

**CHARLES TRAMMELL, FULLERTON, CALIF.  
Embracing MY 'Sado Island'**

*Diagnosed with fourth-stage tongue cancer, Charles Trammell was given only a 30 percent chance of survival. 'This illness was, and continues to be, my opportunity to change deadly poison into healing medicine,' he says. 'I am grateful that with this illness comes the fortune to encourage and inspire others to a degree I never thought possible.'*

My wife and I were driving home to southern California from a vacation in Oregon recently. Lulled by the steady motion of the car and the fresh surroundings, I started thinking about Nichiren Dai-shonin and his life.

At a study meeting a few weeks before, we had been discussing "Letter to Ko-ama Gozen" in which the Daishonin describes his suffering on Sado Island. "Abandoned in the wilderness and exposed to the snow, I sustained my life by eating grass," he wrote (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 4, p. 142). Sado Island was one of the greatest persecutions that the Daishonin faced, and it might be said that Tatsunokuchi and the subsequent exile to Sado changed him more than any other events in his life. To be exiled on Sado was to be banished from society. The Daishonin did not have adequate food, clothing or shelter and was continually exposed to extreme weather conditions. Unable to carry out plans to execute him, the ruling government officials had sent the Daishonin to this barren island to die, knowing that others in similar situations often did not make it. Yet here, in this loathsome environment, was where the Daishonin authored many of his major writings. I could easily imagine that it might have been the most rewarding time in his life as well.

When he was eventually pardoned and he was finally free to leave Sado Island, the Daishonin was reluctant to go. "Therefore, although life on Sado was harsh, I was loath to leave, feeling as if my heart were being left behind and I seemed to be pulled back with every each step I took," he says (MW-4, 142). It was difficult for him to leave due to the treasured, trusting relationships he had fostered with many of his disciples even while facing perhaps the greatest hardships of his life. Their relationships were so pure and wonderful.

After more than a year of doctor visits for what initially was inner ear pain, I was diagnosed with fourth stage tongue cancer. The cancer also had traveled into my lymph glands. A week after the diagnosis, I underwent a 14-hour surgery to remove half my tongue and all of the lymph glands on the right side of my neck.

Due to the advanced stage of the disease, I was given only a 30 percent chance of survival. The only stage worse than fourth stage cancer is cancer that is in reoccurrence. The cancer I had is also reoccurring in nature, and I had to face the reality that I was up against an extremely formidable foe.

It became obvious to me that all my doctors thought I would die. They gave me the most intensive medical regimen possible. I endured two sessions of chemotherapy, both lasting five days each, and 33 radiation therapy treatments. The accumulated effect on my body was severe.

I would go through spells of uncontrollable vomiting and was unable to hold anything in my system. I became severely weak and dehydrated. I could not find anywhere in the house where I felt comfortable. The extreme anxiety that is a side effect of the medication had me moving from one spot to another every 30 seconds or so, all day long. I lost a total of 55 pounds and was hospitalized on six separate occasions for a total of 33 days. My sincere

wish in the middle of this ordeal was that if I had to endure this another day, I would rather die.

The surgery involved replacing the base of my tongue with part of the pectoral muscle from my shoulder, but the muscle remained in shock after the operation. A feeding tube was inserted into my stomach because I was unable to swallow. I had a tracheotomy and was unable to speak for a month. Once I was finally allowed to communicate orally again, I found that I could not speak well, and I am still going to a speech therapist to relearn how to articulate certain sounds and how to swallow.

Anyone who knows me knows that oral communications is my strength. I am a storyteller. This was my way of dealing with the world as a child. I am dyslectic, and being 59 years old, I went to school before the doctors had identified this phenomenon, so I struggled in reading and writing. But I was lucky because my mother was a music teacher and my father was a deejay. With their encouragement and emphasis on oral communications, I developed a vocabulary outside of the written word. I couldn't spell, but I could usually hold your attention in conversation. I conversed well with others, and I used these skills to camouflage the other difficulties in my life.

So it was not unusual that over the last few years before the cancer, I had developed warm relationships with the neighbors in the seven or eight houses immediately around my home. While none of them practiced Buddhism, we would often enjoy long conversations about our pets or other topics we had in common. I counted eight children and a Christian minister among my friends there, and they all knew that I practice with the SGI.

When I was in the hospital, every child and neighbor came to visit me. The children even made a "Welcome Home" poster when I returned — their pure-hearted support truly touched me. My high school baseball teammates from 1958 heard that I was hospitalized and came to visit. Fellow SGI members and my wife, Joy, constantly prayed for me and they continue to chant for me to this day. How fortunate and joyful I am. "I wonder what karmic bonds we formed in the past," the Daishonin graciously writes to his friends on Sado (MW-4, 142).

And after 24 years of practice, I realized that this was my Sado Island. After years of introducing and encouraging many people to Buddhism, my speaking ability was being attacked. This illness was, and continues to be, my opportunity to change deadly poison into healing medicine. I am grateful that with this illness comes the fortune to encourage and inspire others to a degree I never thought possible. And I am grateful to have the opportunity to appreciate the truly wonderful friendships that I am enjoying in this lifetime.

Following the example set by the Daishonin and due to his encouragement, I have come to understand that, without a doubt, this is the happiest time in my life. I am embracing my Sado. I can't wait to see what magnificent medicine is on the other side of this wonderful poison. This victory is reducing, cleansing and eliminating the karma of cancer from my family for future generations.

Eight months after the initial treatment, I have tested cancer free. I have gained 18 pounds. Every one of the doctors that was seeing me several times a week or more has now reduced my appointment schedule to once every two months, and many are now extending this to three months since I am doing so well.

With the writings of Daisaku Ikeda to guide and nurture me, I am determined to maintain my Buddhist practice for the rest of my life. On our way home this evening, with the scenery flashing by, I reflect: I knew I would win this battle.

**WT**