore, the SGI is a rich model for study in ways of viewing the issue of Buddhism and women in the modern age.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Daisaku Ikeda (et al.), *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra: A Discussion*, vol. 3, World Tribune Press, 2001, p. 107

<sup>2</sup> *The Group of Discourses* (Sutta-nipata), vol. 2, trans. K.R. Norman (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1995), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> WLS, vol. 3, p. 107.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93–4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102–3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> In ancient times, death, bleeding and childbirth were considered irregular physiological phenomenon and unexplainable, dangerous events. The “unclean” philosophy is an objectification of these sorts of phenomenon. Principally, the three main unclean phenomena of death, bleeding, and childbirth are thought of as originating from women, thus, by association, making women “unclean”. This thinking was linked with Buddhism, and became a justification of the taboo against women.

<sup>15</sup> *Utsukushiki shishi no tamashii* (The Beauty of a Lion’s Heart) with Axinia Djourova, Japanese (1999); Bulgarian (2000)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> In the third month of the fifth year of the Meiji Era (1872), the government issued an edict (*Dajoukanfukoku* no. 98) which resulted in the lifting of a ban against women to climb Mount Fuji, and six years later, the ban against women in Nantai Mountain in Nikko was lifted. After that, one after another, other mountains followed suit, and lifted their ban against women, but there are still places that have not done so. One is Oomine Mountain in Nara prefecture, and another is Ushiro Mountain which lies on the border between Okayama and Hyogo prefectures.

<sup>18</sup> Ikeda, D. Peace Proposal 2001