

The Concept of Equality in the Lotus Sutra: The SGI's Viewpoint

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Introduction

THE concept of equality is a special feature of Buddhist thought. During the Buddha's lifetime, the caste system was one source of discrimination in society. In addition to this, there was a strong social tendency for women to be regarded with disdain. Under such circumstances, the Buddha preached against the caste system and advocated equality of all people. From the beginning, Buddhism espoused the concept of equality of all people.

The Buddha said, "Difference there is in beings endowed with bodies, but amongst men this is not the case, the difference amongst men is nominal (only)."¹ He also said, "Not by birth is one a Brâmana, nor is one by birth no Brâmana; by work (kammanâ) one is a Brâmana, by work one is no Brâmana."²

The above indicates that the Buddha rejected discrimination based on people's attributes or birth, and that one's behavior was of highest importance. He preached that all people had the potential for Buddhahood within themselves, and for this, deserved equal respect.

Such thinking also extended to his view of women. Many women in those days were forced to live their lives subordinate to their husbands or families. They were not treated as independent people, and their rights and actions were severely restricted. Some of the Buddha's teachings for lay women reflect this social norm, and there are even some teachings that warn male priests to avoid women as they can become obstacles to ascetic practices.

However, it is highly significant that the Buddha asserted the equality of religious competence of men and women. He never denied women's religious competence and qualification. For example, he taught, "Charioteer I say is the Teaching and right view, the attendant. If any woman or man goes in this direction, he reaches close up to extinction in this vehicle."³

Based on such concepts, the Lotus Sutra clearly indicates the equality of all men and women. The idea of the one vehicle is "the most impor-

tant message of the Lotus Sutra, which tells us that all men and women can attain Buddhahood.”⁴

Soka Gakkai International (SGI) which has developed in this modern world makes this idea of Buddhist equality one of their basic theoretical concepts. The Buddha’s concept of equality, and especially the concept of enlightenment of all people contained in the Lotus Sutra is one of the most important ethical foundations of SGI’s mass movement.

Today, I would like to discuss the concept of equality from the standpoint of SGI, focusing on the ideas within the Lotus Sutra and their interpretations by Daisaku Ikeda, President of SGI. President Ikeda’s interpretation is significant not only from the point of theory, but also from that of practice as he is the leader of a mass movement. He revives the wisdom and insights of the Lotus Sutra for the modern world.

1. The Enlightenment of the two vehicles ? Expedient Means chapter

There are three major ideas contained in the Lotus Sutra: enlightenment of all people, the eternal Buddha, and the practice of the Bodhisattva Way. The first indicates the equality of all men and women. The Lotus Sutra states that all people are entities of the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single life-moment and can attain Buddhahood. This idea is especially focused on in the Expedient Means chapter, where the enlightenment of those of the two vehicles—the voice-hearers and the cause-awakened—is introduced. Previous to this sutra, it was said that the people of these two vehicles could not attain enlightenment. Furthermore, the Devadatta chapter tells of the attainment of evil people and women, who were also described as incapable of becoming Buddhas in other sutras.

The Expedient Means chapter says: “The Thus Come Ones have only a single Buddha vehicle which they employ in order to preach the Law to living beings.” (Burton Watson (tr.), *The Lotus Sutra*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993, p. 31). The single Buddha vehicle means a doctrine that declares all people can attain Buddhahood. From such point of view, the Lotus Sutra indicates the enlightenment of the two vehicles, evil people, and women. At first, I would like to discuss about the enlightenment of the two vehicles. The two vehicles mean the voice-hearers and the cause-awakened.

At the beginning of the Expedient Means chapter, there are these words: “The wisdom of the Buddhas is infinitely profound and immeasurable. The door to this wisdom is difficult to understand and difficult

to enter. Not one of the voice-hearers or the cause-awakened is able to comprehend it.” (Watson, p. 23)

The voice-hearers are described in the Simile and Parable chapter of the Lotus Sutra as follows: “Shariputra, if there are living beings who are inwardly wise in nature, and who attend the Buddha, the World-Honored One, hear the Law, believe and accept it, and put forth diligent effort, desiring to escape quickly from the threefold world and seeking to attain nirvana, they shall be called (those who ride) the vehicle of the voice-hearer.” (Watson, p. 60) The voice-hearers are people who understand the doctrine of four noble truths—the truth of suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering—when they hear the Buddha’s teaching, and practice with the objective of entering Nirvana.

As for the cause-awakened, they are described as follows: “If there are living beings who attend the Buddha, the World-Honored One, hear the Law, believe and accept it, and put forth diligent effort, seeking wisdom that comes of itself, taking solitary delight in goodness and tranquility, and profoundly understanding the causes and conditions of all phenomena, they shall be called (those who ride) the vehicle of the pratyekabuddha.” (Watson, p. 61) The pratyekabuddhas are the cause-awakened. They profoundly understand deep Buddhist thought like the twelve-linked chain of causation, not only by hearing the Buddha’s teaching, but also by self-observation of nature and phenomena.

Although they are arhats who are free from attachments to this world, they are criticized because for escaping from reality, being self-centered and lacking altruism. They don’t have a goal to better society at large, and lack compassion. They only wish to escape from the four sufferings. This is what is meant by the disposition of the two vehicles⁵, and this is why they cannot attain enlightenment.

However, the Lotus Sutra declares the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single moment of life, and teaches that people of the two vehicles can, in fact, attain Buddhahood. This is the doctrine of the one single Buddha vehicle. In the provisional sutras, there was the concept of the three vehicles—a vehicle for the voice-hearers, a vehicle for the pratyekabuddhas, and Mahayana sutras for bodhisattvas. However, in the Lotus Sutra, there is one single Buddha vehicle, and it is explained that the three vehicles are only an expedient means.

The one vehicle represents the idea that one single teaching can lead all people to enlightenment. This idea is also present in the Hannya Sutra, Kegon Sutra, Shrimala Sutra and others, but in the Lotus Sutra, this concept is emphasized most explicitly.

The Expedient Means chapter of the Lotus Sutra says, “There is only the Law of the one vehicle, there are not two, there are not three, except when the Buddha preaches so as an expedient means.” (Watson, p. 35) Generally “two” means the voice-hearer and the patyebabuddha, and “three” means the voice-hearer, the cause-awakened and bodhisattvas. The concept of one vehicle is understood to have denied the concepts of two or three vehicles and integrated them. The T’en-t’ai school and the Keron Sutra adapted this interpretation, while the school of three vehicles and the school of four vehicles contended this view.

Furthermore, “one” vehicle not only indicates a solitary vehicle, but also a unification of previous concepts. The Lotus Sutra stresses the latter. In the Lotus Sutra, it is proposed that all practitioners (those who have not yet attained enlightenment) should be unified together as one group, as well as the teachings. The T’ien-t’ai school expresses this unification as the replacement of the three vehicles with the one vehicle. Dr. Hiroshi Kanno refers to this as “the three vehicles are expedient means, and the one vehicle is the true way to enlightenment.”⁶

The Buddha preached this idea for the first time in the Lotus Sutra, for he found the people’s state of mind had matured. Akira Hirakawa pointed out, “The Lotus Sutra teaches that all people can receive the mercy of Buddha...Shakyamuni wanted to preach the idea for forty years after his enlightenment, but it was so early. After forty years, the mind of people matured enough to understand the Lotus Sutra. Then Shakyamuni said that I wished to show my aim in this life in the Lotus Sutra.”⁷

In the Expedient Means chapter, Shariputra asked the Buddha for his teaching three times, but the Buddha did not comply. After being asked the third time, the Buddha began to speak. Then some five thousand monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen in the assembly immediately rose from their seats. “When he had spoken these words, there were some five thousand monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen in the assembly who immediately rose from their seats, bowed to the Buddha, and withdrew.” (Watson, p. 30) However, the Buddha allowed them to leave, and then began to speak.

Concerning the above situation, SGI President Ikeda made the following observation in *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*. After the comment of one of the dialogists who says, “[The] one great reason [for the Buddha’s appearance in this world] is revealed as the four aspects of the Buddha’s wisdom—to open, to show, to awaken and to help enter,” Ikeda says, “That the Buddha seeks to open the door of Buddha wisdom (the state of Buddhahood) to living beings means that living beings

already inherently possess the Buddha wisdom. The reason they possess the Buddha wisdom is that they are essentially Buddhas. Shakyamuni's words are in fact a great declaration that all living beings are worthy of supreme respect." A dialogist says, "The Buddha then reveals that the three vehicles—Learning, Realization and Bodhisattva—are no more than expedient means, while the one supreme vehicle of Buddhahood offers the only true way to enlightenment."⁸

Furthermore, Ikeda comments, "The 'one vehicle' means 'the one and only teaching.' Since the Buddha expounds his teaching solely so that all people may attain Buddhahood, it is also called the Buddha vehicle or the one Buddha vehicle. It can also be interpreted to mean the conveyance by which the Buddha himself attained enlightenment. The one vehicle teaches the path the Buddha himself followed and furnishes us with that very same means to follow that path."⁹

As for the enlightenment of the two vehicles, he points out, "In short, by declaring unequivocally that the Buddha teaches only the one Buddha vehicle, the sutra is also saying that all people are bodhisattvas. The practitioners of the two vehicles are thus also bodhisattvas and as such can attain enlightenment. The unification of the practitioners emphasizes that the teachings of the one vehicle enable all people to achieve Buddhahood. Key to this is the doctrine of 'the enlightenment of the two vehicles' expounded in the Lotus Sutra."¹⁰

As shown above, Ikeda took the enlightenment of the two vehicles as a very important point within the framework of all people attaining enlightenment, and talks about the state of mind of the people of the two vehicles when they realize that they can achieve Buddhahood. One dialogist says, "Shakyamuni described the one Buddha vehicle as 'the Great Vehicle, the Law in which all things are equal'. How overjoyed those of the two vehicles must have been when they learned of this supreme teaching, this supreme way of life!"

"...The sutra describes Shariputra as being filled with irrepressible joy and leaping to his feet to make a gesture of reverence to Shakyamuni: 'At that time Shariputra's mind danced with joy. Then he immediately stood up, (and) pressed his palms together.'"

"...It must have been no ordinary joy for this great scholar, esteemed as 'foremost in wisdom,' to leap to his feet. This scene represents the revitalization of the voice-hearers through the Lotus Sutra."

Then, Ikeda answers as follows, "His mind was transformed at its very foundation. Shariputra then pronounces his acceptance of the single Buddha vehicle: Now I have heard from the Buddha what I had never heard before, a Law never known in the past, and it has ended all my

doubts and regrets. My body and mind are at ease and I have gained a wonderful feeling of peace and security. Today at last I understand that truly I am the Buddha's son, born of the Buddha's mouth, born through conversion to the Law, gaining my share of the Buddha's Law!"

"In Mahayana Buddhism, 'Buddha's son'—which may also be rendered variously as 'Buddha's child' or 'child of the Buddha'—refers to the bodhisattva. Once Shariputra believed and understood the single Buddha vehicle, he was transformed from a voice-hearer into a bodhisattva."¹¹

Furthermore a dialogist says, "Shakyamuni explains to the followers of the two vehicles: What you are practicing is the bodhisattva way, and as you gradually advance in practice and learning you are all certain to attain Buddhahood."

"Therefore the bodhisattvas pose as voice-hearers or pratyekabuddha... to convert the different kinds of living beings... Inwardly, in secret, the sons (of the Buddha) act as bodhisattvas, but outwardly they show themselves as voice-hearers. They seem to be lessening desires out of hatred for birth and death, but in truth they are purifying the Buddha land."

In regards to this, Ikeda points out, "Shakyamuni is telling them: 'You may think you are voice-hearers, but in fact you are bodhisattvas. Playing the role of voice-hearers, you lead people to the Buddha way.'¹² By doing so, he stresses the reverse concept that bodhisattva is their true identity and their voice-hearer identity is actually a superficial one.

Furthermore, Ikeda expands the discussion to a way of life, referring to Nichiren's words saying, "Nichiren Daishonin writes, 'The persons of the two vehicles are not the only ones who should grieve when it is announced that they will never attain Buddhahood; know that we, too, must grieve with them.'¹³

And he reiterates the sentiment, "The failure of others to attain Buddhahood is my failure to attain Buddhahood, and the attainment of Buddhahood by others is my attainment of Buddhahood. The birth in the Pure Land by other ordinary people is of my birth in the Pure Land."¹⁴

"Before the doctrine of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds was expounded, the problems and concerns of others were regarded as something divorced and separate from oneself. But with the teaching of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds, people came to realize that the attainment of Buddhahood, while if others could not attain Buddhahood, then neither could they themselves. This dramatically transformed people's view of life and the world."

"The misfortune of others is our misfortune. Our happiness is the

happiness of others. To see ourselves in others and feel an inner oneness and sense of unity with them represents a fundamental revolution in the way we view and live our lives. Therefore, discriminating against another person is the same as discriminating against oneself. When we hurt another, we are hurting ourselves. And when we respect others, we respect and elevate our own lives as well.”

“...As Nichiren Daishonin says, ‘The provisional sutras teach inequality, but the Lotus Sutra teaches equality.’¹⁵ The Lotus Sutra doesn’t preach equality as just a slogan; it teaches a way to happiness for oneself and others alike, addressing the conditions of our lives on a fundamental level and how those life-conditions are expressed through the way we live our lives.”¹⁶

Thus Ikeda focuses on the fact that it is possible for people of the two vehicles to attain Buddhahood, living with others and for others, and emphasizes the possibility of transforming their lives. It is made clear that those once selfish and self serving, they can now realize a new way of life and advance to a higher existence.

Even in this day and age, many scholars keep themselves in ivory towers, and many artists remain aloof from others. On the other hand, there are many people who wish to use their abilities for others and for the sake of society. Ikeda has held many dialogues with intellectuals who act for others and for society. It can be said that they are Bohisattvas of today who have overcome their selfish minds. Ikeda finds the enlightenment of the two vehicles as the way to make people aware of the true dharma and through this concept, proposes a more dynamic life.

2. The Enlightenment of evil people—Devadatta chapter

The Devadatta chapter describes the enlightenment of evil people and women. Though there are varying theories about the formation of this chapter, for example the fact that Kumarajiva’s translation of the Lotus Sutra doesn’t include this chapter, I will not go into that discussion here.

An evil person in Buddhist terms are those who have committed the “Five cardinal sins”—killing one’s father, killing one’s mother, killing an arhat, injuring a Buddha, causing disunity among believers, or the “Ten evil acts”—killing, stealing, unlawful sexual intercourse, lying, flattery, defaming, duplicity, greed, anger, stupidity. However, even such evil people can attain Buddhahood when they become a believer in the Lotus Sutra.

In the Devadatta chapter, Devadatta, who committed the three cardi-

nal sins (killing an arhat, injuring a Buddha, causing disunity among believers) was able to become a Buddha called Tenno (Heavenly King). There are various theories about his life, but generally speaking we know what kind of character he had.¹⁷

One account says Devadatta was the son of King Amrita and an elder brother to Ananda, while another says he was a son of King Dronodana, a younger brother of Ananda and a cousin of Shakyamuni. When young, he was hostile to Shakyamuni; he is said to have beaten to death a white elephant that had been given to Shakyamuni and was his rival for the hand of Yashodhara. Later, he renounced secular life and became one of Shakyamuni's disciples.

However, because of his arrogance, he grew jealous of Shakyamuni and created a schism in the Order, luring away others. He goaded Ajatashatru, prince of Magadha, into overthrowing his father, Bimbisara, a powerful patron of Shakyamuni, and ascending the throne in his stead. With the new king of Magadha now solidly behind him, Devadatta made several attempts on Shakyamuni's life and persecuted his Order. Devadatta is said to have finally fallen into hell alive. However, in the Devadatta chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni taught that in some past existence he himself had practiced under the guidance of a hermit named Ashi and that this hermit was Devadatta. He also predicted that Devadatta would attain enlightenment in the future as a Buddha called Tenno (Heavenly King).

Though Devadatta is generally thought to be an extreme villain, some scholars say that he was not so evil in actuality. Also in the Lotus Sutra, it is not stated that he is a villain. The Lotus Sutra tells only of the part that he was Shakyamuni's teacher in the past. "The Buddha said to the monks, 'The king at that time was I myself, and the seer was the man who is now Devadatta. All because Devadatta was a good friend to me, I was able to become fully endowed with the six paramitas, with pity, compassion, joy, and indifference, with the thirty-two features, the eighty characteristics, the purple-tinged golden color, the ten powers, the four kinds of fearlessness, the four methods of winning people, the eighteen unshared properties, and the transcendental powers and the power of the way. The fact that I have attained impartial and correct enlightenment and could save living beings on a broad scale is all due to Devadatta, who was a good friend.'

Then the Buddha said to the four kinds of believers, 'Devadatta, after immeasurable kalpas have passed, will attain Buddhahood. He will be called Heavenly Kind Thus Come one, worthy of offerings, of right and universal knowledge, perfect clarity and conduct, well gone, understand-

ing the world, unexcelled worthy, trainer of people, teacher of heavenly and human beings, Buddha, World-Honored One.” (Watson, p. 184).

About this point, Akira Hirakawa points out, “in the days of Shakyamuni, Devadatta was not considered a villain...Probably after the Buddhist group became divided, he came to be blamed. I don’t exactly know the reason, but perhaps Buddhists began to regard him an evil man since he caused a division in the Buddhist group, and they wanted to dissuade others from doing the same thing.”¹⁸

Hiroshi Kanno said, “it is very difficult to confirm Devadatta’s legends at this point. Contrary to our expectations, the Devadatta chapter doesn’t convey that Devadatta is a villain. In China and Japan, the Lotus Sutra preaches the enlightenment of evil people. Such a concept is based on the given that Devadatta is an evil man. That is, even such a villain as Devadatta can attain Buddhahood through the Lotus Sutra...It may be because people in those days knew that Devadatta was evil, the Lotus Sutra does not explicitly explain this fact in detail.”¹⁹

Keeping the above in mind, SGI President Ikeda more deeply explores the significance of the enlightenment of evil people as it pertains to Devadatta from a pragmatic point of view. Borrowing again from the discussion in *the Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, one dialogist says, “Devadatta truly represents the villain. He is known as ‘traitorous Devadatta,’ and it would be difficult to find a person of comparable villainy. ‘Devadatta,’ the twelfth chapter of the Lotus Sutra, explains that even this great scoundrel will attain Buddhahood. On the face of it, this seems a most peculiar doctrine.”

“...In addition to the ‘enlightenment of evil people,’ the ‘Devadatta’ chapter explains the principle of the ‘enlightenment of women’ because it chronicles the attainment of Buddhahood by the dragon king’s daughter. In the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings, evildoers and women were described as incapable of becoming Buddhas. In other words, it was a teaching that overturned the prevailing social ethos. This chapter gives dramatic expression to the Lotus Sutra’s revelation that all people can attain Buddhahood.”²⁰

Regarding this, Ikeda states, “The spirit of the Lotus Sutra is to enable all people to become Buddhas. For ordinary people, the simple fact that one can attain Buddhahood is a matter of far keener importance than any doctrine. The ‘Devadatta’ chapter certainly offers a straightforward reply to that question. The supremely evil Devadatta attempted to murder Shakyamuni and created a schism within the Buddhist order. Because she was a female, the dragon girl was discriminated against in society; in addition, her form was that of an animal. In terms of the cul-

tural and social ethos of the time, both Devadatta and the dragon girl were probably seen as having not the dimmest prospect of ever attaining Buddhahood. The teaching that even Devadatta and the dragon girl can attain Buddhahood, therefore, clearly indicates that absolutely every being in the world can attain Buddhahood.”²¹ Here we can see that Ikeda has high regard for the Lotus Sutra which is thorough in its presentation of equality in Buddhism.

Furthermore, Ikeda discusses this from the point of view of the mutual possession of the ten worlds, which takes a neutral stance on the view of human nature as fundamentally good or evil, saying, “if evil functions to reveal good, then evil in its entirety becomes good. This is truly the oneness of good and evil. But if evil is simply allowed to run its course, then it does not become good. Only when evil is thoroughly challenged and conquered does it become an entity of the oneness of good and evil. In that sense, the enlightenment of evil people presented in the ‘Devadatta’ chapter is great proof of the victory won by Shakyamuni. It is his victory declaration. Only when he stands in this lofty state of life as a winner can he say that Devadatta had in a past life been a good friend and mentor and had in this life aided his efforts to instruct people.”

“...We could say that it explains the reality of life. Devadatta, too, in terms of the true aspect of his life also embodies the oneness of good and evil. Darkness and enlightenment are two facets of the one entity of the Mystic Law. Devadatta, who had been Shakyamuni’s teacher in a past life, was in fact the entity of the Mystic Law. Therefore, Nichiren Daishonin says, ‘Devadatta is another name for Myoho-rence-kyo. In a past existence, he was the seer Asita. The seer Asita is another name for the Mystic Law.’”

“Shakyamuni attained Buddhahood with the fundamental Mystic Law as his teacher. This is what is expressed by the formulation in the ‘Devadatta’ chapter of his having practiced and attained Buddhahood under Asita in a past life.”

“...The power of the Mystic Law enables us to change even bad friends into good friends. The strength of our mind of faith changes suffering into joy, into a tailwind to propel our further advance. This is what the ‘Devadatta’ chapter teaches.”

Nichiren Daishonin says, “Devadatta was the foremost good friend to the Thus Come One Shakyamuni. In this age as well, it is not one’s allies but one’s powerful enemies who assist one’s progress.”²²

“To attain Buddhahood, we have to thoroughly conquer our own inner evil. The concrete means for doing so is struggling against and defeating external evil. Struggling to defeat evil enables us to polish and purify

our lives and attain Buddhahood. Because we strive against the ultimate evil, we attain the ultimate good.

Even ultimate evil, when viewed in terms of its essential function of enabling us to polish our lives and attain Buddhahood, can be thought of as a teacher. The point, therefore, is Shakyamuni's victorious state of life in explaining that even the supremely evil Devadatta had been his teacher in the past. Because Shakyamuni won, he could say this; because he won, he became a Buddha."²³

Next the dialogist says, "Fundamentally, all people can equally attain Buddhahood. Since that is the spirit of the entire Lotus Sutra, it would be a contradiction if Devadatta were excluded. Rather, in terms of the spirit of the Lotus Sutra, it can be said that the prediction of enlightenment for Devadatta is necessary. Nichiren Daishonin explains that the prophecy of enlightenment for Devadatta 'indicates that the world of hell also contains Buddhahood' (WND, p. 357)."

"...It occurs to me that since everyone has in his or her life an evil nature as heinous as Devadatta's, if it were the case that those with evil in their lives could not attain Buddhahood, it would mean that no one could. In other words, whether evil people can attain Buddhahood is not only an issue of concern for evil people; it in fact concerns all people. This is analogous to the principle we earlier discussed in connection with the enlightenment of the people of the two vehicles, i.e., voice-hearers and cause-awakened ones."

Ikeda answers, "The doctrine of the mutual possession of the Ten Worlds indicates that evil exists even within the life of the Buddha, and that the Buddha nature exists even within the lives of evil people. This is indicated directly by Devadatta's attainment of Buddhahood. It could be said, therefore, that if Devadatta's attainment of enlightenment had not been expounded, the Lotus Sutra would not be complete."²⁴

Thus SGI President Ikeda argues the oneness of good and evil through the attainment of Buddhahood of Devadatta and states that only after we overcome evil, can we manifest good. This thought may be applied to society as well as individuals. Ikeda points out that modern societies are filled with evil energy and it is most important to strengthen the energy for good.

3. The Enlightenment of women—Devadatta chapter

Now I would like to discuss about the enlightenment of women in the Lotus Sutra.²⁵ In the age of the formation of Mahayana Buddhism, Buddhism reflected the prevailing attitude of disdain of women, which was

mainly seen in the Laws of Manu. We can see it in the denial of the enlightenment of women from the standpoint of the five obstacles of women, and the emphasis on the bad karma of women.

However, some Sutras were formed which overcame the disdain and exclusion of women. The most typical Sutra is the Lotus Sutra, in which the enlightenment of the dragon girl who lived at the bottom of the sea, a daughter of the dragon king, is contained within the Devadatta chapter.

It is interesting that Shariputra questions the enlightenment of the dragon girl according to the five obstacles of women. The passage reads, "at the time Shariputra said to the dragon girl, 'You suppose that in this short time you have been able to attain the unsurpassed way. But this is difficult to believe. Why? Because as woman's body is soiled and defiled, not a vessel for the Law. How could you attain the unsurpassed bodhi? The road to Buddhahood is long and far-stretching. Only after one has spent immeasurable kalpas pursuing austerities, accumulating deeds, practicing all kinds of paramitas, can one finally achieve success. Moreover, a woman is subject to the five obstacles. First, she cannot become a Brahma heavenly king. Second, she cannot become the king Shakra. Third, she cannot become a devil king. Forth, she cannot become a wheel-turning sage king. Fifth, she cannot become a Buddha. How then could a woman like you be able to attain Buddhahood so quickly?' (Watson, p. 188)."

Then, the dragon girl gave a precious jewel to Buddha. "At the time the members of the assembly all saw the dragon girl in the space of an instant change into a man and carry out all the practices of a bodhisattva, immediately proceeding to the Spotless World of the south, taking a seat on a jeweled lotus, and attaining impartial and correct enlightenment. With the thirty-two features and the eighty characteristics, he expounded the wonderful Law for all living beings everywhere in the ten directions." (Watson, p. 188).

Thus women, who were up until then deprived of the qualification for enlightenment, were now shown the way to attain Buddhahood. This idea is an epoch-making one, and this is why people first think of the Lotus Sutra when they think about the enlightenment of women.

Ikeda discusses the dragon girl's enlightenment in *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra*, "the discussion of the dragon girl in the 'Devadatta' chapter is a tale about how arrogant men are defeated by women. Even Shariputra, known as the foremost in wisdom, is no match in faith for the dragon girl. It is also a grand declaration of human rights that refutes, by means of actual proof, ideas and beliefs that discriminate against women."²⁶ He then interprets the enlightenment of the dragon girl from

the viewpoint of the 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.”²⁷

Furthermore, he points out, “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.”²⁸

And finally, concludes as follows, “further, 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 the 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 strug-

gle 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. ‘All women have the right to become happy. They have to become happy without fail.’ This is the spirit of the Lotus Sutra.”²⁹

Thus, using the above as a philosophical basis for the equality of the sexes, Ikeda calls on women to live independently, to self-realize their potential, so that they may contribute to the society. It has become widely known that many women who have answered this call to challenge sexual discrimination and unfair situations, have more fully developed themselves and are progressing down the pathway to a higher humanity.

Conclusion

Nichiren wrote about the concept of equality revealed in the Lotus Sutra, “the provisional sutras previous to the Lotus Sutra, teach inequality, whereas the Lotus Sutra teaches equality. Now Nichiren and his fellow disciples have become self-aware of the unsurpassed way, and are votaries of the dharma of the one great vehicle that will lead all people to enlightenment without discrimination. Now is the time for the dharma of the great vehicle of equality, Nam-myō-ho-renge-kyō, to be spread far and wide.”³⁰

In another writing, Nichiren states, “Once one has heard the sutra teaching that good and evil are not two, that correct and erroneous are as one, then one gains inner enlightenment and attains Buddhahood. Therefore this is called the attainment of Buddhahood in one’s present form. And because one gains enlightenment in a single lifetime, it is called perfect enlightenment in one lifetime.”

“Though there may be persons who are unaware of the principle involved, if they chant the daimoku, they will experience the joy that can only be shared between Buddhas.”³¹

And in yet another writing, he expresses, “No treasure tower exists other than the figures of the men and women who embrace the Lotus Sutra. It follows, therefore, that whether eminent or humble, high or low, those who chant Nam-myō-ho-renge-kyō are themselves the treasure tower, and, likewise, are themselves the Thus Come One Many Treasures.”³²

Thus Nichiren emphasizes that all people are equally entities of the Mystic Law, and can attain Buddhahood without any distinction of sex and age. People of the two vehicles, evil people, women, in other words people of any status have the same potential to attain Buddhahood if

they become practitioners of the Lotus Sutra. Nichiren understood that the Lotus Sutra is a teaching that reaches out to save all people who have been discriminated against.

The SGI, which was founded and has developed in this modern world, founds itself on the concept of equality of all people declared by the Buddha, the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren. The SGI has carried out innumerable activities by various members, irrespective of race, nationality, sex, job and status. These people of various backgrounds have realized their own Buddha nature, and have taken action for self-realization and contributed to society, in accord with the Buddhist principle of cherry, plum, peach and damson blossoms.

Ikeda often refers to the sutras and cites words of Nichiren in his books and speeches. He understands that Buddhism originally contained the concept of equality of all people, and from this starting point, he expounds deep insights and principles and finds ways to apply them to the current times, continuously transmitting the Buddhist message out into society.

In conclusion, I would again like to quote Ikeda's words, "The teachings of Buddhism were expounded for the happiness of all people; there is no discrimination based on sex, priestly or lay status, race, academic achievement, social position, power or wealth. In fact, Buddhism was expounded precisely to enable the discriminated and oppressed, those who have experienced the bitterest sufferings, to attain supreme happiness. This is the true power of Buddhism and the true wisdom of the Lotus Sutra."³³

"A Buddha is a person awakened to the reality of his or her being and, naturally, to the reality of all human life. That is the wisdom of the Buddha and the wisdom of the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra was clearly expounded for all human beings, to enable them to attain true independence. It does not discriminate in any sense between priests and lay practitioners, men and women, rich and poor, persons of high and low status, or young and old. It is entirely for all humanity."³⁴

"The Lotus Sutra teaches that all equally possess the potential for Buddhahood and that all have the ability to savor a state of absolute happiness. It is worth noting that Shakyamuni's intent to make Buddhahood accessible to all people is revealed by the language he chose to preach the Buddhist teachings: the language of Magadha, the everyday language of the common people."³⁵

Ikeda has reinterpreted the ancient principle of equality taught in Buddhism for contemporary society. Not only has he further developed the ideas in thought, but as well as in action. Thus, it can safely be said

that Ikeda has revitalized the Lotus Sutra for the modern era.

Notes

¹ The Sutta-Nipāta, Book 3: Chapter 9: 17, trans. by V. Fausböll, in *The Sacred Books of the East* vol. X, Oxford, the Clarendon Press, 1881. taken from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/sbe10/sbe1035.htm>

² *Ibid.*, Book 3: Chapter 9: 58.

³ *Samyutta Nikaya* 1.46: Acchara Sutta, trans. by Bhikkhuni Uppalavanna, Wikipitaka —The Completing Tipitaka. http://tipitaka.wikia.com/wiki/Acchara_Sutta

⁴ Hiroshi Kanno, *Hokekyo Nyumon*, Iwanamishoten, 2001, p. 46.

⁵ Masafumi Kubota discusses about the two vehicles in his article, Hokekyo no Kadai, in Kubota (ed.), *Hokekyo Nyumon*, Nisshinshuppan, 1966, p. 153.

⁶ Hiroshi Kanno, *Hokekyo Nyumon*, Iwanamishoten, 2001, pp. 46–47.

⁷ Akira Hirakawa/Yoshiaki Mochizuki, *Hokekyo wo yomitoku*, 1, Shunjusha, 2000, pp. 4–5.

⁸ Daisaku Ikeda, Katsuji Saito, Takanori Endo, Haruo Suda, *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra: A Discussion*, World Tribune Press, 2000, vol. 1, p. 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 142–143.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 151–152.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹³ *Nichiren Daishonin Goshō Zenshu*, Soka Gakkai, first published 1952, p. 522.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 816.

¹⁶ *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra: A Discussion*, vol. 1, pp. 149–150.

¹⁷ This content about Devadatta was quoted from *A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms and Concepts*, Nichiren Shoshu International Center, 1983.

¹⁸ Akira Hirakawa/Yoshiaki Mochizuki, *Hokekyo wo yomitoku*, 1, Shunjusha, 2000, pp. 233–234.

¹⁹ Hiroshi Kanno, *Hokekyo Nyumon*, pp. 152–153.

²⁰ *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra: A Discussion*, vol. 3, p. 69.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

²² *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, Soka Gakkai, 1999, p. 770.

²³ *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra: A Discussion*, vol. 3, pp. 84–85.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.

²⁵ I already wrote some articles about this theme. Women's Issues in Buddhist History: Nichiren's Theory of Women's Attainment of Buddhahood, in *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2002. The 21st Century Is a Century of Women: Buddhism and Women, in *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2004. Buddhism and Women: Focusing on the SGI, in *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2009.

²⁶ *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra: A Discussion*, vol. 3, pp. 93–94.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁰ “Okō-kikigaki” [The Recorded Lectures], *Nichiren Daishonin Goshō Zenshu*, p. 816.

³¹ *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* Vol. II, Soka Gakkai, 2006, p. 89.

³² *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 299.

³³ *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra: A Discussion*, vol. 1, p. 43.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.