

# The Image of the Mother in the Poetry of SGI President Ikeda

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## Introduction

**D**R. Ikeda was honored with the award of World Poet Laureate by the World Poetry Society Intercontinental in the year 1995. This mark of distinction was based primarily on his collection of poems entitled *Songs from My Heart*, which was translated by Burton Watson. Dr. Ikeda is a prolific writer who has composed over 560 poems exceeding 130,000 lines.

One of his early poetic compositions was an impromptu piece titled “Springing from the Earth.” This poem, composed in the summer of 1947 about sixty years ago, captures the emotions of his first encounter with Josei Toda, the man who was to become his mentor for life. The poem “Springing from the Earth” is as follows:

Traveler!  
where have you come from?  
where are you going?

The moon has set  
the sun not yet risen  
in the chaos before dawn  
searching for the light  
I press onward

To drive back the dark clouds of the mind  
I seek the great tree unshaken by the storm—  
will I spring up from the great earth of life?<sup>1</sup>

In 1951 he wrote a romantic love poem for his wife-to-be, Kaneko. Dr. Ikeda has always used the genre of poetry to express deep feelings; he possesses a natural inborn talent for versification. In this love poem he expresses his appreciation for encountering the woman who would play such a decisive role in his life.

In this paper, I would like to draw attention to the way Dr. Ikeda creates the identity of women, especially the figure of the mother, based on his underlying philosophy and thought processes as a poet.

The Indian poet, Dr. Krishna Srinivas, wrote about the mother of Gautama Buddha, Maya, who died while giving birth to the future Buddha. In his collection of poems entitled “*The Buddha: Victory of Humanism*,” we read the following lines:

Twenty five centuries ago  
In India—the Jewel of Asia  
Was born Siddhartha—

Immaculate Saviour of Universe  
In Lumbini Gardens near Kapilavastu  
As son of Shuddodhana  
And Queen Maya,  
But mother died  
Leaving the princely child  
To care of the aunt Mahaprajapati,  
The Scion endowed with thirty two features  
And eighty physical characteristics.

Brought up in silken care and luxury  
And married to Yashodhara, Rahula was born<sup>2</sup>

The poem makes us reflect upon the important role the mother and father play in giving birth to a human being. After spending almost 10 months in the mother’s womb, a child comes to life. From time immemorial childbirth has been understood as a phenomenon involving tremendous risk to both mother and child. For this reason a woman possesses an inherent ability to treasure life, raise and nurture it.

## 1. Women—Guardians of the Dignity of Life

In the poem, “To Those Who Guard the Dignity of Life,” Dr. Ikeda describes about women as follows:

Freedom, peace, dignity—  
women have been the fighters for these emblems

from times of high antiquity

holding life to be of priceless value  
 with unrivaled tenderness  
 taking pains, nourishing  
 faithful for a lifetime to these high principles—  
 these I call true women!<sup>3</sup>

In the teachings of Buddhism, all human beings, irrespective of their backgrounds, are endowed with the Buddha-nature (Skt. *Buddhatā*: The internal cause or potential for attaining Buddhahood/according to *A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms and Concepts* NCIC, 1983). As a result, Buddhism treats the life of every human being as most valuable and respectable. As such, Buddhism is fundamentally a philosophy that respects the dignity of life, and in his poem Dr. Ikeda underscores the life-giving function that women play in childbirth. Women can appreciate and respect the dignity of life more than anyone else. The title of the poem, ‘To Those Who Guard the Dignity of Life,’ encapsulates the caring and nurturing function of women who treat life as a priceless treasure. It is this respect for life that earns women the title ‘Pure Partisans of Peace.’ Prioritizing the position of women is the quintessential aspect of Dr. Ikeda’s poetry.

Next, I would like to focus on the image of the “Mother” that emerges in Dr. Ikeda’s œuvre, in which he highlights the life-protective function of mothers arising out of their unconditional love and affection for their offspring. The following example illustrates the point succinctly:

The seeds she planted  
 With utmost love and care  
 ...  
 Have already begun to sprout.  
 Watching them blossom  
 Into large splendid flowers  
 Her joy is unparalleled.  
 What a noble spirit!<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Mothers as Partisans of Peace

Secondly, let me focus on the image of mothers as representatives of peace and in opposition to the absolute evil of war. The following example illustrates my point:

The aggression of lands,

The trampling down of the people,  
 Oppression, plunder and looting.  
 Oh, the Scars left behind by history's painful past.  
 The cries of babies  
 Even now can be heard  
 Echoing in the verge of the blue skies.  
 The tears of a mother,  
 Flow like rivulets on the earth.<sup>5</sup>

In his essay, "A Mother's Compassion," Dr. Ikeda writes as follows: "My home too suffered the nightmarish tragedy of war. I had four elder brothers. Just when they were old enough to go out to work in the world to support the family in our mother's place, they were called upon one after another to work for the sake of country and emperor. Transformed into a mother of a nation at war, shedding no tears but sending off her very own children for the sake of the country with a smile, I often wonder what storms were raging in her heart."

Dr. Ikeda's strong desire for peace and his deep respect for the dignity of human life arose out of his childhood experience observing the suffering of his mother. His mother's suffering and courageous stand played a decisive role in shaping his determination to create a peaceful, harmonious world. His clear ideas for peace can be observed in his early dialogue with the British historian Arnold J. Toynbee, which were brought together under the title '*Choose Life*.' In his room Toynbee states to Dr. Ikeda, "The tears of grief that wars have inflicted upon mothers can never be forgotten. That's why I have never given up my quest for peace." We can see that the deep desire for peace shaped by the sorrow of their mothers is a point of commonality shared by both Drs. Ikeda and Toynbee.

In his poems Dr. Ikeda also describes the 'origins of his sentiments for peace' in the following lines:

My earliest reflections about peace were  
 Triggered by the deep indignation I felt against  
 The claws of evil that stole my brother from us;  
 The sorrow I saw on my mother's face as a boy.  
 I cannot forgive the militaristic government that  
 Incarcerated my mentor.<sup>6</sup>

The poem highlights Mr. Ikeda's deep indignation against the military junta that callously used his family members and unjustly imprisoned

his mentor. The poem symbolizes his grief of losing his brother and the sorrow on his mother face. His commitment to peace begins from these unforgettable experiences.

### 3. Reflecting on the “Poem for Mothers”

Here I would like to introduce the song, “Mother,” composed by Dr. Ikeda and music by members of the SGI, and dedicated to his mother, Ichi (1895–1976):

Mother, what a wondrous, nourishing power you have!  
 Were it not for you in this world,  
 People would lose the earth to return to,  
 And wander for all eternity.

Mother, our mother.  
 Persevering through the storm,  
 You offered prayers in sadness.  
 I pray you will stay in good health until the day  
 When all your wishes are fulfilled,  
 And, as though endowed with wings,  
 you take flight toward the heavens.

Mother, with your ideas and wisdom,  
 I hope you will perform a melody of peace on the earth,  
 Where people look forward to the arrival of spring.  
 Thus, you will become the mother of the Century of Humanity.<sup>7</sup>

This song was composed in memory of Dr Ikeda’s mother, Ichi, and was completed only a month before she passed away. It is often played by the vocalist Dr. Jutta Unkart-Seifert, who has served as an under-secretary of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, by Ms. Natalia Sats, President of The Children’s Music Theater in Moscow, and by the Brazilian pianist, Amaral Viera.

This song has three verses and 19 lines in Japanese. However the original poem on which this song is based, written in 1971, consists of 26 verses and 184 lines. Although condensed to only a tenth of the original length, it is infused with feelings of love and affection for his mother, Ichi. While the song overflows with sentiment towards Dr. Ikeda’s own mother, it has become a symbol for the indubitable role mothers play all around the world. It is because of this reason that this beautiful

song possesses a universal appeal and deeply moves the hearts of all those who hear it.

The famous Japanese writer Yasushi Inoue, who had lost his own mother a year and a half before, had the following words to say on the completion of the “Mother” song:

I cannot help but feel a deep sense of gratitude for Mothers for what they do for us. Their infinitely deep love moves the heart.

Dr. Ikeda and Yasushi Inoue exchanged 12 letters each between 1975 to 1976, which took a question-and-answer format. This epistolary collection was later published as a book entitled *Letters of Four Seasons* (Shiki no gansho). In the concluding section of the book Dr. Ikeda writes: “Although Mr. Inoue and I belong to different backgrounds, different age groups and have traversed totally different paths in life, there is no doubt that we were able to share and experience a rejuvenating resonance of thought as two human beings.” The hearts of both Dr. Ikeda and Mr. Inoue were able to respond to each other with such a “rejuvenating resonance” based on their shared humanity. I think that we too can share the same sentiment regarding the image of women, especially of mothers, in Dr. Ikeda’s poetry.

Dr Ikeda’s poetry sees the thinking of women, especially mothers, as grounded in respect for life, and believes that they can be instrumental in bringing world peace. This implies that women and mothers are the only ones capable of changing the world. In this regard the poetry of Dr. Ikeda serves as an important message to all women.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have highlighted some of the characteristics of women, the underlying philosophy, and the thought processes as seen in Dr. Ikeda’s poetry. To summarize, we can identify two main points in Dr. Ikeda’s works, namely, Women as Guardians of Life and Mothers as Partisans of Peace.

In a poem entitled, “The Awakening of Humanity through the Restoration of Poetic Sentiments,” Dr. Ikeda states as follows about the power of poetry:

Words come alive.  
And when they reverberate deeply in the hearts of people,  
They have a truly great power.<sup>8</sup>

The Herculean power of Dr. Ikeda's poetry stirs the sympathy of people and evokes universal human feelings that finally reverberate in the entire cosmos. I believe that he is calling out for the revival of poetry through his own example. By reading Dr. Ikeda's poems we learn that poetry possesses the power to connect rather than divide people and avert universal tragedy. Finally I'd like to conclude by stating my belief that poetry is an indispensable factor to bring about world peace.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ikeda, D., *Songs from My Heart*, translated by Burton Watson. New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, Inc., 1978, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Srinivas, K., *The Buddha: Victory of Humanism*. New Delhi: Gandhi Media Centre, 2000, pp. 10–11.

<sup>3</sup> Ikeda, *Songs from My Heart*, p. 103.

<sup>4</sup> Trans. by Ritu Java.

<sup>5</sup> Trans. by Ritu Java.

<sup>6</sup> Trans. by Ritu Java.

<sup>7</sup> Trans. by Soka Gakkai.

<sup>8</sup> Trans. by Ritu Java.