

**Buddhism and Women: Centers and Peripheries.
A Case Study of Soka Gakkai**

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ABSTRACT: Over the years, Buddhism has been criticized for adopting sexist dogmas against women. While other religions have also been the recipients of similar criticism, particularly with the emergence of various feminist movements worldwide, there has been some effort in recent years to address this issue: firstly, by identifying perspectives held by different Buddhist schools of thought; secondly, by clarifying sociocultural factors over the ages that have influenced the manner in which these schools came to regard women; and thirdly, presenting the views on gender equality of a lay Buddhist organization, specifically Soka Gakkai, and how it is conveying a message of empowerment and engagement for women on a global basis in the modern era.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai, Buddhism and Gender Equality, Nichiren, Lotus Sutra, Buddhism and Women.

Introduction

Historically, social, economic, political, and cultural factors have conspired to relegate women to the role of a “secondary sex.” Religion has been equally culpable; and women have certainly been marginalized in Buddhism as well.

In the 21st century, when gender equality is becoming the ethos of the age, the relationship between Buddhism and women should warrant deeper reexamination. What is important is that in striving to do so, we should not merely censure Buddhist philosophical ideals and principles, but also identify and evaluate the concept of gender equality as originally embraced by Buddhism—and in so doing, inform the process from which to build a new relationship between women and Buddhism.

Unlike traditional Buddhist congregations, Soka Gakkai is a lay Buddhist organization that has consistently emphasized gender equality. Soka Gakkai's third president Daisaku Ikeda has striven over many years to empower women, regarding their flourishing as being fundamental to resolving the manifold challenges that confront the global society.

Ikeda's perspectives on humanity and women are rooted in Buddhist tenets, Shakyamuni Buddha, the *Lotus Sutra*, and Nichiren (1222–1282). Having studied the genealogy of women's emancipative thought in Buddhism and concluded that gender equality is essential to Buddhist thought, Ikeda has sought to communicate this in modern, readily accessible terms for contemporary society.

This presentation provides the perspectives of women held by Shakyamuni, the *Lotus Sutra*, and Nichiren while introducing Ikeda's beliefs regarding women that have been shaped and sustained by these three points of reference.

1. Shakyamuni Buddha's View of Women

Discrimination against women was a demonstrable fact of life in the Indian subcontinent at the time Buddhism was founded. They were seen as inferior to men, and their rights and activities were rigidly restrained. In contrast, Shakyamuni Buddha saw both sexes as being religiously equal. Although women were thought to be a distractive influence, and thus excluded from monastic practice, their basic nature and capacity for religious salvation was not necessarily denied.

For example, in explaining his dharma, the Buddha compared it to a cart:

Be it woman, be it man for whom /

Such chariot doth wait, by that same car /

Into Nibbāna's presence shall they come (*The Books of the Kindred Sayings [Sanyutta-Nikāya], Part I* 1971, 45).

Moreover, the Buddha described the Brahman as follows:

Not by birth does one become an outcaste, not by birth does one become a brahman. By (one's) action one becomes an outcaste, by (one's) action one becomes a brahman (*The Group of Discourses [Sutta-Nipāta], vol. II* 1995, 16).

For Shakyamuni, one's worth was derived from deeds rather than attributes, and neither status nor gender were relevant.

His attitude toward women was further exemplified by their ordination into the clergy. Although a nun's practice was circumscribed with special rules—there were more precepts for nuns (348) than for monks (250)—, the very fact that women were admitted into the clergy at all was still an epochal development for the time.

The *Therīgāthā* (*Verses of the Elder Nuns*) vividly describes the circumstances and practices of nuns. In the work, the Buddha speaks to them as follows:

To Dhīrā, he said, “Dhīrā, attain cessation, the stilling of the (evil) notions, happiness; gain quenching, unsurpassed rest-from-exertion” (*The Elders' Verses II [Therīgāthā]* 1995, 1).

And to Mittā, “Mittā, having gone forth in faith, be one who delights in friends; develop good mental states for the attainment of rest-from-exertion” (*The Elders' Verses II [Therīgāthā]* 1995, 192).

These passages indicate that the Buddha considered it to be natural for nuns to reach the state of Nirvana.

Moreover, the nun Somā proclaims,

What (harm) could the woman's state do to us, when the mind is well-concentrated, when knowledge exists for someone rightly having insight into the doctrine? (*The Elders' Verses II [Therīgāthā]* 1995, 192).

During Shakyamuni's lifetime, monks and nuns undertook the same religious practices as the Buddha's disciples, and women experienced no discrimination with men in terms of their qualification for religious salvation. However, after the Buddha's passing, with Buddhist factions and movements being led mainly by monks, the status of nuns gradually declined.

It was during this period that the doctrine holding that women are subject to the five obstacles emerged. This doctrine purported that women cannot become a Brahma heavenly king, a King Shakra, a devil king, a wheel-turning sage king, or a Buddha. This was not merely a recusal of the female potential, but a basic denial of the essential religious qualification of women.

Thus began the gradual erosion of gender equality in Buddhism.

2. *Women in Mahayana Sutras*

The Mahayana Buddhist movement, which emerged around the first century BCE, was strongly influenced by the social institutions of the time because of the large role the laity played in it. The movement's view of women was also influenced by extant socially approved thoughts as incorporated in the Laws of Manu. This legal text or code rejected the notion of female independence, categorized women as being malignant by nature, and proscribed their reading of the Vedas. As Mahayana Buddhism absorbed the socially accepted ideas of the day, the attainment of Buddhahood by women was firmly denied, and their basic iniquity underscored.

However, even under these circumstances, a number of Buddhist scriptures were emerging that did not subscribe to such misogynistic beliefs. For example, the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* stated that it was an illusion to distinguish man from woman based on the concept of “emptiness” or non-substantiality. The *Śrīmālā Sutra* expounded that both men and women could attain Buddhahood equally, based on the concept of True Dharma. The most groundbreaking of all teachings was the *Lotus Sutra*, which revealed for the first time the dragon daughter's attainment of Buddhahood in the twelfth, or *Devadatta*, chapter. Despite her doing so, Śāriputra could not bring himself to believe it, so profoundly prejudiced was he by the theory of the five obstacles. According to the Sutra, the dragon daughter was transformed into a man before an assembly gathered before the Buddha; by carrying out her bodhisattva practice she gained spiritual enlightenment—and only then did Śāriputra become a believer (*The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras* 2009).

The dragon daughter's need to metamorphosize into a man before she gained enlightenment has been reproved in recent years. But what such criticism often neglects is the sociocultural context of that period. Given the extant predominance Hindu society assigned to men over women, any advocacy of gender equality was tantamount to heresy, and a potential danger for its advocates. The creature's transformation should therefore be interpreted as a compromise measure, tweaked to meet the social mores of the era. It can also be argued that it was done to facilitate popular acceptance. In any event, the dragon daughter's Buddhahood was a momentous matter in the annals of Buddhism.

3. Introduction of Buddhism to Japan and Japanification of Buddhism

Having traveled through China and the Korean Peninsula, Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century CE, with many Buddhist scriptures having been translated into Chinese.

Among the most prominent of these translations was the *Lotus Sutra* completed by Kumārajīva (344–413). From the *Lotus Sutra*, the Tiantai school expounded the principle of “three thousand realms in a single moment of life” that was carried forward by Nichiren in 13th-century Japan. This principle serves as the theoretical basis and validation of the enlightenment of women.

In Japan, Chinese Buddhism underwent a metamorphosis, evolving to meet uniquely Japanese ways and needs. The first to be ordained were three young girls. It is said that their motives for doing so were twofold: first, they were virgins and, reflective of both indigenous religious as well as Buddhist beliefs at the time, thought to possess shamanistic powers; and second, as daughters from educated families that had emigrated to Japan, the girls were literate. Thus, during this early period of Japanese Buddhism, women were not seen as predisposed to religious inferiority and shunned as a matter of principle.

This attitude continued into the Nara period (710–793). For example, the “Statute for Priests,” a 27-article regulatory code governing temples and priests, was essentially gender-blind despite featuring numerous provisions regarding the Buddhist clergy.

The situation would change in the Heian period (794–1191), however. As a result of the institutionalization of Buddhism, temples served as official instruments of a state religion, and canonical authority rested almost exclusively in the hands of male priests. This came about as the shamanistic nature of women was relegated to irrelevance while the grip of paternalism on Japanese society grew even more powerful.

Among the more conspicuous developments of this era was the exclusion of women from temples and shrines. Beginning from the second half of the eleventh century, women were prohibited from entering and staying in such major Buddhist sanctuaries as Tōdaiji, Enryakuji, and Kongōbuji.

The prohibition was justified by the theory of five obstacles that emerged after the Buddha’s passing, asserting that women were a distraction and therefore

hindered monks from their ascetic practice. What was the cause of such sexist backlash at this time, while women faced little discrimination in the early days of Japanese Buddhism? It appears that other factors had conspired to bring the matter to the fore.

One such factor initially unrelated to imported Buddhist scriptures was the longstanding indigenous notion that women were fundamentally impure, a belief that Japanese Buddhism gradually assimilated. Impurity had been closely associated with “sin” and “disaster,” and the process of purification required a period of abstinence.

Little understood physiological phenomena such as death, menstruation, and childbirth were not seen as natural processes, and perceived instead as being impure and even virulent, and thus to be avoided. In order to evade “infection,” people believed that they needed to isolate the cause, and refrain from contact with anything related with such phenomena. Should such contact be unavoidable, people bathed and purified themselves with salt and water.

While death may have been a “defilement” common to both men and women at the time, menstruation and childbirth were peculiar to women. At first, women were considered impure only during such feminine processes, and able to return to their daily lives once such occasions ended. However, from around the 11th century, women themselves began to be seen as impure—what had been a temporary stigma persisted, and eventually became permanent. Women could not enter such holy facilities as temples, and were barred from other sacred sites.

Buddhism turned its early generosity towards women into a teaching that emphasized the depth of female sin, and strove to institutionalize their discrimination. Such thinking was pervasive in temples and the aristocratic elite, and gradually came to permeate the very lives of ordinary women.

4. Nichiren's View of Women

Buddhism in Japan underwent a significant transformation in the Kamakura period (1192–1333), spawning new schools of thought and culminating in the so-called Kamakura New Buddhism. Although the founders of these new schools held varied views of women, Nichiren deserves special attention.

Nichiren rejected the discrimination against women set forth in other sutras, and refuted their position that women cannot attain Buddhahood, basing his view on the *Lotus Sutra* and its description of the dragon king's daughter attainment of Buddhahood.

Nichiren wrote as follows:

In the various Hinayana sutras that were preached before the *Lotus Sutra*, it is denied that women can ever attain Buddhahood. In the Mahayana sutras other than the *Lotus Sutra*, it would appear that women can attain Buddhahood or be reborn in the pure land. But they may do so only after they have changed into some other form. It is not the kind of immediate attainment of Buddhahood that is based on the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life. Thus it is an attainment of Buddhahood or rebirth in the pure land in name only and not in reality. The dragon king's daughter represents "one example that stands for all the rest" (Nichiren 1999a, 269).

The central point, according to Nichiren, is that women have the capacity for the attainment of Buddhahood. This belief is based on the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, which holds that all life possesses an infinitude of possibilities that can be manifested from moment to moment, thereby enabling any living being to attain Buddhahood in any given moment, regardless of one's gender or life-state.

Nichiren also repudiated those teachings that require women to metamorphosize into a man as a prerequisite to enlightenment. He pointed to the dragon daughter as the first ever example of a woman to attain Buddhahood in a single lifetime and that the outcome is ensured for all women in the *Lotus Sutra*. He asserted that the path to Buddhahood for women is only accessible to those who have faith in Nichiren's teachings, which are firmly grounded in the original intent and purpose of the *Lotus Sutra*.

At the same time, Nichiren clearly denied the theory of the five obstacles, while rejecting the notion that women are defiled by nature. He believed that menstruation and childbirth are not impure, but that they are simply biological and physiological properties.

For Nichiren, faith—not gender—was the primary determinant for the attainment of Buddhahood. He thus wrote:

There should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of Myoho-enge-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 (Nichiren 1999b, 385).

Positioning the *Lotus Sutra* at the core of his teachings, Nichiren made clear that gender has no bearing on an individual's capacity for religious salvation—the original view as expounded by Shakyamuni in the *Lotus Sutra* and one Nichiren carried forward. In an age that was so heavily misogynistic, Nichiren's proclamations, both emancipative and egalitarian, were nothing short of revolutionary.

As Japanese scholar of Buddhist studies Junko Oguri writes, when it came to attitudes on women in Buddhism, Nichiren stands out as “the most progressive among the founders of Kamakura Buddhism.” (Oguri 1987, 122).

5. Soka Gakkai's View of Women

Soka Gakkai, established in modern Japan, owes its lineage to the Buddha, the *Lotus Sutra*, and Nichiren. Introducing Daisaku Ikeda's views on the attainment of Buddhahood by women as revealed in the *Lotus Sutra* in turn provides perspective on and commentary to his manifold views on and expectations regarding women.

Ikeda points out the following on the attainment of Buddhahood by the dragon daughter:

[It] is also a grand declaration of human rights that refutes, by means of actual proof, ideas and beliefs that discriminate against women... (Ikeda et al. 2001, 93–4).

[E]veryone, 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 (Ikeda et al. 2001, 94).

Thus, Ikeda believes that discrimination by any measure, including gender, is an unspeakable affront to the universality of Buddhahood. He continues:

... 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... 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, in essence, is the Mystic Law. From this enlightened standpoint, it would be ludicrous to assert that one sex is superior to the other (Ikeda et al. 2001, 94).

Having explored the sources of gender equality in Buddhist thought, Ikeda has for decades been encouraging women to contribute to the communities in which they reside and to society in general as independent individuals striving for self-realization. It may be, in fact, that Ikeda's perspective of wellbeing transcends gender, assigning primacy on such values as a person's humanity and humility, altruistic service, philosophical beliefs, and tenacity in the face of hardship, to achieve a truly fulfilling life regardless of one's sex or gender.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that various schools of Buddhist thought and belief systems have long oppressed women and displaced them unto the peripheries of Buddhism, the genealogy and interpretation of emancipative Buddhist thought with regards to women has been consistent and continuous, as explained earlier.

Women in Soka Gakkai worldwide, inspired by Ikeda's clarion call for empowerment and self-realization over the years, are striving to transform the 21st century into what Ikeda terms the "century of life," in which individuals of all genders are cared for and share responsibilities, realizing their potential without restraint while serving to better society. They are, in fact, central to—not marginal in—this effort.

And that is precisely how Soka Gakkai views Buddhism: a dynamic, diverse and all-inclusive body of religious thought thoroughly relevant to the modern world, a key point when discussing the complex, often controversial and misunderstood relationship between women and Buddhism.

Indeed, gender equality as perceived in the *Lotus Sutra*, Nichiren Buddhism, and Soka Gakkai has broader connotations, reaching out to address every stereotype and inequality, be it in terms of race, ethnicity, ideology, religion, occupation, academic record, age, origin of birth, physical constitution or mental

or emotional condition. While such distinctions remain as embedded and abiding as ever, Soka Gakkai—based on the principle of the universality of Buddhahood as expounded in the *Lotus Sutra*—maintains that every human being possesses the Buddha nature, and is thus unique and invaluable.

No two human beings are identical. In theory, differences between people are natural, and it is precisely because we, as individuals, are different that we are able to learn from and enrich one another and appreciate our diversity. Yet, in practice, our human differences are what drive us apart, sowing the seeds for discrimination, exclusion, oppression, and conflict. That has been the intractable narrative of human history. As humanity strives to overcome this legacy and create a world built on peaceful coexistence, Soka Gakkai's perspectives on human dignity and universal equality, and its engagement in advancing such causes, may prove highly instructive.

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