

## **Nichigen-nyo: The Woman With Sunshine Eyes** **By Stephanie Celano, Staff Writer**

NICHIGEN-NYO was one of Nichiren Daishonin's premier followers in Kamakura. The second wife of Shijo Kingo, Nichigen-nyo presumably married at the customary age of 14 or 15. Shijo Kingo would have been around the age of 28. It is believed that she became a follower of the Daishonin the same year as her husband in 1256. Both were strongly devoted to him and actively propagated his teachings.

The Daishonin gave Nichigen-nyo her name which means "woman with sunshine eyes." (Her birth name is not known.) The Japanese character *gen* connotes eyes of wisdom, possibly signifying the wisdom cultivated through faith in the Lotus Sutra.

In Japan during this medieval era, a woman depended on her husband to support her; whether she had fortune was directly related to how well she married. Nichiren Daishonin clearly understood the plight of women as he states in "The Unity of Husband and Wife": "The [Japanese] character for woman implies 'to depend.' The wisteria depends on the pine tree and a woman depends on a man." In the case of Nichigen-nyo, however, because she took faith in the Daishonin's Buddhism, he stated that "a woman who embraces this sutra not only excels all other women but also surpasses all men" (MW-5, p. 157).

The closeness of the relationship between the Daishonin and Nichigen-nyo is expressed through the many letters that he sent to her at crucial moments in her life. In one instance, she and her husband had been trying to conceive a child but were unable to do so for some years. The day before the birth of her first child, at age 28 she consulted the Daishonin about an easy and safe labor.

In response, on May 7, 1271, the letter "Easy Delivery of a Fortune Child" was sent: "You will surely bear a jewel of a child who will carry on the seed of the propagation of the Lotus Sutra. I wholeheartedly congratulate you. How could you suffer prolonged labor? The child will surely be delivered easily." He assures her that a woman of sincere faith is always protected.

The following day, having given birth to a baby girl, Nichigen-nyo asked the Daishonin to name her newborn. That same day he sent a letter of congratulations. "The fulfillment of your wish is now complete, just like... the blossoming of flowers in a spring meadow. Please call her Tsukimaro. How happy you both must be!" (MW- 3, pp. 39—40) The Daishonin's elation was as if his own child had been born.

SIMILARLY in the autumn of 1272, the Daishonin named their second daughter Kyo'o. In August 1273, Kyo'o became extremely ill and not even Shijo Kingo, a doctor, could find a cure. The Daishonin had just conferred the Gohonzon upon the family and in encouraging them he wrote: "In inscribing this Gohonzon for her protection, Nichiren is like the lion king... Believe in this mandala with all your heart. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?... Kyo'o Gozen's misfortunes will change into fortune." (MW-1, pp. 119—20)

Inspired by the Daishonin's words, Nichigen-nyo and Shijo Kingo were able to

help their baby daughter overcome her illness.

Nichigen-nyo personally exhibited her bravery in supporting the Daishonin in many ways, specifically when her husband accompanied him to Tatsunokuchi in September 1271, and again when he made the dangerous journey to Sado in April 1272. At such times, left on her own with two young children, she had to rely on her faith, prepared for the possibility that her husband may not return. In recognition of her efforts, the Daishonin comments that her 'sincerity is deeper than the earth...loftier than the sky' (MW-2 [2nd ed.], p. 195).

IN the letter "The Causal Law of Life," he urges Nichigen-nyo to unite with her friends and fellow women believers in Kamakura and lauds their courageous faith. "I hope you will read this letter over and over again together with Toshiro's wife. You two women were born as commoners... yet you believe in the Lotus Sutra without concern for the prying eyes of others or the danger it may pose for your lives. This is nothing short of extraordinary." (MW-2, [2nd ed.], p. 195)

These ordinary women, of such strength, were a rarity considering the turbulent times in which they lived. Their faith was based on nothing other than a strong bond to their mentor, Nichiren Daishonin. Nichigen-nyo, worthy of admiration, serves as an example of a true victor in faith and life.