

Shijo Kingo—"My Story"
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What follows is a story based on what is known about Shijo Kingo, a samurai who was one of the Daishonin's chief disciples; he was converted in 1256. His full name and title are Shijo Nakatsukasa Saburo Zaemon-no-jo Yorimoto. Kingo is an equivalent of the title Saemon-no-jo.

Imagine how it must have been for him, responsible for his lands, serving Lord Ema. He was a physician, a warrior, a family man and a man who commanded respect in his region.

What would it be like for such a man, trying to make his way through the world, as it existed for him so graphically described in the following passage from "On Securing the Peace of the Land through the Propagation of True Buddhism?"

**"On Securing the Peace of the Land
through the Propagation of True Buddhism"**

IN recent years, there are unusual disturbances in the heavens, strange occurrences on earth, famine and pestilence, all affecting every corner of the empire and spreading throughout the land. Oxen and horses lie dead in the streets, the bones of the stricken crowd the highways. Over half the population has already been carried off by death, and in every family someone grieves.

All the while some put their whole faith in the "sharp sword" of the Buddha Amida and intone the name of this lord of the Western Land.... There are those who follow the esoteric teachings of the Shingon sect and conduct rituals by filling five jars with water; and others who devote themselves entirely to seated meditation and try to perceive the emptiness of all phenomena as clearly as the moon. Some write out the names of the seven guardian spirits and paste them on a thousand gates, others paint pictures of the five mighty bodhisattvas and hang them over ten thousand thresholds, and still others pray to the heavenly gods and earthly deities in ceremonies conducted at the four corners of the capital and on the four boundaries of the nation. The rulers, taking pity on the plight of the common people, carry out government on the national and local levels in a benevolent manner.

But despite all these efforts, they merely exhaust themselves in vain. Famine and epidemics rage more fiercely than ever, beggars are everywhere in sight, and scenes of death fill our eyes. Corpses pile up in mounds like observation platforms, dead bodies lie side by side like planks on a bridge.

If we look about, we find that the sun and moon continue to move in their accustomed orbits, and the five planets follow the proper course. The three treasures of Buddhism continue to exist, and the period of a hundred reigns has not yet expired. Then why is it that the world has already fallen into decline and that the laws of the state have come to an end? What is wrong? What error has been committed? (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2, pp. 3–4).

WHAT I have seen in my life, no man's eyes should see. Death. I have seen

enough of it for 100 lifetimes. When I was younger, we ran toward death, a source of honor—for one is never more alive than at the point of sword. To fight an enemy, to live another day. To travel many days home to my wife and children. Sit once again in my *furo* (bath) under the stars, a container of sake kept warm and ready. And in the manner of men, drink away the blood on my hands, blind my eyes to what I had seen, forget the desire to forget.

Can I remember a time of any peace at all? If there was, I know nothing of it. Peace has never been really important. Not in this life anyway. My prayers were for the harvest, for my mother and father to live long. Near the end of the famine, even I worked in the fields, as if I could force food from the earth with my sheer will. Hunger—we lived on rice and salt soup; what little sweet potatoes we could find. I see now it was those times, desperate, that I took to the fields and hillsides. I looked up to the sky and I wondered for what use are we here, so little sense it made.

The only paradise I could see was in my wife's eyes, in the faces of the simple farmers who tilled my fields, in the laughter of my children—anytime I was here on this land where I had poured so much of my life.

Even that would change. Shift at Lord Ema's whim. Cross him and I would be eating grass in some northern province, plowing the ground with a stick, anonymous as a stone.

And yes, the ground would shift and convulse beneath my hall like a ship at sea. Shake us from sleep like a dog shakes an old piece of skin in its teeth. Thinking about it now, I wonder at how we all made it through. Maybe everyone feels this looking back. Just surviving it was the miracle one always looked for.

AND I wasn't much for priests. I'm a simple man, really. Direct, headstrong and sometimes defiant, yes? All my life, my father's life, we served the Ema clan. I owed that man my very life, the safety of my family, the smooth tiles under my feet in my courtyard. Perhaps my headstrong nature was something Lord Ema liked, if only in secret. He had plenty of people around him to tell him what he wanted to hear. But I like to think he knew he could count on me for another view of things and a surprise or two.

But priests. How could they even pretend to know what to do in such a treacherous time? Part and parcel to dissent, they would weasel themselves into political decisions, called to pray for rain during the drought! We would shake our heads in wonder. The only rain that fell was the drops of sweat that tricked off their shaven heads! And their earthly powers were more productive. Cross them, and it would be more than relocation to another fief. Their methods were subtle: hired men sent to wait for you at the crossroads in the night. So important they were as intermediaries, paradise having retreated considerably west of Japan, that the building of temples and the collection of food to feed all the priests became our primary purpose in life. That is, of course, in addition to the making of war, which we excelled in. Beautiful, perfected savagery. Like a sword, unbending, can cut a floating piece of silk.

Without the women in my life, I might have been a rough man. My mother, open-minded, capable. My first wife. Then, later my second. They were the silk in

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my life. They rarely complained of our often precarious circumstances. It wouldn't have been their way. Like me, they had their doubts about how things were, but never openly challenged what seemed inevitable. At times, sitting at dusk in our summer robes, dark falling over the fields, the children catching fireflies, we would venture talk about what it might be like if everything we had didn't balance on the favor of one unpredictable man.

And what if...what if the priests were wrong? What if life was really worth living? What if there was more than to suffer in this life and vainly hope for relief in some other? This away from the ears of servants who might be pressured one day for telling what they heard.

WHEN I met the priest Nichiren, I couldn't believe at first that he dared to say the things he did in public! I stood in the back of a small crowd in a village square, my bow strung, at ready for some disturbance. The thing that impressed me about him was the absolute conviction he had in his beliefs. No doubt. And everything he said made perfect sense. And then I realized just how dangerous he was. Because he made sense, and who among us could hear him and go home the same man?

If we had the gift of knowing the way of things while they're happening, I might have run to Lord Ema and begged him to send me to that northern province where I could happily dine on grass and stones! At least my world would not have suffered the upheaval I first experienced when I looked at this plain priest whose eyes knew my thoughts. A dangerous man. I wagered my best saddle that he would not live to see the year end.

To be continued