

Ko-ama Gozen: "My Story"
By Fay Hovey, Maui, Hawaii

The following article presents Fay Hovey's fictionalized, first-person account of Ko-ama Gozen's thoughts. There are only two extant letters addressed to Ko-ama and her husband, Ko Nyudo, and very few clues remain about what sort of people they were. Because they lived in the town where the government of Sado Province was located, the husband was known as Ko Nyudo—the lay priest (nyudo) who lives in the seat of the provincial government (ko). During the Daishonin's exile, the elderly couple protected him and presented him with offerings, even though by doing so they were putting themselves at risk with the local authorities.

FOR weeks we heard that a dangerous man would be arriving on Sado to live out his life in exile. A priest. A dangerous priest with evil ways. Rumors flew around the village and across the countryside. This man could turn you into an animal just by looking at you. He had vile ways and a terrifying face. He could cause crops to die, when passing your house. We were told by authorities that we were not to have any contact with him under threat of punishment.

Now, there is one thing a person can claim for having lived a long time and that is: Things are never what they appear to be on first measure. My husband, who was steward of our village, worried about the effect of having such a man around and for my part, I thought, "Let me see this monster myself before I make anything of it." My face wasn't covered with wrinkles for nothing. I'd seen enough of life and the cruelty of humankind. "Don't worry so much, Husband," I chided him. "What harm can a mere priest be?"

Men were tossed upon our shore like so much offal. Many of us were moved to pity by the sight of them, covered in leaves, eating bark. Little better off than dogs, stealing dried fish from the racks along the shoreline. Were these not men, human beings, however, misbegotten? I, for one, could never turn a beggar down. I would lock my door after placing a bowl or parcel on the step and watch carefully while they ate furtively, eyes darting in their skulls, like so many ghosts. So I chanted the Nembutsu daily, asking Amida Buddha to take these poor souls away quickly to the Pure Land. They died of disease, dysentery, grief, loneliness, neglect. In the winter, their frozen bodies, covered in snow, dotted the landscape until the spring when they could be properly disposed of.

When the priest Nichiren arrived, there was a great commotion by the landing. We were surprised at their arrival—the seas were still rough for crossing over from the mainland. Using my walking stick, I managed my way to the edge of the crowd and peered through jostling shoulders to where the party disembarked. There were several young priests as well as the notorious man we had been warned about. They were roughly pushed down the main street through the village. Whenever the priests fell, weakened by sea sickness and hunger, the soldiers would kick them and force them to move, finally, to the edge of the village where the wild country began. The villagers crowed at them, "Welcome to Sado, welcome to Hell!" I was very close to them when they walked by, dignified despite their suffering. I looked into

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the eyes of Nichiren as he looked into mine—a brief moment of time. And I saw no beast there.

For some time, I could not get this priest out of my mind. Late one night, before retiring, I said: “Husband, I am going to take them food and some clothing. It is not in me to stand by and do nothing.”

“You are a foolish, stubborn woman and I wonder why I married you, for you have your own mind in things and have never learned to follow my orders. Even at 80 years or more, you are as stubborn as you were as a young girl. Do you know what will happen to us if we help these people? They may not survive the night. There are enough criminals outside the walls of this village to do them in!”

“So, I’ll go alone then. They are not animals, they are men. I have seen him and there is no evil there.”

My husband pulled on his warm coat, muttering something to himself about the ways of women, and accompanied me as we crept stealthily through the village in the dark. We found them not far, just inside the forest a few yards, sitting together, wrapped in pine boughs and leaves, quietly chanting words we didn’t recognize. Without light, we couldn’t see their faces, but we felt them bow low before us and heard their polite words of appreciation. “Please do not expose yourselves to unnecessary danger by helping us,” Nichiren said. “Please be careful.”

I never felt better about doing something in my whole life. What kind of man was this, who, in the face of hunger and exposure, would display compassionate concern for us? This was unlike most priests of my acquaintance who seemed more occupied with the accumulation of contributions and the embroidery on their robes. That night, I vowed these men would not starve if I could help it. They had settled into the broken-down shrine called Sanmai-do in the middle of a graveyard. This is where they would have passed the winter together. Nichiren sent most of them back to the mainland even though they were prepared to remain and die with him on Sado. There simply wasn’t enough food to go around. Imagine our surprise one night when we encountered two other figures carrying baskets on the trail to the graveyard! It was Abutsu-bo and his wife, Sennichi-ama, another elderly couple like ourselves, taking rice, miso and skewers of dried persimmons. Abutsu-bo had first confronted the priest in anger, determined to kill him and do away with this nuisance once and for all! It took one visit for Abutsu-bo to see there was something more to this priest with his chief disciple in residence at Sanmai-do.

Nichiren told us we had formed karmic bonds in the distant past and we were reunited on Sado once again. My husband and I both embraced the Lotus Sutra and the chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, knowing fully we might die because of our new faith.

“Husband,” I said, “we must die of something. Let us die for something we believe in. We’ve come too far to turn back.” And so it was that we enjoyed precious time with this priest with his straightforward ways and penetrating words. “Since you have no children, I’ll be your son,” he said. Nothing he said could’ve touched us more deeply. All my life I had wanted children of my own. He had seen directly into my heart. Just imagine the joy we felt.

All of us who helped Nichiren and his disciple, Nikko, to survive their privations

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on Sado were deeply reluctant to see them both go when the pardon was delivered. We knew that it was time and, like all old people, my husband and I know nothing lasts for long. But oh, how our hearts ached when he left. "Whenever you yearn for me, Nichiren, look toward the sun, which appears in the morning, and the moon, which appears in the evening. I will invariably be reflected in the sun and the moon," he gently said before he left.

As I move about my garden now, I feel the sun on my shoulder as if he were standing nearby. "How mysterious life is," I think. "What if I had never looked into his eyes?" And then I bend to gather some vegetables for dinner. □

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