

The Unity of Husband and Wife



AS for false teachings that gouge out the eyes and delude the minds of the entire Japanese populace, in the final analysis, there is none more mistaken than that upheld by the teachers of the True Word school. But let us set this matter aside for now.

Although the ten similes¹ seem to illustrate the relative merit of the Lotus Sutra and all the other sutras, this was not the Buddha's true intention in expounding them. His aim was to compare the votaries of all other sutras with the votary of the Lotus Sutra and to show that the votary of the Lotus Sutra is like the sun and moon, while the votaries of the other sutras are like stars or lanterns.

How do we know this? The eighth simile² is followed by a most vital passage. It reads, "A person who can accept and uphold this sutra is likewise foremost among all living beings." This twenty-two-character passage is the heart of the entire sutra, the eye of all living beings. Its meaning is that, while the votary of the Lotus Sutra is like the sun and moon, the great king Brahma, or the Buddha, the votaries of the Mahavairochana Sutra are like the stars, the streams and rivers, or like ordinary people.

For this reason, the Buddha surely considers anyone in this world who embraces the Lotus Sutra, whether lay

man or woman, monk or nun, to be the lord of all living beings, and Brahma and Shakra most certainly hold that person in reverence. When I think in this way, my joy is beyond expression.

Moreover, in pondering this sutra passage day and night and reading it morning and evening, I realize that the votary it refers to is not just any practitioner of the Lotus Sutra. Since "a person" in the phrase "a person who can accept and uphold this sutra" literally means any human being, I had thought that it must indicate anyone among the monks, nuns, laymen, or laywomen in this world who believe in the Lotus Sutra. This, however, is not so. For, in a subsequent passage where the Buddha again refers to this person, he says, "If there is a woman . . ."

When I, Nichiren, read the sutras other than the Lotus Sutra, I have not the slightest wish to become a woman. One sutra condemns women as messengers of hell. Another describes them as great serpents. Still another likens them to bent and twisted trees. And there is even a sutra that describes them as people who have scorched the seeds of Buddhahood.

Buddhist scriptures are not alone in this regard; non-Buddhist writings also disdain women. Jung Ch'i-ch'i,³ for example, sings in praise of three pleasures, one of which is the pleasure of

not having been born into the world as a woman. It is widely accepted that disaster had its origins in the three women.⁴ Only in the Lotus Sutra do we read that a woman who embraces this sutra not only excels all other women, but also surpasses all men.

Even though she may be slandered by everyone, for a woman, there is ultimately no greater happiness than to be loved by the man she holds dearest. Let others hate you if they will. What have you to complain of, if you are cherished by Shakyamuni Buddha, Many Treasures Buddha, and the Buddhas of the ten directions, as well as by Brahma, Shakra, and the gods of the sun and moon? As long as you are praised by the Lotus Sutra, what cause have you for discontent?

You say that you have now reached the unlucky age of thirty-three⁵ and for that reason sent offerings. I have presented them before Shakyamuni Buddha, the Lotus Sutra, and the god of the sun, and reported your sincerity to them. A person's body has a left and a right shoulder, on which there are two gods, one called Same Name and the other, Same Birth. These are two deities whom Brahma, Shakra, and the gods of the sun and moon have assigned to protect each person. From the time we enter our mother's womb until the end of our life, they accompany us like our shadow or like our eyes. If we commit an evil act or perform a good deed, they report everything to the heavenly gods without omitting even a detail as minute as a dewdrop or a speck of dust. This is related in the Flower Garland Sutra and

is cited by the Great Teacher T'ien-t'ai in the eighth volume of his *Great Concentration and Insight*.

He states, however, that if a woman's faith is weak, even though she embraces the Lotus Sutra, she will be forsaken.⁶ For example, if a commanding general is fainthearted, his soldiers will become cowards. If a bow is weak, the bowstring will be slack. If the wind is gentle, the waves will never rise high. This all accords with the principles of nature.

Now [your husband] Saemon⁷ is a believer in the Lotus Sutra, without peer among the Buddhist lay believers in Japan. Being married to such a man, you also are foremost among the women of Japan. Because you live for the sake of the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha surely regards you as equal to the dragon king's daughter. The character for woman implies "to depend." The wisteria depends on the pine tree, and a woman depends on a man. Make Saemon your teacher and be guided in the faith of the Lotus Sutra.

The bad luck of your thirty-third year will turn into the happiness of your thirty-third year. That is what is meant by the passage, "The seven disasters will instantly vanish, and the seven blessings will instantly appear."⁸ You will grow younger, and your good fortune will accumulate.

Respectfully,
Nichiren

The twenty-seventh day of the first month

Reply to the wife of Shijo Kingo



Background

In the first month of the twelfth year of Bun'ei (1275), Nichigen-nyo, the wife

of Shijo Kingo, informed Nichiren Daishonin that she had turned thirty-

three, an age thought to be unlucky for women, and sent offerings. This letter, dated the twenty-seventh day of the same month, is the Daishonin's reply. In response to Nichigen-nyo's apprehensions, he assures her that a woman who embraces the Lotus Sutra surpasses all other people, and that, if her faith is strong, she will certainly be protected by the Buddhas and Buddhist gods.

The Daishonin praises Shijo Kingo as foremost among all Buddhist lay believers; as his wife, Nichigen-nyo is

also foremost among the women in Japan. "The wisteria depends on the pine tree, and a woman depends on a man" reflects the structure of Japanese society in the medieval period, when a woman's fortunes were largely determined by her husband. What the Daishonin urges here, however, is that Nichigen-nyo follow her husband in faith. This shared faith of husband and wife is the "unity" referred to in this letter's title and forms the ideal basis of marriage.

Notes

1. Ten comparisons set forth in the "Medicine King" chapter of the Lotus Sutra to illustrate the supremacy of the Lotus Sutra over all other sutras.

2. The eighth simile states that voice-hearers who have attained the four stages of awakening (that is, stream-winner, once-returned, non-returned, and arhat) and cause-awakened ones are first among all ordinary people; in the same way, the Lotus Sutra is first among all teachings, whether they are expounded by Buddhas, bodhisattvas, or voice-hearers.

3. Jung Ch'i-ch'i (n.d.) was a man of the Spring and Autumn period (770-403 B.C.E.). According to *Lieh Tzu*, he told Confucius that he had obtained three pleasures in this world: the first was to have been born a human being, the second was to have been born a man, and the third was to be able to enjoy a long life.

4. Mo Hsi, Ta Chi, and Pao Ssu, who were regarded in China as classic examples

of evil women. They were the favorites of, respectively, King Chieh of the Hsia dynasty, King Chou of the Yin dynasty, and King Yu of the Chou dynasty, and led these men astray into dissipation and misrule.

5. The idea of unlucky ages derives from the ancient Chinese philosophy of yin and yang. The ages of nineteen and thirty-seven were also considered unlucky for women.

6. *Great Concentration and Insight* reads, "The deities Same Name and Same Birth protect people. If one's faith is strong, then their protection is great." The Daishonin interprets this, applying it to the wife of Shijo Kingo.

7. Saemon was Shijo Kingo's official title.

8. Benevolent Kings Sutra. The "seven blessings" means averting or eradicating the seven disasters. See seven disasters in Glossary.