

The Courageous Lady of Sado Island
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The following two articles introduce one of Nichiren Daishonin's most famous disciples, Sennichi-ama. The one beginning on this page is a historical account of her life. In the article on page 28, Faye Hovey gives us a fictionalized first-person account of Sennichi-ama's thoughts.

SHE was living comfortably and peacefully with her aged husband in their farming village on Sado Island. Her son, Tokuro, was married and had taken over most of her husband's duties. She saw the rest of her life as a simple, happy time with her beloved Abutsu-bo. But the arrival of a controversial priest to their island off the coast of Japan would turn her into a conspirator, guilty of violating government policy. Her association with the priest Nichiren would also make her one of the bravest and most famous women in Buddhist history. She was Sennichi-ama.

Like her husband, she was a lifetime believer of the Nembutsu Buddhist sect which believed in attaining entrance to a heaven-like Pure Land by chanting the name of Amida Buddha. Nichiren Daishonin had denounced the sect as contradictory to Shakyamuni's teachings and the cause of the calamities and suffering of the nation. It was because of this view that the Daishonin was exiled to Sado Island in October 1271 and put in confinement under the responsibility of the local magistrate, Honma Shigetsura, on his estate at Sanmado. When news of the arrival of this heretical priest spread among the Nembutsu believers of the area, they were outraged.

One of those who was outraged the most was the respected headman of the village, a former samurai, Endo Tamemori. Tamemori was his secular name but to demonstrate his devotion to Amida Buddha, he changed his name to Abutsu-bo, a contraction in Japanese of Yui-Amida-Butsu. He was simply known as Abutsu-bo and was in his 80s.

WHEN he heard that this criminal priest living near his village had proclaimed that all Nembutsu believers were going to hell, Abutsu-bo was filled with murderous intent. One evening he went to the shabby hut at Sanmado. As he approached through the snow, he heard the intriguing sound of chanting coming from the hut—*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. It was Nichiren Daishonin and Nikko chanting against the cold.

He called out and the door opened. Abutsu-bo's eyes met Nichiren Daishonin's. The priest had a faint smile on his face and his eyes were filled with such compassion that Abutsu-bo was taken aback. Invited in against the cold wind, the elderly villager entered and sat down before Nichiren Daishonin and Nikko.

He must have asked if it was true that the Daishonin said Nembutsu believers were going to hell.

Calmly and reasonably, the Daishonin would have explained that Amida Buddha should not be one's object of worship because that Buddha is only a

symbol Shakyamuni used to explain the enlightenment he had attained. Shakyamuni himself stated that the teachings leading up to the Lotus Sutra were only expounded to pave the way for what he really wanted to say—that the essence of universal truth is contained within the Lotus Sutra—Myoho-renge-kyo.

Myoho-renge-kyo is not merely the name of the sutra. It is the core of all of Shakyamuni's teachings and the soul of the Buddha.

After a while, there was a great change in the heart of Abutsu-bo and warm tears filled his eyes. He vowed to never utter the Nembutsu chant ever again. When he returned to his home that night, Sennichi-ama listened to his tale in great wonder. Abutsu-bo had always been a passionate man, but that night he could barely contain himself. When her husband had finished, she was convinced of the righteousness of the Daishonin's Buddhism as well.

When Abutsu-bo said that he was going to take food and supplies to the priest's hut, violating government policy toward the Daishonin, he tried to persuade Sennichi-ama to remain behind. But she would have none of that and the two of them trudged on through the snow with their packs on their backs. Night after night, the two of them made their way past the guards to the Daishonin's shack.

He later wrote to her:

When I was exiled to the province of Sado, the constable of the province and the other officials, following the designs of the regent, treated me with animosity. And the ordinary people went along with their orders. In addition, the Nembutsu believers and the Zen, Ritsu and Shingon priests in Kamakura sent word that by no means should I be allowed to return there from the island of Sado....Thus it seemed that I could not possibly escape with my life. Whatever Heaven's design in the matter may have been, every single steward and Nembutsu believer worthy of the name kept strict watch on my hut day and night, determined to prevent anyone from communicating with me. Never in any lifetime will I forget how under those circumstances you, with Abutsu-bo, carrying a wooden container of food on his back, again and again came in the night to bring me aid. It was as though my deceased mother had suddenly been reborn in the province of Sado! (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 6, p. 255)

THEY also joined Nikko in spreading the Daishonin's Buddhism across the island, starting with their own son, relatives and friends. Because Abutsu-bo and Sennichi-ama were held in such high esteem, their propagation activities were very successful. As a result, the Abutsu-bos were harassed with fines, being driven from their home and having it confiscated.

The priests of other sects were dismayed. Not only were their efforts to kill the Daishonin through starvation unsuccessful, they were losing many of their own congregation. When they complained to the magistrate Honma about the situation, he suggested a public debate. On January 16, 1272, the single priest

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Nichiren defeated scores of priests from the major sects of the day before hundreds of farmers, villagers and the magistrate. Many Nembutsu adherents threw down their prayer beads and pledged to never chant Nembutsu again.

Abutsu-bo and Sennichi-ama shared the victory with the Daishonin and Nikko as all their propagation efforts were validated. About a month later, Honma Shigetsura became a follower of the Daishonin and provided more hospitable accommodations for him at a residence in Ichinosawa.

FROM here, the Daishonin continued to pen more of his most important works. He also inscribed a Gohonzon for Abutsu-bo and Sennichi-ama. In response to a question from Abutsu-bo, he wrote "On the Treasure Tower." This letter of March 13, 1272 contains the famous quotation:

Abutsu-bo is the Treasure Tower itself, and the Treasure Tower is Abutsu-bo himself. No other knowledge is purposeful.... You, yourself are a true Buddha who possesses the three enlightened properties.... Faith like yours is so extremely rare that I will inscribe the Treasure Tower especially for you.... This is the reason for my advent in this world.... You and your wife should worship this Treasure Tower.... (MW-1, p. 30)

In February 1274, a messenger arrived from the capital city, Kamakura, with a pardon for Nichiren Daishonin. This was at once good news and sad news for the couple. Their days with the Daishonin had been the most fulfilling of their lives and now he was preparing to return to the capital to continue his efforts to propagate the Law. Leaving Abutsu-bo and Sennichi-ama as leaders of the believers on Sado, the Daishonin and Nikko departed. It was a sad parting for everyone.

Eventually, the couple heard that Nichiren Daishonin had retired to the remote Mount Minobu region after the government rejected his third remonstrations to save the nation.

IN 1275, the aged Abutsu-bo declared his intention to visit the Daishonin. This was a courageous decision because the journey required crossing the treacherous sea of Japan as well as the long overland route into the mountains of Minobu. But equally courageous was Sennichi-ama's support of her husband's decision. She would remain behind to take care of their responsibilities at home. She realized that she may never see him again. But she also understood her husband's deep desire to see their master again.

During the four years between 1275 and 1278, he visited the Daishonin three times. Each time, the Daishonin praised Sennichi-ama's courage to let her husband make the dangerous trip. In one of his letters to her he wrote:

It is easy to sustain our concern for someone who is before our eyes, but quite a different thing when he or she is far away, even though in our hearts we may not forget that person. Nevertheless, in the five years... I have been living here in the mountains, you have three times sent your husband from the province of

Sado to visit me. What profound sincerity! Your faith is weightier than the great earth, deeper than the great sea! (MW-6, p. 256)

In 1279, Abutsu-bo died on Sado, leaving a grieving Sennichi-ama. Following his father's wishes, Tokuro carried his ashes to Mount Minobu to rest near the Daishonin. The Daishonin, acutely aware of Sennichi-ama's suffering over the loss of Abutsu-bo, wrote to her:

Some may wonder where the spirit of the late Abutsu-bo may be at this moment. But by using the bright mirror of the Lotus Sutra to reflect his image, I, Nichiren, can see him among the assembly on Eagle Peak, seated within the Treasure Tower of Taho Buddha and facing toward the east. (MW-6, p. 297)

THE letters written to Sennichi-ama from the Daishonin are among the most moving written to any of his followers. His great love and respect, his praise for her strong faith are evident throughout. He wrote to her that even though they had not met face to face during Abutusbo's pilgrimages, it was their heart-to-heart connection that mattered most.

She practiced the Daishonin's teachings on a remote island, far from the centers of his activities on the mainland, and yet her faith shone so brightly that centuries later, its light reaches us today. □