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Nichiren's View of Women

In the history of Japanese Buddhism since the medieval period, male priests have preached the doctrine that women, who are deeply sinful, cannot attain Buddhahood unless they are reborn as men. This idea remains firmly fixed in the minds of some priests. Despite the fact that in the Kamakura period Nichiren refuted such discriminatory views and taught that women could attain Buddhahood just as they are, there are still some male priests within the contemporary Nichiren-shū priesthood who continue to preach this idea. Taking the passage “women should follow men,” which appears in Nichiren’s writings and refers to feudalistic morality within the context of the times it was written, these priests appropriate these words for their own purposes, passing them off in their sermons as the Buddhist teachings of Nichiren. The statements and actions of male priests who enforce derogatory views of women symbolize a discriminatory attitude that exists in the contemporary sangha. Female Buddhist practitioners feel that we can change this by shedding light on the reality of the situation and bringing about a revival of the true teaching of the founder.

KEYWORDS: *Nichiren ibun – henjō nanshi setsu – goshō sanjū* – Devadatta chapter of *Lotus Sutra* – dragon king’s daughter – women attaining Buddhahood

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THE SECTION relating to women in the *Nichiren ibun* 日蓮遺文 [The writings of Nichiren] is presented mainly through the interpretations of male priests or religious scholars. Before I became a nun in the Nichiren-shū tradition, I usually learned about Nichiren's writings from the sermons of priests and articles in the *Nichiren-shū shinbun*.¹ The more I studied these interpretations, however, the more uneasy I felt: something always seemed very wrong. The following sentence from an article written by a certain male priest is a good example. Although the article initially states that the contents of the Devadatta (twelfth) chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* reveal that the sutra teaches women's liberation, in the conclusion the author writes: "Even women, who turn into poisonous snakes out of their own jealousy, can become good functions of the environment (*zenjin* 善神) who are compassionate toward sentient beings through living in accord with the *Lotus Sutra*." As the concept of "women turning into poisonous snakes out of jealousy" was widely accepted during the medieval period, Nichiren used the idiom as an adjectival phrase to describe the benefits that one can gain by making offerings to the *Lotus Sutra* in *Nanjō-dono nyōbō gohenji* 南條殿女房御返事 (STN 2: 1504). He merely used it in a casual manner and did not intend to have it taken literally. Despite Nichiren's intention, however, the learned priest purposely quoted this phrase alone to describe how evil he thinks women are. If Nichiren knew of this, what would he say? Since the priest's article begins with an emphatic statement of this idea, readers would surely misinterpret it to mean that it was actually Nichiren's own teaching. Yet it merely expresses the opinion of the priest who wrote the article. A careful reading of the *Nichiren ibun*, however, reveals that Nichiren never states that women are full of sin. Perhaps this discriminatory idea has somehow been inherited in the minds of contemporary priests. In the medieval period, the rebirth of women in the Pure Land (*nyonin ōjō* 女人往生) was preached as a doctrine of salvation based on this idea. Such discrimination also led to the development of *henjō nanshi setsu* 變成男子説, the idea that women needed to be reborn as men in order to attain Buddhahood.

Nichiren's Doctrine of Women Attaining Buddhahood

Nichiren preached that women can attain Buddhahood just as they are by believing in the *Lotus Sutra* their entire lives, a stance which differed radically

1. A newspaper published by Nichiren-shū three times a week.

from the perceptions toward women that were prevalent during the medieval period. Let me discuss how Nichiren was able to break new ground in this area.

Nichiren was born in the village of Kominato, Awa Province in 1222 as the son of a fisherman. At the time the idea of *mappō* (the Final Dharma age) was widespread. In the *Hōi-sho* 法衣書, Nichiren describes himself as being “a monk without precepts endowed with false views” (STN 2: 1854). It was virtually impossible to find a priest in Japanese society at the time who strictly followed all the precepts that formed the basis of Buddhist practice. At a time when these precepts existed in name alone, the new precept to which Nichiren devoted his life was to never lose faith in the *Lotus Sutra*. He placed utmost value in upholding faith in *Myōhō-rence-kyō* 妙法蓮華經. Through tackling the predominant ideas of the times, Nichiren, who assumed the role of Bodhisattva Superior Practices (J: Jōgyō bosatsu 上行菩薩), the messenger of the Buddha whose mission is to change this world into the Pure Land and realize the vow of the Tathagata, gradually established his beliefs. As a result, he realized that in the realm of faith, men and women are equal.

In the *Shohō jissō shō* 諸法實相鈔 [On the true entity of life] Nichiren writes: “In the time of *mappō*, there should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of *Myōhō-rence-kyō*, be they men or women. If they are not Bodhisattvas of the Earth, they could not chant *daimoku*” (STN 1: 726–27). Clearly, Nichiren’s understanding was that people who have faith in the *Lotus Sutra* are all equal. One is reminded of Dōgen who lived in the same period and insisted that no differences existed between men and women seeking Buddhism. Dōgen criticized the notion of *nyonin kekkai* 女人結界, the prohibition of women entering a sacred area.

Nichiren felt impelled to write the *Risshō ankoku ron* 立正安国論 [On the establishment of the correct doctrine and the peace of the nation] after observing a series of disasters that brought great suffering to the people. In contrast to Buddhist priests these days who preach in the safety and comfort of their temples, Nichiren devoted his life to the happiness of common people by working among them. His faith in Buddhism was not merely in word alone—it encompassed his entire being. Many women visited or sent letters to Nichiren seeking advice concerning their problems and sufferings, and we can now read many of these letters in the *Nichiren ibun*. From the lines there emerges an image of Nichiren as a sensitive and kind Buddhist, an image that differs substantially from the commonly accepted one of him as a loud and trenchant critic of other religions. The following passage appears in a letter Nichiren wrote to Sennichi-ama, a female follower:

In the letter you sent through your husband Abutsubō, you inquire about the faults and impediments that prevent women attaining Buddhahood. Accord-

ing to the teachings, as the *Lotus Sutra* puts the attainment of Buddhahood by women first, you should rely upon this sutra in all matters.

(*Sennichi-ama gozen gohenji* 千日尼御前御返事; *STN* 2: 1538)

This passage reveals a glimpse of not only Sennichi-ama but of all women in the medieval period, a time when women were widely considered to be sinful. Women were forced to think that Buddhist salvation had forsaken their existence. Let us consider a passage from one of Nichiren's major treatises, the *Kaimoku shō* 開目抄 [The opening of the eyes], which contains his teaching on women attaining Buddhahood:

The fact that the dragon king's daughter attained Buddhahood does not mean that she alone did so. It means that all women can attain Buddhahood. In various Hinayana sutras that were preached before the *Lotus Sutra*, the possibility of women attaining Buddhahood is denied. In other Mahayana sutras apart from the *Lotus Sutra*, it seems that women can attain Buddhahood or be reborn in the Pure Land. Yet they may only do so after they have been reborn as men. Since this is not the immediate attainment of Buddhahood based on the doctrine of three thousand realms in a single thought-moment [*ichinen sanzen* 一念三千], it merely represents the attainment of Buddhahood in theory alone.... When the dragon king's daughter attained Buddhahood, it opened the way for all women to attain Buddhahood eternally.

(*STN* 1: 589–90)

As this passage shows, Nichiren bases his doctrinal foundation of women attaining Buddhahood on the story of the dragon king's daughter, which is found in the Devadatta chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. The chapter contains the phrase, "a woman's body is soiled and defiled, not a vessel for the Law" (WATSON 2002, p. 86). This phrase, which is spoken by Śāriputra, was interpreted in older forms of Buddhism to mean that women, whose existence embodies the five obstacles and three obediences *goshō sanjū* 五障三従,² cannot attain Buddhahood if they are not reborn as men. There are still some who read this passage in this manner. This passage is still easily misinterpreted to mean that the *Lotus Sutra* teaches discrimination of women. Nichiren explains this section in

2. The five obstacles are as follows:

1. A woman cannot become the heavenly king Brahmā (J. Bonten-ō).
2. A woman cannot become the heavenly king Shakra (J. Taishaku).
3. A woman cannot become the devil king (J. Maō).
4. A woman cannot become the wheel-turning king (J. Tenrin jō ō).
5. A woman cannot assume the body of the Buddha.

The three obediences are based on Confucian teachings and are as follows:

1. A woman should first obey her parents.
2. She should then obey her husband.
3. In old age, she should obey her son.

the *Nyonin jōbutsu shō* 女人成仏抄 [On the enlightenment of women] as follows:

When Śāriputra, the foremost in wisdom...criticized women by using the idea from the provisional Hinayana teachings, saying that women were “soiled and defiled, not vessels for the law,” Manjuṣri asserted that the dragon king’s daughter should be able to prove that she was able to attain Buddhahood now in front of the Buddha. Just as he said this, the eight-year-old dragon king’s daughter appeared before the Buddha without changing her snake-like appearance. She presented the Buddha a precious jewel worth as much as the thousand-millionfold word and the Buddha joyfully accepted it. At that time, Wisdom Accumulated (J. Chishaku 智積) and Śāriputra removed their doubts, and thus the path for women attaining Buddhahood was opened. This became the model for women attaining Buddhahood.

(STN 1: 335)

When we nuns have to read this section, which contains discriminatory references toward women such as “bodies of five obstacles and three obediences,” and “soiled and defiled, not [vessels] for the Law,” as a sutra, we feel deep sorrow, despite the fact that it is spoken by Śāriputra, not Śākyamuni. Nichiren, however, refutes these ideas by saying that Śāriputra criticized women “using the provisional Hinayana teachings.”

These discriminatory terms used by Śāriputra, which describe his disbelief in dragon king’s daughter’s attainment of Buddhahood, also surface in a number of sūtras that appeared before the *Lotus Sutra*. Nichiren writes in *Shijō Kingo-dono nyōbō gohenji* 四条金吾殿女房御返事, “When I, Nichiren, read sutras other than the *Lotus Sutra*, I have absolutely no desire to become a woman” (STN 1: 856). When I read the appalling descriptions of women in various sutras, I feel like covering my eyes. Perhaps Buddhism takes its negative view of women to extremes because it is based fundamentally on world renunciation. Nichiren, however, does not ascribe to the discriminatory terms in the *Lotus Sutra*. Yet, sadly, why are women in today’s society, who have taken faith in the *Lotus Sutra*, “preached to” by those who interpret Nichiren’s writings in a manner that opposes his own view of the *Lotus Sutra*?

Nichiren’s Perception of Women in the Nichiren Iibun

Although Nichiren saw women as being essentially equal to men, naturally his ideas reflected the limitations of the times he lived in. The feudalistic view that women should obey their husbands and depend on them appears in a number of passages in the *Nichiren ibun*. As many of Nichiren’s followers included warriors, their wives, and their families, some of his letters express the feudalistic relationship between men and women. For example:

A woman is like water, which takes on the shape of its container.... If [her husband] is good, she will become a Buddha.

(*Sajiki nyōbō gohenji* さじき女房御返事; STN 2: 997)

Women follow others and thereby cause others to follow them.

(*Kyōdai shō* 兄弟抄; STN 1: 932)

The Chinese character for woman implies “to depend.” The wisteria depends on the pine tree, and a woman depends on a man.

(*Shijō Kingo-dono nyōbō gohenji*; STN 1: 858)

When these passages are quoted selectively, they amply demonstrate feudal morality. Even these days, however, the passages are often quoted either at temple sermons or in print and are used to show this antiquated morality. I feel as though these words from the *Nichiren ibun* have been selected and distorted by male priests. Platitudes that are preached in temples all over Japan, such as “women who sacrifice themselves for the household and devote themselves to others can ensure the happiness of their families,” are no different from the ways of living (=ethics for women) taught to women who rely on some types of new religions. Is the feudalistic ethic that “women should defer to men,” which modern-day priests speak of in the name of Buddhism, actually what Nichiren taught? Surely he would be shocked and dismayed if he knew what they are saying, for he never recorded these words to impose feudalistic morals on women in the way these learned priests intend.

It is clear from the *Nichiren ibun* that Nichiren wrote of women in terms of the realities of feudal society, and his view of women accords with the prevalent view of the time. Yet he never clung to such notions as “women must behave in a certain way simply because they are women.” For instance, he wrote the following to the wife of Shijō Kingō, whose faith in Nichiren’s teachings was stronger than his wife’s: “Even if a woman has faith in the *Lotus Sutra*, if her faith is weak, she will be forsaken.” Nichiren also encourages her by saying: “Now take your husband as your mentor in faith and let him lead you to the *Lotus Sutra*” (*Shijō Kingo-dono nyōbō gohenji*; STN 1: 858).

The passage “take your husband as your mentor in faith” contains Nichiren’s advice on marital relations from the perspective of faith. His intention here is nothing like the feudalistic, hierarchical ethic of “always follow your husband.” On the other hand, let us look at a letter addressed to the Ikegami family. The younger brother’s faith is thought to have been weaker than that of his older brother, and Nichiren wrote the following to their wives, whose faith was strong: “You should have no regrets, even if your husbands harm you, because of your faith in this teaching” (*Kyōdai shō*; STN 1: 933).

This passage shows Nichiren’s true intention that women should not follow

their husbands in order to maintain faith in the *Lotus Sutra*, but rather lead their husbands toward faith in the *Lotus Sutra*. Nichiren also wrote:

Women follow others and thereby cause others to follow them.... If you two join together in encouraging your husbands' faith, you will follow the path of the dragon king's daughter and become a model for women attaining Buddhahood in the evil latter age. (*Kyōdai shō*; STN 1: 932–33)

During feudal times, many women lived by following their husbands. In understanding this reality, Nichiren showed how women could influence their husbands from the perspective of faith and attain Buddhahood together, equally. Nichiren clearly envisaged the elimination of the secular, hierarchical relationship between men and women. Therefore his words must have deeply touched the hearts of women at the time.

Why, then, do priests these days prefer to interpret these sentences in the completely opposite sense? In terms of the phrase “Women follow others and thereby cause others to follow them,” Nichiren emphasized the latter part of the phrase, that is, women “cause others to follow them,” in order to encourage his female followers. Yet it seems that priests today try to emphasize the former part of the phrase, that is, “women follow others.” Nichiren negates the concept of the three obediences for women by writing, “the three obediences will disappear in this lifetime. The five obstacles have already been dissolved” (*Kōnichī-ama gohenji* 光日尼御返事; STN 2: 1795). Despite this, it appears that contemporary male priests continue to hope that they can easily control women. I have read a number of different passages where priests quote Nichiren's writing in a manner that clearly reveals their hope. For example, in a small pamphlet that the Nichiren-shū priesthood produced in 1985, *Jitei fujin no kokoroe* 寺庭婦人の心得 [Instructions for temple wives], it states: “women should stay at home and support their husbands.” The pamphlet quotes the passage from the *Kyōdai shō*, “Women follow others and thereby cause others to follow them. When a husband is happy, his wife will be fulfilled,” as the doctrinal basis for this. Nichiren's words are explained as follows:

The term “others” can be interpreted to mean husbands, but why not interpret it as “reason” *dōri* 道理? When we read this passage from this perspective it means “women follow reason and thus control reason.” When women “follow reason,” they display soft femininity. When women “control reason,” it sounds as though they become fearsome and aggressive. If we consider the case, however, where women follow reasoning that is absurd, then the passage means, “On the surface, women appear to follow absurd reasoning while maintaining a veneer of soft femininity, but they actually triumph over such reasoning without being noticed.” Surely this reveals a confident and resolute image of women disguised in the appearance of soft femininity.

Although it is possible to interpret these words in a number of ways, it is as if producers of the pamphlet were saying that women should pretend to follow their husbands who display absurd reasoning while actually leading them in the right direction.

The pamphlet used these days has a new design and name, *Jitei fujin handobukku* 寺庭婦人はんどぶっく [Handbook for temple wives; published 1999]. Part of the preface contains the statement, “The phrases and contents contained within the previous pamphlet, *Jitei fujin no kokoroe*, that are inappropriate for current times have been completely revised.” Certainly it is true that the section indicated in the preface has been removed. Yet the phrase “Women follow others and thereby cause others to follow them” remains in the first chapter as part of the section entitled “The Proper Attitude for Temple Wives.” Looking at this, it is clear that male priests have not fundamentally changed their view of women.

In Japanese society, where men are considered superior to women, this method of “following while causing others to follow,” which can be described as the ethic of the weak, has been recommended as the best path for wise women to take from the medieval period to the present day. This idea is also extremely popular among some new religions in their teachings of ethics for women. I am forced, however, to consider why this particular passage alone from the *Nichiren ibun* is used like an eternal catchphrase and targeted toward women in contemporary society. One cannot help but think that men are enforcing this idea for their own purposes, that is, they are enforcing an ethic that maintains and strengthens the patriarchal system.

It would be certainly difficult to declare that men and women are equal in contemporary Japanese society. Yet if Nichiren were alive today, it is inconceivable that he would think woman must follow men. He states: “When it comes to studying Buddhism, one must first learn to understand the time” (*Senji shō* 選時抄 [On the selection of time]; *STN* 2: 1003). Based on his understanding of the feudal times he lived in, Nichiren wrote about women following and causing others to follow them. Nichiren was a man who chose words that spoke to people’s hearts and were appropriate to the age. Thus, in the *Oto gozen goshōsoku* 乙御前御消息. (*STN* 2: 1100) he wrote: “Irrespective of who you marry, if he is an enemy of the *Lotus Sutra*, you must not follow him.”

Gender Roles in the Sangha

In today’s sangha, the framework where men are qualified to teach (*nōkesha* 能化者) yet women are merely pupils (*shoke* 所化) remains intact. Men originally compiled the sutras and male priests transmitted the teachings to ordinary people. Thus men exerted great influence throughout the history of Buddhism. This fact may be one reason why discrimination against women has continued

in the sangha and has been perpetuated by male priests who have not reflected on their own attitudes.

During feudal times, temples were made part of the structure of authority through the temple registration system. One of the roles of temples was to disseminate to the populace ideas that were useful to the authorities. Although Japan is now a modern nation, the administration of the sangha has continued as in the past, and the discriminatory view toward women remains fixed in the minds of some. This is clear from the following incident. Approximately fifty years ago, around the time when the Association of Nichiren-shū Nuns (Nichiren-shū nisō hōdan 日蓮宗尼僧法団) was established, nuns were in subordinate positions in Nichiren-shū and were not able to actualize the original ideals which led them to become nuns in the first place. One reason why the Association was formed was that there was a strong expectation for nuns to serve the male priests.

Remarks made recently during a Study Meeting for Representatives of Temple Wives' Groups (Jitei fujin daihyōsha kōshū kai 寺庭婦人代表者講習会) reveals that the relationships between male priests and their wives are still not equal in temples today. One person commented: "The problem we all face is that in many temples, wives of priests cannot go outside the grounds without their husbands' permission. This means that the Temple Wives' Group [Jitei fujin kai 寺庭婦人会] always has the same participants." In addition, someone who lived in an area where a temple wife association had not yet been established said, "In the same way that 'the nail that sticks out always gets hammered down,' temple wives cannot participate in activities outside their temples. I did not even know about the *wasan* 和讃 [followers gathering together to sing poems and recite phrases dedicated to the *Lotus Sutra* and Nichiren's life]." These voices of temple wives show that they are subordinate to their husbands in their relationships.

In temples where we practice faith in the *Lotus Sutra*, I feel that a revolution in the awareness of priests is a prerequisite to creating an environment whereby "men and women respect, treasure, and accept each other as humans based on the *Lotus Sutra*" (quote from an editorial published in the *Nichiren shū shinbun* 20 April 1997, authored by Ishikawa Kyōchō). Once it is understood that current relationships between men and women within the sangha, and particularly in temples, are unequal, it becomes obvious why priests interpret the *Nichiren ibun* based on their discriminatory views of women. This explains why contemporary male priests not only cling to discriminatory ideas but appropriate them as "teachings," despite the fact that Nichiren showed the way for women to be liberated by overcoming the social stigmas of the times.

Toward the Future

A fundamental tone of avoidance and disassociation of women has pervaded Buddhism throughout its history. Nichiren was therefore quite remarkable in

upholding his view that women are equal to men. At a time when blood associated with childbirth and menstruation was considered to be defiled, and when the notorious *Ketsubon kyō* 血盆經³ was widely accepted in Japanese society, Nichiren showed in his *Gessui gosho* 月水御書, which mentions the role of women who shoulder the responsibility of giving birth, that he viewed women in an unbiased manner. He wrote clearly that menstruation was simply a natural phenomenon of life and was not defilement.

Furthermore, despite the fact that it has not been quoted much in the past, it is also important to note that Nichiren, as opposed to Shinran who suffered from his worldly desires for women, displayed a magnanimous and positive attitude toward love between men and women. With this in mind, letters Nichiren sent to female followers, such as the following, provide great encouragement to women:

What is known as faith is nothing unusual. Just as a woman treasures her husband, as a man is prepared to die for his wife, as parents refuse to abandon their children, or as a child refuses to leave its mother, faith means to put one's trust in the *Lotus Sutra*, Śākyamuni, Many Treasures, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions, the heavenly gods and benevolent deities, and to chant *Namu-myōhō-rengē-kyō*.

(*Myōichi-ama gozen gohenji* 妙一尼御前御返事; *STN* 2: 1749)

In the *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集, GENSHIN (942–1017) writes: “All of us are impure, even a man and woman who love each other” (1970, p. 37). This idea is representative of the fact that most priests dismissed sexual love and viewed it as something impure. Nichiren's ideas could be said to be completely opposite to this. Women during the medieval period were invariably viewed as being deeply sinful, and often found themselves excluded based on the idea that they obstructed Buddhist practice. On the other hand, extreme images of women have also been produced by the hands of male priests. For instance, maternal instincts alone were highly valued at times while at other times women were worshipped as the savior Kannon. There is surely a need for a more realistic evaluation of women.

Conclusion

Women living in the contemporary age first want to break down the barriers of discrimination that separate men and women. To achieve this, we must eradicate our old ways of humbly receiving the teaching of priests in a passive man-

3. The *Ketsubon kyō*, which is thought to be an apocryphal sutra that came from China, taught the salvation of women who had fallen into the “pool of blood” hell as a result of the defiled blood they had shed during childbirth and menstruation.

ner. There is a way to live in accordance with the Law in a subjective manner through questioning our own way of living. When more women who are associated with male priests change toward that direction, naturally the priests themselves will change.

During Nichiren's time, people lived in fear of unprecedented Mongolian invasions. Consider the following passage he wrote regarding men and women who had to separate from each other under those circumstances:

If we have concerns, they should be about the situation in Iki, Tsushima, and Dazaifu.⁴ Although the people of Kamakura have enjoyed pleasures as if they had been in heaven, they must now depart for Tsukushi. For the husband who leaves and the wife who stays, parting is as painful as stripping off their skins. They press their faces together and their weeping eyes meet, but they must soon separate.... Now they are cut off by rivers, mountains, even clouds. All that is left is tears and grief. How sad it must be for them.

(*Toki-ama gozen goshō* 富木尼御前御書; STN 2: 1148)

As this passage shows, Nichiren deepened his faith by taking on the sufferings of the people as his own. I would like to believe that for us nuns who live in contemporary society, having an insight into the problems and sufferings of this age and society is the path which accords with our faith in the *Lotus Sutra*. By making this our starting point, we can have faith that is rooted within society and the people, and we may be able to understand the true meaning of the *Lotus Sutra* and the writings of Nichiren.

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4. Iki and Tsushima islands were in the front line of the Mongol attack. Dazaifu was the military headquarters on Kyushu. These places sustained heavy damage from the attacks.

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