

A Study of Difference of Gender in Nichiren's Concept

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Introduction

Nowadays, Buddhism is being criticized by feminists as sexually discriminating due to the theory of the five obstacles for woman (*Gosyo, pañcāvaraṇāni*, 五障⁽¹⁾). It is true that all Buddhist canons were written with words that men said, therefore there is sex discrimination. That is, it must be said that men are placed in a dominant position and that women are the opposite in Buddhism.

On the other hand, the scholars who have studied the History of Japanese Buddhism and the Doctrines in sects show that Buddhist canons — especially in the canons of the great vehicle (*Daijōkyōten, Mahāyāna Sūtra*, 大乘經典) — reveal the equality of male and female in regard to the attainment of Buddhahood. Particularly, it is said in the Lotus Sutra (*Myōhōrenge-kyō, Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*, 妙法蓮華經) that at Devadatta-Varga (*Daibadatta-hon*, 提婆達多品第十二), women could attain Buddhahood based on “*Ryūnyo-jōbutsu*” (龍女成仏), the attainment of Buddhahood of the Dragon-lady. And the principle by which she attained the buddhahood is “*Henjō-nanshi*” (變成男子), the transformation of a woman's body into a man's.

This “*Henjō-nanshi*”, however, is a theme that the feminists criticise

because it show that a woman's body could not attain Buddhahood (*Nyonin-jōbutsu*, 女人成仏) without converting to a man's. In fact, in recent studies by Ōgoshi Aiko and Odajima Rie which survey the original sanskrit text of the Lotus Sutra, in "*Henjō-nanshi*", the woman's sex organ is hidden by the mysterious powers of the Buddha and arhats (*Jinzū-riki*, 神通力) and a man's appears.⁽³⁾ But because the Lotus Sutra which Nichiren depended on was translated by Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什, 344-413), it goes without saying that there is no explanation of this in his letters and works. Therefore, in regard to the principle of woman's attainment of Buddhahood, Nichiren did not explain the theory of "*Henjō-nansi*". That is to say, Nichiren's view of women did not include the sex discrimination which Buddhism essentially has had.

If so, how did Nichiren see women? You will take it for granted that his view of women is against the social and religious view in those days in Japan that woman are naturally discriminated against, for he declared that all sentient being were given relief with having faith in the Lotus Sutra. Hence the purpose of this study is to consider how Nichiren's view got the better of the discriminatory view of woman. I would like to discuss his view of sexual difference from the standpoint of "gender".

1. On gender

In the first place, I would like to confirm the concept of "gender".⁽⁴⁾

Though "gender" was originally a grammatical term, it has been used regarding concepts of sex, sexuality, sexual difference, generation, engendering, and so on. While "sex" shows a biological difference,⁽⁵⁾ "gender" expresses a social or cultural difference. Since feminists divided sexual difference between a biological difference and a social difference, women were released from the destiny that they have been bearing as a physical fault. Namely, the difference between male and female has two concepts as "sex" (= the biological or physical difference) and as "gender" (= the social or psychological difference). And the feminists say that originally humans were distinguished by "sex" and "gender".

Then, the concept of "gender" is the difference between man and woman that exists before "sex". That is, it comes to show a border line which divides between them.

Though the concept of gender which so far you have confirmed has been based on a distinction between the biological difference and the social one, the new concept is of a continuity between "sex" and "gender". In other words, the social difference you have is based on the biological difference.

In this case, "gender" is one of the concepts which build up a society, so the relation of the political oppositions between men and women is turned out repeatedly, this relation being the one of the dominant male and the dominated female.

The concept of "gender", moreover, can be defined as the system

that produces the biological difference. Namely, "sex" is defined in general discourse as "gender". For instance, the words of God or a myth bind people to a certain perception of "gender".

In this paper, I will consider the acts that differ man from woman. And I will take this invaluable approach based on "gender" to consider Nichiren's view of woman. Since the purpose of Nichiren's religion is to give relief to all beings, you may find in his discourses that the border line shifts to another position in which woman's place was higher than man's. In other words, "gender" in Nichiren's discourse redefined the human body. In his system of code, that is, you will find not the disdain of woman, but her superiority.

2. Nichiren's view of "sex" and "gender"

In the second place, before I would like to confirm Nichiren's view of "sex" and "gender", let us glance through these sentences of "*Ryūnyo-jōbutsu*", which Nichiren quoted from Devadatta-Varga in his writings.

The purpose for which Nichiren preached "*Ryūnyo-jōbutsu*" was to demonstrate that it is possible to attain the Buddhahood as our body is (*Sokushin-jōbutsu*, 即身成仏), including the attainment of Buddhahood in a woman's physical form. Nichiren wrote in *On putting spirits into the images of the Buddha which are made of wood and painted on paper* (*Mokuenizō-kaigennokoto*, 木絵二像開眼之事) :

Said in The Lotus Sutra, "The Buddha is deeply versed/In the characteristics of good and evil, And he completely illuminates the ten directions. His subtle and pure Dharma-body/Is endowed with the thirty-two marks etc." The above two phrases are the acceptance of the non-origination of all phenomena as our own body is. The below two phrases are the attainment of Buddhahood as our body is. It is *Ryūnyo* that is a good example of becoming a Buddha as her body is."⁽⁶⁾

Nichiren maintained that the attainment of Buddhahood is based on "our own body means *dharmakāya*", for the evidence of this he quoted the phrase of "*Ryūnyo-jōbutsu*". Consequently, when he explained in *The work of opening your eyes* (*Kaimokusyō*, 開目抄 : one of the five major works of Nichiren) :

The attainment of the Buddhahood of *Ryūnyo* shows not only for her, but for all of women. The *Hināyana sūtras* (*Shyōjō-kyō*, 小乘經) did not forgive for women's attaining of Buddhahood before the Lotus Sutra. Although the *Mahāyāna sūtras* before the same period forgave for this, it is nominal. This is because the attainment of Buddhahood is not based on the actualization of the ultimate truth (*Ichinen-Sanzen*, 一念三千⁽⁷⁾), but on the transformation of woman's body into man's. As it is said that "Giving an example, we show all one", so "*Ryūnyo-jōbutsu*" have to make all of women attain Buddhahood at the end of period of Buddhism (*mappō*, *saddharma-vipralopa*, 末法).

The theory of woman's attainment of Buddhahood is predicated on

the possibility of the attainment of Buddhahood as her own body is. And the transformation of woman's body into man's will become useless as a snare, when we compare this theory to the other one based on the actualization of the ultimate truth.

In spite of Nichiren's overcoming of the sex discrimination concerning woman's attainment of Buddhahood, he recognized that woman had the five obstacles and the three obediences (*sanjū*, 三従). In Nichiren's letters, there are a few discourses about the discrimination against woman:

"Some Buddhist canons have no theory of the woman's becoming a Buddha. Because woman has no seed of Buddha and no truth, or has the five obstacles and the three obediences.⁽⁸⁾"

"Originally, man and woman are separate about sex. It is as if though fire is hot, water is cold, and as if while woman divers are skillful at catching fish, hunters have a thorough knowledge of how to take a deer. It is clear in the canons that woman is familiar with dirty behavior. We have never heard that they are well aware of the teaching of Buddha (*Buppō*, 仏法⁽⁹⁾)."

From these letters we can comprehend that though Nichiren had understood the existence of the sexual discrimination in the Buddhist canons, he had maintained that woman's attainment of Buddhahood was possible. Namely, although Buddhism has sexual discrimination, Nichiren declared the superiority of the equality of the Lotus Sutra.

Next, I would like to consider what Nichiren referred to as the difference of the sexes in his discourses.

3. The discourses on sexual difference

There are two kinds of discourses on biological or anatomical sexual differences, and/or social differences in Nichiren's writings. The former is in *Kōnichi-syōnin Gohenji*, in this, it is written: "A child's flesh is his mother's, a child's bone is his mother's. . . a mother and a child must be tied firmly by bonds, because a mother conceived a child, bore it after 9 months, and brought up it for many years".

As Wakita Haruko has previously stated⁽¹⁰⁾, the society in the middle age of Japan was patriarchal, hence the duty of a mother's body was to bear a child. Accordingly, Nichiren's discourse commonly reflected the idea of the unification of a mother and a child, and he emphasized that a mother and a child could go to the Vulture (*Ryōzen-Ōkei*, 靈山往詣) together.

When Nichiren taught the female followers about the relation of man and woman, he expounded on that from the viewpoint of the unification of man and woman. That is, the latter is reflected in the following quotations:

"A man is like a pillar, a woman like a crossbeam. A man is like the legs of a person, a woman like the trunk. A man is like the wings of a bird, a woman like its body. . . A home without a man is like a person without a soul. With whom can you discuss matters of business, and to whom can you feed good things?"⁽¹¹⁾

"A woman is like water, because water is affected by a container. A woman is like an arrow, because an arrow is connected with a bow. A woman is like a ship, because a ship is controlled by a tiller. . . A woman depends on a man not only in this world, but next."⁽¹²⁾

Although Nichiren explained the unification of man and woman (husband and wife), you can find, as long as you see these two quotations, that man's position is more important than woman's.

In other discourses on the unification of man and woman, we can confirm not the superiority of man but the equality of sexes, or the superiority of woman:

"Since you, as husband and wife, have the faith of the Lotus Sutra, like a bird that has two wings or a car that is provided with two wheels, there is not anything that can't be achieved."⁽¹³⁾

"An arrow is flown by a bow's power, a cloud is moved by a dragon's power, and a man's achievement is carried on through a woman's power. Now *Toki-dono* (高木常忍) could come all the way to my house in *Mt. Minobu* (身延山), according to your assistance as his wife."⁽¹⁴⁾

Those discourses made a woman's role in a community clear, and the woman's role is more important than the man's in it. Now that you have read to here, you can understand that he realized the superiority of woman. After all, Nichiren explained that the country of "Japan" has a womanhood: "It is said that Japan is a female country. Because Japan was made by the Goddess whose name is

Amaterasu-Ōmikami⁽¹⁵⁾(天照大神).” ; he made this phrase an argument for proving the woman's dominant position.

Conclusion

We can't deny that man is a government existence and woman is in the opposite position, so long as the Buddhist canons are made up of men's discourses. "Gender" is a unsettled state on the border line, for the difference of sexes is discussed in a discourse. So, the border line slips out of place.

In the middle age of Japan, this border line was drawn from a woman's territory to a man's. In the background, you may think that there were various factors such as the fixing of the patriarchy based on the *ritsuryō* codes (*ritsuryōsei*, 律令制) or the ideas of Buddhism, etc.

In spite of the fact that you can't know how Buddhism took part in developing the gender difference of that time, it is true that the sexual discrimination of Buddhism had been accepted in Japan. As it turned out, Japanese Buddhism formers had to declare the woman's attainment of Buddhahood possible.

Though Nichiren recognized the discrimination against woman in the five obstacles included the Buddhist canons, he proposed the new difference of sexes based on the woman's attainment of Buddhahood as her own body is, which is revealed in the Lotus Sutra. The special

feature of Nichiren's discourses is that he propounded the equality of the sexes or the superiority of women. Moreover, you may think that the reproduction of the sexual difference is one reason why "*Henjō-nanshi*" was lost in Nichiren's principle of the woman's attainment of Buddhahood when he taught his female followers about it.

〔註〕

- (1) You can see the five obstacles for woman in the Lotus Sutra. She cannot become *Bontennō* (梵天王), *Taisyaku-ten* (帝釈天), *Ma-ō* (魔王), *Tenrinnō* (転輪王), or *Busshin* (仏身).
- (2) Mamiya Keijin, "*Nichiren nimiru Josei no Kyusai—'Ichinen Sanzen no Jōbutsu'—*", *Minobu Ronsō* vol. 1, 1996, pp. 105-107.
- (3) This explanation is argued by Ōgoshi Aiko and Minamoto Junko, "*kaitai suru Bukkyō*", (*Daitō shuppansha* 1944), pp. 36-45, and by Odajima Rie, '*The Ideas of Sexuality in the Stories of "Henjonanshi"*', "*Indo-gaku syūkyō-gakkai Ronsyū*", pp. 19-34.
- (4) Sechiyana Kaku, '*Gender Kenkyū no Genjō to Kadai*', "*Gender no Syakaigaku*", (*Iwanami Kōza, Gendai Shakaigaku*, 1995), pp. 227-243. Ueno Chizuko, '*Sai no Seijigaku*', *Ibid.*, pp. 1-26, '*Rekisi to Feminism*', "*Rekisi Isiki no Genzai*", (*Iwanami Kōza, Nippon Tūshi*, 1995), pp. 174-184.
- (5) Linda Macdowell and Joanne P. Sharp, "*Space, Thinking Through Gender, Gender, Knowledge*", (*Arnold*, 1997), pp. 25
- (6) *Shōwa Teihon Nichiren Shōnin Zensyū* (Minobu-san Kuonji, 1952), pp. 794.
- (7) *Ibid.*, pp. 589-590.
- (8) *Ibid.*, pp. 400-401.
- (9) *Ibid.*, pp. 646.

- (10) Wakita Haruko, '*Tyūsei niokeru "Ie" no Seirituto Joseino Ichi*', '*Bosei Sonchō Shisō to Zaigokan*', "*Nippon Tyūsei Joseisino Kenkyū*", (Tōkyō University Press, 1992)
- (11) *Shōwa Teihon Nichiren Shōnin Zensyū*, pp. 1762.
- (12) *Ibid.*, pp. 997.
- (13) *Ibid.*, pp. 1514.
- (14) *Ibid.*, pp. 1147.
- (15) *Ibid.*, pp. 1625.

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