

**Shijo Kingo—A Great Model of Lifelong Practice**  
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*The following two articles introduce one of Nichiren Daishonin's most famous disciples, Shijo Kingo. The first article gives an historical account of his life. In the article on page 14, Faye Hovey presents a fictionalized, first-person account of Shijo Kingo's thoughts.*

SHIJO Kingo was a great model of lifelong practice and dedication. Born in 1231, he met Nichiren Dai sho nin when he was 25 years old and began practicing his Bud dhism. Throughout his life he surmounted all difficulties and showed great proof of the power of the practice until his death in 1300 at age 69. Like his father before him, he was a samurai in the service of Lord Ema Mitsutoki, a member of the ruling Hojo clan, and later, Lord Ema's son, Chikatoki.

We can trace the development of Shijo Kingo's practice through the thirty-seven existing letters that the Daishonin wrote to him.

At first Nichiren Daishonin wrote to Shijo Kingo to answer his personal questions. Later he wrote to encourage his disciple's own struggle with the three powerful enemies (ignorant lay people, evil priests and evil priests in collusion with governmental authority).

In May 1271, the Daishonin wrote to Shijo Kingo and his wife to reassure and congratulate them at the time of the birth of their first child, whom the Daishonin named Tsu-kimaro. At that time Shijo Kingo was 40 years old and had been practicing fifteen years. In July 1271, the Daishonin wrote to thank Kingo for offerings he had sent the Daishonin as a donation for a memorial service for his mother, who had died the year before. Nichiren Daishonin used this opportunity to reinterpret the memorial service from the standpoint of the Lotus Sutra, and concluded, "You should deepen your faith all the more" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 4, p. 95).

Shijo Kingo irrefutably dem-onstrated his loyalty to the Daishonin when the crucial moment came—the night of September 12, 1271. The chief of military police, accompanied by a band of armed soldiers, had arrested the Daishonin and was leading him toward an execution site at Tatsunokuchi Beach. When passing Shijo Kingo's street, the Daishonin sent a messenger to Shijo Kingo, who rushed to his aid without a moment's hesitation, leaving his wife and infant daughter, not even stopping to put on his shoes; he also risked his employment by the ruling clan to so publicly support someone perceived as a criminal. The execution attempt failed when a meteor flashed across the sky and frightened the would-be executioners. The Daishonin wrote him a few days later, "You not only accompanied me to Tatsunokuchi but declared that you would die by my side. I was deeply moved!" (MW-1, 13) and "You accompanied Nichiren, vowing to give your life as a votary of the Lotus Sutra" (MW-1, 14).

After the failed execution attempt, the government de-cided to exile the Daishonin to Sado, a cold island in the North Sea, a forlorn place from which exiles never returned alive. He was given a hut to live in that did not really protect him from the cold, and insufficient rations to survive on. Shijo Kingo continued to send

messengers to him with letters and offerings. The Daishonin, even in these circumstances, with not enough writing paper, and fighting against the freezing cold, struggled to pen his convictions: "I wanted to record the wonder I had experienced, in case I should be beheaded" (MW-1, p. 189). By February 1272, the Daishonin had finished "The Opening of the Eyes," and asked Shijo Kingo's messenger to take it to him.

IN April 1272, Shijo Kingo himself visited the Daishonin, even though it was dangerous. It required him to be away from his duties in Kamakura for over a month; he worked for a lord under the Hojo regime, which had exiled the Daishonin. He was risking his life to visit this "political prisoner." The following month the Daishonin wrote to thank him for his visit, and encouraged him, "Bring forth the great power of faith and establish your reputation among all the people of Kamakura and the rest of Japan as 'Shijo Kingo of the Hokke sect'" (MW-2, [2nd ed.], 201).

In September 1272, the Dai-shonin wrote from Sado to thank Shijo Kingo for offerings he had sent for his mother's third-anniversary memorial service. The following spring Shijo Kingo again made the dangerous trip to Sado to see the Daishonin.

In August 1273, Nichiren Daishonin wrote to Shijo Kingo in response to a message that his 1-year-old daughter, Kyo'o, was seriously ill. "Nam-myoho-rence-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?" (MW-1, 119) he encouraged him, and then advised, "The mighty sword of the Lotus Sutra must be wielded by one courageous in faith." (MW-1, 120)

Up until this point, Shijo Kingo's correspondence with the Daishonin was focused on his immediate concerns and that of his family members. In 1274, two events caused Kingo's confidence to soar: Nichiren Daishonin was pardoned and returned from Sado; and the Daishonin's prophesy (that Japan would suffer foreign invasion due to its adherence to heretical beliefs) came true as the Mongols threatened invasion. Kingo could no longer keep silent; he tried to introduce his boss, Lord Ema, to the Daishonin's Buddhism. However, Lord Ema was not just an adherent of Nembutsu; he was a lay priest; and his clan had exiled the Daishonin.

From 1274 on, Shijo Kingo's practice changed as he himself began confronting the three powerful enemies that he had now seen the Daishonin confront successfully. In September 1274, the Daishonin wrote to Kingo to congratulate him for avoiding the offense of complicity in slander, the offense of failing to admonish slanderers: "You have been able to avoid the offense of complicity" (MW-6, 91). But, knowing what difficulties lay ahead for Kingo, he warned, "You cannot be too careful" (MW-6, 91). Not only Lord Ema, but his fellow samurai resented him and would attack him if they could. In March 1275, the Daishonin wrote to remind him that happiness was not the absence of problems, and that "It is difficult to sustain faith in this sutra" (MW-1, 128).

A year later Lord Ema still disapproved of his practice, and his fellow samurai were looking for a chance to kill him. The Daishonin urged him in June 1276 not to

go out drinking, but to stay at home with his wife. "Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life and continue chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo, no matter what happens. Then you will experience boundless joy from the Law" (MW-1, 161).

In July 1276, Kingo was apparently entertaining thoughts of getting out of his situation and becoming a lay priest. But the Daishonin urged him, "But you yourself must not abandon him [Lord Ema], no matter how your life may be placed in danger" (MW-6, 167). He gave Kingo very specific instructions not to go see Lord Ema at night, or to go out drinking, and that he could become a lay priest later.

In September 1276, Lord Ema gave Kingo an ultimatum: either renounce his faith, or be transferred to a remote rural province, Echigo. Nichiren Daishonin told Kingo exactly how to respond: "Answer him [Lord Ema] firmly in this way ... 'At this moment I am resolved to sacrifice my life for my lord. Yet, should a sudden crisis occur, it is doubtful whether I could reach you in time from the distant province of Echigo. Therefore, even at the risk of losing my estate, I will not leave you this year ... I will devote this life to you, even if you disown me, for I have entrusted my life after death to the priest Nichiren'" (MW-1, 171-72).

THIS response mollified Lord Ema for a time. But in June 1277, Kingo's enemies framed him. Kingo had attended a debate on June 6, at which a disciple of the Daishonin had thoroughly defeated a disciple of Ryokan, who was revered by Lord Ema. Kingo's enemies accused him of forcibly disrupting this debate, and nineteen days later, Kingo received an official letter from Lord Ema ordering him to write an oath discarding his faith in the Lotus Sutra, or lose his estate and be banished.

Kingo immediately sent Lord Ema's letter to the Daishonin, who was then in retirement at Mount Minobu, with his own determination never to give up his faith.

The Daishonin was delighted with his disciple's attitude, and on June 27 wrote a letter of petition in Kingo's name to Lord Ema. In it he clarified what had happened at the debate, thus enabling Lord Ema to understand Ryokan's errors, and clarified what true loyalty is. He mentioned the long history of service of himself and his father to Lord Ema Chikatoki and his father, Lord Ema Mitsutoki, and refused to sign the oath, saying that Lord Ema would suffer. He urged summoning Kingo's accusers to face Kingo in Lord Ema's presence.

The Daishonin at the same time also wrote a long letter of encouragement to Shijo Kingo, praising him highly, but warning: "This life is like a dream. One cannot know if he will live until tomorrow. Even if you should become the most wretched of beggars, never disgrace the Lotus Sutra" (MW-4, 283). He pointed out to Kingo that his own exile to Sado had been in fact a protection; if the Daishonin had been in Kamakura during the civil unrest in 1272, he could have been killed.

He urged Kingo to unite with other believers: "You should band solidly together with your fellow believers. As for the others, let them clamor against you as they will. Then, if you can submit the petition, news of it may spread

throughout Kamakura, and perhaps even reach the regent himself. This will mean misfortune changing into fortune" (MW-4, 284). He concluded with a warning: "Under no circumstances should you attend any gatherings" (MW-4, 285).

In July the Daishonin wrote another letter of encouragement to Shijo Kingo during this tense situation. He assured him, "Buddhism is reason. Reason will win over your lord"(MW-3, 238). He praised him highly, saying, "I have been ceaselessly praying for your sake to the Lotus Sutra ... for I am convinced that you are a man who can inherit the soul of the Lotus Sutra" (MW-3, 239), but then warned him "be hundreds of thousands of times more careful than ever" (MW-3, 238).

Soon thereafter Lord Ema became ill, and Kingo wrote the Daishonin about it. On September 11, 1277, Nichiren Daishonin responded, saying he was grieved over Lord Ema's illness, and again warning Kingo: "I have a feeling you are in danger. Your enemies are sure to make an attempt on your life" (MW-2, p. 234). He then gave Kingo detailed guidance on how to dress, how to act, who to associate with and above all never to be alone. He praised Kingo, reminding him how he had accompanied the Daishonin the night he was to be beheaded. He also reminded him of the true priorities: "More valuable than treasures in a storehouse are the treasures of the body, and the treasures of the heart are the most valuable of all. From the time you read this letter on, strive to accumulate the treasures of the heart!" (MW-2, 238).

In April 1278, the Dai-shonin again wrote to guide Kingo. "Unseen virtue brings about visible reward" he assured him, and warned him against eroding his faith with slander: "You must be on good terms with other believers, neither seeing, hearing, not pointing out anything about them that may displease you" (MW-5, 259). The Daishonin urged him to redouble his efforts at work: "Regard your service to your lord as the practice of the Lotus Sutra.... No affairs of life or work are in any way different from the ultimate reality" (MW- 3, 270).

In June 1278, Nichiren Daishonin wrote to thank Kingo for the medicines Kingo had prescribed and sent to him. "My complaint has diminished steadily and is now a mere fraction of its former intensity "(MW-4, 292).

Shijo Kingo's situation began to change when he also cured his lord's illness. In gratitude, in September 1278, Lord Ema gave him a larger estate. The Daishonin was elated at this news. "It must have happened because of your profound sincerity in trying to lead your lord to faith in the Lotus Sutra" (MW-3, 286) and added, "I entrust my life to you and will consult no other physician" (MW-3, 291).

THE next month Lord Ema gave Kingo three new fiefs. The Daishonin advised in response: "No matter how poor these estates might prove to be, you must not complain of it, not to others nor to your lord. If you repeatedly praise them as excellent lands, your lord may grant you still more fiefs" (MW-6, 262).

But Kingo's troubles were not over, because his fellow samurai were now jealous. Nichiren Daishonin was worried about Kingo traveling, and wrote in October 1278, "Ride a horse which can easily carry you in your armor" (MW-1, 226). He recounted for him the story of General Stone Tiger, who was able to

pierce with his arrow a rock that he thought to be the tiger who had killed his father, and urged Kingo to have a comparable strength of purpose.

In October 1279, Kingo's enemies finally attacked him. The Daishonin praised him, saying he survived because he still possessed good fortune, and urged him to "Employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra before any other. Then, just as the sutra says, 'All enemies are crushed'" (MW-1, 246).

In October 1280, Nichiren Daishonin wrote to Kingo to thank him for a gift of rice, and praised his unusual dedication: "You held on to the reins of my horse, accompanying me barefoot and shedding tears of grief.... In what age could I possibly forget it?" (MW-6, 307). He concluded, "It is certain that within this lifetime you will eradicate the karmic hindrances you have accumulated since the beginningless past" (MW-6, 310).

After the Daishonin died in 1282, Shijo Kingo continued practicing and encouraging others, until his death in 1300. In a way he represents the first lay movement. Aside from Nikko Shonin, who really understood the Daishonin's heart, he did not have much use for priests, who were already reverting to Tendai and other earlier teachings.

For us today he is a great example for us to follow. A true disciple, he was able to confront and overcome the three powerful enemies, just as he had witnessed his mentor had done. □