

THE JOURNEY THAT TOUCHED THE DAISHONIN'S HEART

Background commentary to "Letter to the Mother of Oto Gozen" compiled by the SGI-USA Study Department.

IF you were like most people in thirteenth-century Japan, you would have spent your entire life without ever leaving your native town or village. There would be, of course, treks to the marketplace or to nearby temples or shrines and sometimes the government brought peasants to large cities such as Kyoto or Kamakura as laborers. For many, those trips were the only opportunities to travel outside their local areas, and they were unpleasant ones. In fact, in 1275 a complaint was lodged with the government against a local official for enforcing cruel labor practices on such a trip.

Travelling long distances was dangerous and costly, making it extremely difficult even for those who had an urgent need. As natural disasters, famine and pestilence repeatedly befell Japan during the Daishonin's day, public safety measures did not exist, even outside large cities. Highway robbery and murder were commonplace. Travelers who could afford it hired armed escorts for their protection, and accommodations along highways were scarce. Horses or attendants were necessary to carry provisions and other belongings. Under these circumstances, it was almost unthinkable for an ordinary woman without escort to travel any great distance.

So, in May of 1272, when a woman from Kamakura suddenly appeared with her young daughter at the doorstep of Nichiren Daishonin's place of exile at Ichinosawa on Sado, a remote northern island in the Sea of Japan, he could scarcely believe it. Later he recalled the visit as "almost too amazing to be true" (MW-3, 197). When the Daishonin was exiled to the island in 1271, it took his party twelve days to travel from Echi near Kamakura to Tera-domari where they had to take a ferry to the island. The round trip from Kamakura to Sado and back, therefore, would have taken nearly a month. Having traveled the same road as his visitor, the Daishonin empathizes with her arduous journey:

From Kamakura in Sagami Province to the northern province of Sado is a journey of more than a thousand *ri* over treacherous mountains and the raging sea. The wind and rain make untimely onslaughts; bandits lurk in the mountains and pirates lie in wait on the sea. The people at every stage and every post town are as bestial as dogs or tigers, and you must have felt as though you were undergoing the sufferings of the three evil paths. (MW-3, 52)

In praise of her earnest desire to seek Buddhism, the Daishonin gave her the name Nichimyo Shonin. *Nichi* of Nichimyo comes from Nichiren, indicating the sun, and *myo* is that of Myoho-rence-kyo. *Shonin* here means a sage or a Buddha. The Daishonin tells her: "You are undoubtedly the foremost votary of the Lotus Sutra among the women of Japan. Therefore, following the example of Bodhisattva Fukyo, I bestow on you the Buddhist name, Nichimyo Shonin" ("Letter to Nichimyo Shonin"; MW-3, 52).

ACCORDING to Nichiko Hori, the fifty-ninth high priest of Taiseki-ji and noted historian of the Daishonin's Buddhism, the woman whom he named Nichimyo Shonin and the woman who visited him in exile with her young daughter Oto Gozen—the recipient of "Letter to the Mother of Oto Gozen"—were the same person. Her real name is unknown,

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and the date when she took faith in the Daishonin's Buddhism is uncertain. She was not a woman of high status, although it appears that she was educated enough to read.

What made her life particularly difficult was the fact that she was a single mother. Nichiren Daishonin touches upon her circumstances as follows: "Nevertheless, despite all the risks involved, you traveled to Sado carrying your infant daughter, since her father, from whom you have long been separated, was not to be depended upon for her care" (MW-3, 53). We do not know the reason she was separated from her daughter's father.

For a woman to live without a husband and raise a child was no easy task in the patriarchal society of thirteenth-century Japan where women as a rule did not own property and lacked any independent economic means. Nichimyo Shonin had neither a husband nor an adult son upon whom to depend financially. Prejudice toward her for being a single mother must also have run deep. Women were generally looked upon as inferior to men not only socially and economically, but also intellectually, morally and spiritually. The Daishonin describes the misogynist view of women that was pervasive at that time:

A woman's nature differs from a man's just as fire differs from water, fire being hot and water cold.... A sutra states that it is a woman's nature to be jealous, but no sutra says that women are good at seeking Buddhism. A woman's mind is compared to a breeze; even if it were possible to bind the wind, one could never grasp a woman's mind. A woman's mind is likened to characters written on the surface of water; they do not remain a moment. A woman is compared to a liar; one cannot tell whether a liar's words are true or false. A woman's mind is compared to a river, for all rivers meander. ("Letter to Nichimyo Shonin"; MW-3, 51)

Buddhist sutras other than the Lotus, which were generally embraced in Japan, viewed women in a very critical light, as the Daishonin suggests here. Considering the prejudice that she had to suffer as a woman, the Daishonin's praise no doubt encouraged her greatly. Moreover, it was praise that was fully deserved.

After the shogunate government's all-out crackdown on the Daishonin's followers in Kamakura after its attempted execution of the Daishonin in 1271, most believers in the city renounced their faith. As Nichiren Daishonin describes: "When I incurred the displeasure of the government, even in Kamakura 999 out of 1,000 discarded their faith" (MW-3, 69). Many of them even criticized the Daishonin.

The early 1270s were particularly difficult times—the Daishonin was exiled to a remote island as a criminal deemed dangerous to the government, and his movement was virtually destroyed.

It was during this time that she remained steadfast in faith and traveled to see the Daishonin on Sado. She remained true to her teacher, even when many around her bitterly criticized him. And she continued to seek Buddhism from him literally at the risk of her life.

In another letter, Nichiren Daishonin reiterates his praise for her resilience in surviving in an oppressive, male-dominated society as a single mother:

A woman's soul is her husband. Without him, she has no soul. Nowadays, even married women find it difficult to get along in the world. Though you have no husband, you lead your life more courageously than those who are married. Furthermore, you maintain your faith in the Buddhist gods and continue to worship the Buddha. You are indeed a re-

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markable woman. (“The Supremacy of the Law”; MW-3, 196)

The Daishonin’s description of women’s state here is noteworthy: “A woman’s soul is her husband. Without him, she has no soul.” Here the Daishonin states the predominant contemporary view that a woman did not have her own soul—she had no identity and independence of her own.

In this regard, the Daishonin encourages Nichimyo Shonin never to trade her spiritual freedom and independence for the seemingly advantageous protection and security from men and marriage: “No matter whom you may marry, you must not follow him if he is an enemy of the Lotus Sutra. Strengthen your faith more than ever” (MW-3, 199).

At a time when women’s submission to men, especially to their husbands, was viewed as one of their most celebrated virtues, the Daishonin here encouraged women to actively disobey the men in their lives where those men opposed or interfered with their religious faith and practice. Considering the social and cultural context of the day, the Daishonin’s advice for Nichimyo Shonin is remarkably progressive.

In an era when marriage was viewed as the only source of women’s happiness, the Daishonin makes it clear that what is most important to women is not marriage or a man but faith. Through faith a woman can overcome the insecurity that comes with independence and freedom in such a society and reclaim her soul or true identity.

After returning from her visit to Sado, Nichimyo Shonin continued to practice Buddhism in Kamakura while supporting the Daishonin’s disciples. As the Daishonin states: “I understand that you are looking after the disciples [in Kamakura]. I cannot thank you enough” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1222). In 1274, the Daishonin was pardoned and returned from his exile to Kamakura. After his third and last remonstrance with the government, he moved to Mount Minobu in order to perpetuate his teaching for posterity.

In October of the same year, Mongolian forces attacked Japan as Nichiren Daishonin had predicted earlier. Although the Mongolian fleet temporarily retreated to the continent mainly due to storms, in April of the following year they sent an envoy demanding that the shogunate government submit or face another attack. The government beheaded the Mongol envoy in defiance. Nonetheless, the entire nation was swept by the fear of another invasion from an enemy whose military strength was far superior to that of the small island country.

It is at this time that Nichimyo Shonin once again visited the Daishonin at Mount Minobu. He praises her unchanging faith and sincerity as follows:

While I was in Kamakura, . . . I had no way of determining whether the faith of individual believers in the Lotus Sutra was deep or shallow. This I came to know only after I had incurred the displeasure of the authorities and had been exiled to Sado. Though no one else came to visit me, you, a woman, not only sent me various offerings but personally made the journey to see me. It was almost too amazing to be true. And in addition, you have now called on me here in Minobu. I know of no words with which to thank you. (“The Supremacy of the Law”; MW-3, 196–97)

Judging from this letter, it is evident that over the years the Daishonin and Nichimyo Shonin developed a strong bond of trust. Keenly aware of people’s desperate fear for their lives in the wake of the first Mongolian attack, the Daishonin concludes the letter by telling

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her:

Should any calamity befall us, you should immediately come to visit me here, where you will be welcomed wholeheartedly. Should the worst happen, then let us starve together among these mountains. I would imagine your daughter, Oto, has become a fine and intelligent young girl. I will write you again. (MW-3, 202)

A passage such as this clearly expresses what is at the core of Buddhism—genuine compassion and trust among people.

IN 1282, seven years after Nichimyo's visit to Minobu, her beloved teacher died. After the Daishonin's death, five of the six senior priests he had appointed betrayed him and committed numerous errors, misinterpreting his Buddhism.

One such error, for example, was promoting the worship of statues of Shakyamuni Buddha rather than the Gohonzon. The Daishonin's Buddhism, however, was carried on by Nikko Shonin, who left Mount Minobu to protect the integrity of the teachings.

In 1298, sixteen years after the Daishonin's death, Nikko Shonin established a seminary at Omosu in the Fuji area. It is said that Nichimyo Shonin and her now grown daughter, Oto Gozen, visited Nikko Shonin there. Persevering in her faith despite numerous persecutions and prejudice, Nichimyo Shonin developed a profound and heartfelt understanding of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism.

Her faith and experience enabled her to discern who was correctly practicing the Daishonin's Buddhism and who was merely keeping up appearances while in fact distorting it.

The triumph of this believer is instructive for us in many ways. Though nameless, she left a brilliant legacy of faith, especially for many of today's women who still face prejudice and oppression. □

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