

MY STORY—SAIREN-BO BY FAY HOVEY, MAUI, HAWAII

The study material for June appeared in last month's issue. It is a letter written by Nichiren Daishonin titled "The Heritage of the Ultimate Law of Life" and sent to Sairen-bo Nichijo, a former priest of the Tendai school of Japanese Buddhism. The following story is a fictionalized first-person account of Sairen-bo.

The Daishonin had been living in exile on Sado Island since October 10, 1271, after government soldiers failed in their attempt to execute him on the beach at Tatsunokuchi. For reasons that are unclear, Sairen-bo was also living in exile on Sado Island. Details about Sairen-bo are scarce, but it is known that he was originally from Kyoto, and that he had studied at Mount Hiei, the seat of the Tendai School. He was also present at the Tsukahara Debate, held in front of Sammai-do, the Daishonin's dwelling at Tsukahara, on the sixteenth and seventeenth days of the first month in 1272. In this debate the Daishonin was the clear victor over the Pure Land, True Word sects and other priests from Sado and from various provinces of northern Japan. A number of people converted to his teachings at this time, among them Sairen-bo.

Near the quarters where I lived in exile on the windswept, miserable island of Sado there was a narrow road. It wasn't much of a road; it was more a footpath for there was hardly a reason to go anywhere unless one felt like risking his life for the trouble of a visit. Near a small log bridge over the small stream at the foot of a hillside, I spied a smaller path, hidden in the weeds, one that disappeared into the forest rather like my life had done. Without so much as a horse or an assistant to go with me, I had reflected long and hard about the reducing of my circumstances. How had it come to pass that I, a priest of one of the most venerable of all temples was striding about in disgrace on some obscure island?

I saw it in my mind as I walked: Enryaku-ji, that vast complex of buildings fixed on the promontories and recesses of Mt. Hiei. What was I doing here, with mud on my sandals? I thought of its quiet verandas, peaceful gardens and meditation halls—my small but comfortable room and study there, and all of the measured activities of priesthood. I was an avid student and could be found amidst the stacks of scrolls poring over texts long after most priests had tired of such things and had moved on to the more luxurious attractions and privileges of their stations.

Exile. A common enough thing in our times. If the regent at Kamakura didn't like what someone had to say, well, then: ship them off somewhere well away from the centers of power and influence. What I disliked most about being banished is the feeling of having been completely forgotten. Erased. And of course, there was boredom. Re-reading what few documents I brought with me. Writing letters that might not ever be delivered. Imagining what was going on in Kyoto, eagerly gleaned news from whatever hapless messenger ventured near. This was the restlessness in me that drove me to tramping the woods and shorelines daily. One day, even though I knew it would put me in the greatest danger, I ventured onto that small path I'd seen which led to the old cemetery at Tsukahara.

I had begun by walking partway up the hill then turning back. Once, I actually saw the young priest Nikko who had accompanied the notorious Nichiren. I saw him in the wood gathering branches into a large bundle. His back was turned from me and I stepped quickly behind a tree. He worked quietly, occasionally whistling. Soon, he was finished, the bundle

hoisted upon his back, making his way up the hill to the broken-down shrine that was the abode of the most hated priest in Japan. Nichiren. A man who called himself “the pillar of Japan” who had captured the hearts of some of the fiercest and renowned Eastern samurai. A tough breed they were and hard to convince. How had he gotten to them? Now, he was a man who wouldn’t go away. He’d been banished before and pardoned. He returned and continued to lecture and remonstrate with the government. That he dared to question the prevailing beliefs of the time was considered sheer madness by many, or at the very least, foolish. I was intrigued by the idea that I was in exile on Sado at the same time with so infamous a man and that he had once studied for a time at Enryaku-ji before my time.

I walked up that hillside many times and could never quite bring myself to go all the way to his door. I was of the Tendai school, proud with a long lineage of teachings going back many centuries. What could I learn from such a man? If I were caught anywhere near him, I might be executed myself! So it was with another irresistible impulse that I would sit on a small stone fence on the opposite side of the field where I could observe them from afar. Saw the wisps of smoke from the fire. Occasional laughter, coughing, the wind blowing cold across the drear landscape.

“Why do you sit here in the cold, priest?” a strong voice startled me from behind. It was Nichiren’s attendant. “We have seen you come and go for some time now—there’s not much in the way of entertainment here, so we have been watching for you and guessing when you will have enough courage to introduce yourself to us properly!”

“I am Sairen-Bo, Tendai priest from Mt. Hiei. I am an exile like you.” I offered in a startled voice. “Forgive me for not venturing closer, I have been most rude.”

“Well, I don’t think a cup of hot tea will hurt you much. Will you join us?” and he held his hand and arm out wide as he gestured towards the shrine and walked by me with his bundle. As we approached the small building that looked more like a shed than a shrine, I heard a man’s voice say, “So, you’ve decided to visit at last!” and there he was: a vigorous and forceful personage, his eyes looking sharply into mine. “I know, I know!” he laughed heartily. “You’re surprised I don’t have three heads and horns! I’m sorry to disappoint you! I am Nichiren, a simple priest born in Awa province. There is no harm here with just two of us fending off the weather and the wild beasts on two and four feet. Come sit by our fire and warm yourself!”

I ducked under the low doorway and knelt hesitantly on the dirt floor. I looked around and saw how desperate and drab their surroundings were. There were cracks in the walls, very little in the way of comfort. Yet, there was a feeling of such lively curiosity and good humor in both of their faces. I realized it had been a long time since I’d looked into a happy face. Even I had become grim in my banishment. Nichiren’s eyebrows were raised in question. “Well, then, here is some tea. Let us talk about you and where you come from, sir. I can see by your face you have a lot of questions. But first, tell me your story; then, I will tell you mine.

We spoke for hours. I’d forgotten how good it felt to discuss religious matters, and with someone so learned and astute! His grasp of the essential nature of things astonished me. I knew he was only giving me a glimpse of his knowledge, for the time being he was “sizing me up” instead of the other way around. Before dusk gathered in the trees, I prepared to leave for home while there was still light. “Next time you visit, come at night, where no one can see you. You come here at great peril to yourself for I am reviled by all. You have a good mind and Nikko here, well, he has heard all of my arguments already, eh? He would be happy for me to have someone else to needle!” he joked.

Once I was safely back in my quarters that evening, I felt more stimulated and alive than I had in months. “What are you doing?” I thought to myself. There is nothing to be gained politically by associating with him! What chance is there of his ideas being sanctioned by the government?” Before I finally fell asleep, I remembered that he hadn’t asked me if I would visit again — he assumed I would. Except for moonlit nights, my feet would have to learn to see in the dark.

I was there when he debated numerous priests that had come to confront him! Can you imagine it? Proud men, with their assistants and fine robes. Sitting upon their portable chairs, secure in their positions and favor. Imagine Nichiren there, in simple garments, in front of that dilapidated building. On every question, he bested them! They could not prove themselves right. His knowledge was comprehensive and his understanding was penetrating. But it was his speech, his confidence and his expression that sent them staggering away, heads shaking in exasperation. “The voice does the Buddha’s work,” he had said to me once. The next evening I made my way over the darkened track to see him. Together we chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo then sat by their small fire quietly. “You have something on your mind tonight, Sairen-bo. Speak it now, for who knows what will happen now that I have sent these priests away in confusion. There are none more vengeful or spiteful than priests who have been discovered false!” he said sternly.

“I must tell you what is in my heart, sir”, I began. “I have been thinking about this for a time. It is firm in my mind and must be acknowledged as such. I am ready to renounce everything I have embraced until the day I walked into this hut. If you will have me, consider me for a disciple, I could wish for nothing more in this life.” I bowed low and waited.

“Surely, there must be some profound reason for our relationship, “ he said softly. “ Is there not a mystic bond between us?”

“I can hardly hope to measure up to the others, sir, but I would be most pleased and honored to be considered your disciple,” I pushed on respectfully.

“I wonder if you and I have not been pledged to each other as teacher and disciple in countless *kalpas* past,” he ventured. “You and I have been born together here in this defiled age as teacher and disciple solely because of some bond of karma we share from the past. How delightful!”

“So am I to understand that you have accepted me?” I said.

“Sairen-bo, you have always been my disciple!” he exclaimed. “Let us promise that whoever is pardoned from exile first will pray for other to be soon released. We have much work to do!”

In this simple and warm-hearted way, I was accepted as his follower. The Lotus Sutra says “Those persons who had heard the Law dwelled here and there in various Buddhist lands, constantly reborn in company with their teachers” (LS7, 140). I had to be banished in exile in order to meet him.

Eventually, we were both pardoned. First my mentor. Then, myself, somewhat later, whereupon I returned to my native Kyoto a new man, forever changed. □