

## NANJO TOKIMITSU — UENO THE WISE

By Fay Hovey, Maui, Hawaii

*The following is a fictionalized first-person account of Nanjo Tokimitsu's thoughts. Born in Kamakura, he was the second son of Nanjo Hyoe-Shichiro, a follower of Nichiren Daishonin and lord of a village called Ueno in the Fuji area. Nanjo Tokimitsu began practicing the Daishonin's Buddhism at a young age and received many personal letters from him, including "The Person and the Law," "Good Fortune in this Life" and "The Story of Ohashi no Taro." Follow-ing the Atsuhara Persecution, Nanjo Tokimitsu earned the title "Ueno the Wise" for the valiant role he played in protecting believers.*

THERE are those whose path is unknown to them and their lives are a journey of discovery; every twist and turn a mystery; every victory or defeat peels away another layer and they come to know themselves anew. For me, the road was different. From the beginning, the way was made clear. I grew up knowing who I was, what my duties must be and most of all, with the sound of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo as part of my everyday life. When I was little, I thought that my mother was chanting all night long while I slept because she would be chanting when I went to bed and, when I awoke, I could still hear her chanting.

My mother and father practiced Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, no small matter in our turbulent and fearful age. I remember how my father, a warrior and imposing man, who nonetheless possessed a warmhearted manner, would gently guide me to sit and chant together with him, saying to me: "One day, Tokimitsu, you will help lead this family. You must know what to do, how to take care of everyone here. You will need great wisdom, so chant, my young son."

Many people think that young children don't remember very much of their early years, but I don't think that is so. Even though my father died when I was 7, I hold a very deep impression of our moments together. I also recollect the Daishonin's visit to our home when my father lay cold and still in our hall. How my mother bowed deeply and tried not to weep and the dignity and the concern in his face as he expressed his admiration for my father. He walked through the entrance to our manor house and touched each of us on the shoulder or head, saying soft words. Like any child, I was curious about him, and felt myself drawn to him. But I was hesitant to approach him as the occasion was so solemn and the whole household in an uproar over his visit.

Life without my father was difficult. I had modeled myself after him, re-enacting his battle tales in the woods near our home with my brothers and sisters. With his death, it was like the roof had blown off above our heads and my mother was left alone to guide and protect all of us, five sons and four daughters. So, I guess you would say, I had to "toughen up" and, as we were a respected family of the samurai warrior class, there was still much to learn and the years passed quickly. Yet, I missed my father and would often visit his grave to chant and talk quietly of my youthful dreams and concerns. As I grew to manhood, the future loomed on the horizon and I wondered if I would be able to live up to my family's expectations of me. In truth, there were a few times that I felt it might be better to

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run away and pretend to be someone else. Perhaps every young person feels this way: if only life could remain carefree for just a while longer.

So it was that at the age of 16, after the death of my elder brother, that I was officially acknowledged the head of our family in the eyes of the Kamakura government. My mother and I spoke of it one night in the dim candlelight after our evening prayers. While she softly spoke, I heard my father's words: "Someday you, Toki-mitsu, will have great responsibilities..." Where had the time gone? That night after my mother retired, I walked through our garden and gazed up at the stars and the new sliver of moon. I looked out over our estate and I felt a great weight slip onto my shoulders.

Two days later, I was packed and ready to leave for Mount Mino-bu. I had determined after chanting long about it that I would go to visit the Daishonin. I wanted to bring him offerings, yes, but more than that, I sought his wisdom. I wanted to know the man whose philosophy had shaped my life. My mother didn't say much. Like any wise mother, she knew that to suggest I go would make it seem her idea so she had been chanting for me to know what to do myself. Smiling, she patted my boot in the stirrup and I was off.

I journeyed several days and the people I met and the things I saw along the way would make another story in its own right. Beggars, thieves, dead bodies of people and animals lined the roadways. The wealthy hurried here and there with their hired bodyguards. Priests of every description offered to pray for me for a price. Soldiers, harsh and powerful, stopped people whenever they liked and demanded money and goods. To see a smiling face or a person of good intention was rare indeed. It was with great relief that I left the villages of the plains and entered into the mountain vastness where I followed the directions I had been given to a deep ravine where the Daishonin dwelled.

A stream cascaded and sang along the narrow pathway as I approached and I could smell the wood smoke of a fire. Through the trees as I slowed, I saw a movement, a glimpse of a robe, a hand holding a bucket to fill with water. Stopping, I announced my presence, and soon a monk with a broad smile and crinkling eyes climbed the bank to the path, saying: "Ah, so there you are! We thought you might come! Right this way, right this way. The master will want to see you!" And he took the reins of my horse and we made our way to a clearing at the back of a ravine where there stood several small huts and a main hall. There were other monks going about the daily business of gathering wood, preparing food.

All about the place there was such a feeling of peace and happiness. The singing of birds, the wind sighing through the trees, the sound of the running water. The priest that met me on the path, Nikko, came for me and we entered a small hall where the Daishonin waited. He was a good deal older, it seemed, and thinner than I remembered. He was so big in my memory, yet I had become taller than him. Kneeling, I bowed low to the mat, "Sir, I am so happy to be here." The Daishonin laughed and warmly said: "You must be 16 now, yes? I have been feeling for some time now that I might see you riding down my path! How do you like our new home? This is where I will live out the remainder of my life."

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I was impressed with his ease of speech, his informality and I felt that I could confide in him and in the earnest young priest who served us tea and sat nearby. I told him of my loneliness after my father died and how I wanted to fulfill my responsibilities well. He told me that I would have to face trouble for embracing his Buddhism, that I would have to hold steadfast. He also said that I had a great mission to fulfill and that many people would look to me for wisdom and protection in the future.

I stayed a few days, resting my horse and attending the lectures the Daishonin gave to the monks. I helped re-thatch the roof of the main hall, hauled water, and did what I could to help. I had brought rice, warm quilted clothing for the Daishonin, some rice wine and some miso. It wouldn't be nearly enough. I was deeply concerned about how they would fare once the freezing winter lay a mantle of white across the mountains. I could see that the snow would drift in over the tops of the structures there. They would need help to make it through.

Before I left, I spoke with Nikko apart from the others and told him he must send a message if there was anything I could do for them. He looked at me and said: "You have already done so much, Tokimitsu, just coming here. One day I will come to visit you." We felt the great bond that only two people joined in faith can feel. The Daishonin came out to say farewell when it was time for me to leave. I had my life to return to, all of my new obligations. "Look at that stream there, Tokimitsu, make your faith like that flowing water. Some people have faith like fire that quickly flares and is gone. But to have faith like flowing water means to believe continuously without ever regressing. It is worthy of great respect!"

It was difficult for me to leave, yet I departed with renewed confidence and hope. I felt a new excitement about my life and no longer felt burdened. Part way down the path, I turned in my saddle and looked back to see them both standing there. What a profound honor it was to know them. "I'll be back! Please be well!" "Go now, my young friend!" the Daishonin replied, "and please give my regards to your brave mother!" As my horse and I made the journey back to Ueno, I thought of them up there in the mountains thinking of me. And I found the courage to take up the reins and face my life. □