

**NICHIMYO SHONIN—MOTHER OF OTO GOZEN: “MY STORY”  
AT A CRUCIAL MOMENT, A MOTHER CHOOSES JOURNEY OF HOPE  
BY FAY HOVEY, MAUI, HAWAII**

*In this fictionalized first-person account, the author imagines the thoughts of Nichimyo Shonin, one of Nichiren Daishonin’s most courageous disciples who, with her daughter, made the perilous journey from Kamakura, Japan, to visit him in exile on Sado Island.*

“LOOK!” My little daughter pointed behind us with her small fingers as we made our way along the steep mountain road. Turning, I saw the dust rising up far behind and, kneeling, I placed the palm of my hand on the earth. Horsemen! The ground vibrated with the hooves of horses. I climbed down the embankment, and we took shelter in a thicket as the sound drew closer. It wouldn’t do for a woman alone with a child to be found wandering in such a remote place; so we huddled close, Oto’s face amused at what appeared to her to be a fine game of hide-and-seek. Placing my finger over her lips, I warned her not to cry out and pulled her closer to me as the unmistakable smell of horses and men, long on the trail, drew closer. Soon, they were upon the road above us.

After they were gone, we made our way to the churned-up road and as it was becoming dark, we slipped into the forest, thick with cedar and pine. We found a tree with big roots and a padding of pine needles, and we ate the last of the rice I had brought with us. Oto, still happy to be on an outing, spent the last minutes of light climbing over an old log clad in green moss. The birds soon fell silent, and night filled up the branches of the trees, and then it was completely dark. Singing a little goodnight song, I tucked a thick kimono from my bundle around Oto and she was soon asleep as I sat long into the night, chanting and keeping watch.

A forest at night is very different from the daytime. At night, there is only sound: the crack! of a branch, small rustlings of woodland creatures unseen. And hearing the sound of my own heart beating, “Nam-myoho-enge-kyo,” I prayed. May we be protected, may we be guided safely to see the priest Nichiren.

Being a woman alone in the world with a small child was a dangerous thing in my time. I had no protector, no male relative to rely upon. I had no reserves, nothing to hold back hunger for long. And the cold weather was coming. I pushed myself each day to walk further, to make our way over the mountains to the sea, to find a boat somehow, to reach Sado Island in the Japan Sea where they had taken my mentor. Since the loss of my husband, I had felt so vulnerable and alone in the world. There were many times I wanted to give up, just throw myself into a convenient pond or river or just lie down and turn my face to the wall. However, I was chanting and, although something in me wanted me to give up, something else within me was growing stronger each day. I was determined to prevail. And I had Oto to guide and care for.

When dawn drew away night’s black veils, we drank a little water and moved on. We became creatures of the forest, quiet, cautious and alert to any sign of danger. We stooped to drink at streams and chewed on bark to stave off the sharp pangs in our stomachs. Oto soon grew tired of the journey and cried fretfully for food. I found berries and we ate too many, which made things worse. Avoiding villages along the way as we descended the mountain, we were like ghosts moving invisibly from place to place. Sometimes I thought myself foolish for starting this journey—for putting us both in more danger. But, I tell you, I’ll take a quiet death looking up into the sky through the tree branches over the rough

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danger of our towns, filled with the sick, the greedy and the unscrupulous. A few times we ventured close into the small homes on the outskirts and sat quietly eating whatever people could spare. One kind old woman gave me a worn pair of shoes and pressed two coins into my palm.

After many weeks of travel, we came upon our first view of the ocean! Waves tumbled in upon the shore, sending all the rocks on the beach to grinding and clicking against one another in a low growl. Clouds of mist rose up and wet our clothing with a salt damp. This was not the tranquil, sparkling expanse I had imagined. The winds tore pieces of clouds like rags, and I couldn't see Sado Island in the distance at all. At Teradomari we were forced to wait for the storms to pass. I searched for someone to take us across for the two small coins I had knotted into my kimono. I found work doing laundry at an inn and traded my labor for fresh clothing for both of us and precious food. I did not want us to meet the Daishonin half-starved in filthy clothing. Each day I watched the sky, praying that good weather would come soon and we could be on our way. We were so close at the time and the wait wore on us, but there was no turning back.

Have you ever wanted to see someone so much that you'd go to any length to travel to him or her? All I knew was that the Daishonin had become like my father—my only family—and if I was to die trying to see him again, then I would die. Desperate times bring different things out in people—resources they might not have known they had, actions they did not know they were capable of. My world was filled with desperate people, and I saw this as my journey toward hope, the only true hope I'd known. I believe, because I was chanting, we managed to make it through, with people helping us just at the right time. It was several weeks before we were under way to Sado with a one-eyed fisherman who tested my two coins between his teeth before waving us on board. The storms had passed but the ocean was still rough, and soon we were green with seasickness, the old man laughing at us both as we hung over the side, miserable and cold. He left us on an unfriendly-looking beach in the harsh night and we stumbled along a small path, making our way toward the dim and wavering light of a small town.

As we approached, the night watchman hesitated before letting us in. I think he thought we might be ghosts. I'd heard about Sado Island being isolated and severe, but I hadn't realized how dangerous it truly was. The watchman, moved to kindness after deciding we were humans, let us sleep in the gatehouse that night. In the morning, I decided not to ask of my mentor's whereabouts, but instead, listened in the marketplace and near inns for old people's gossip and children's careless chatter.

I needed to find the dwelling at Ichinosawa. They said an evil priest dwelled there with his acolyte. The priest had angered the military government with his slanderous and demanding words. A good deal was said by those who claimed a first-person encounter with him: that he had the horns of a demon and that even the wolves that roamed the desolate island in packs took care to avoid him. When we approached the residence, I saw wisps of smoke snatched away over the roof by the stiff breeze. After all that way, I was finally standing on the path with my mentor's residence in sight and I was overwhelmed with happiness and relief. I fell to my knees and Oto began to cry. Tears of relief cascaded from my eyes and I opened my mouth to call out, but my voice wasn't there. I looked across the wide channel we had crossed and the dim shape of mainland Japan in the distance. How had I done this?

I had been traveling so long I felt to be no longer myself. Perhaps I really was a ghost! Oto's cries soon brought someone to the door of the small dwelling. Nikko, the young

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priest, leaned forward, squinting at us and soon his face broke into a wide smile and he ran toward us with his coarse clothes flapping and tears springing from his eyes. “It is the mother of Oto Gozen! Master! Look who is here!”

And he took up little Oto with one arm and with the other helped me to my feet. “It is hard for me to believe it is really you! I cannot believe it!” We made our way to meet the Daishonin, who hurried down the path calling out our names in disbelief. “Child, it is you! How can this be? How did you get here all by yourselves?”

“M-M-Master,” I stammered. “I’m here. I j-j-just had to see you!” And I bowed over and over again with nothing else to say. Oto was happily patting Nikko’s shaved head and pulling on his ears while he laughed and tickled her.

“Come in, come in,” the Daishonin said. “Sit here by the fire. Tonight, we celebrate your arrival, and you will tell us the story of your long journey!”

We sat up late into the night, the wind howling around the eaves. They listened with serious faces lit by the fire’s glow while I told them of our walk through the mountains and the passage over the sea. They stopped me from time to time, asking about things I’d learned along the way, what people were saying about him on the mainland. They shook their heads in wonder marveling at the protection granted us by the Mystic Law.

That night, Oto and I wrapped ourselves in deerskins by the fire. The last thing I heard before I slipped over the threshold of sleep was the Daishonin’s voice telling me that, no matter what, I could always make my way to him, that I was his family member and his home would always be open to us. Despite the terrifying and lonely circumstances of my life and the hard journey, I had done the right thing: At a crucial moment, I had chosen hope. I smiled and fell into a pure and dreamless sleep. □

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