

## Sado Couple Had Great Respect and Affection for Their Teacher

AMONG those who took faith in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism during his exile on Sado Island were Ko-ama and her husband, Ko Nyudo. Not much of this elderly couple is known. No record exists regarding the years of their births and deaths or their family background. Since the wife and husband lived at Ko (present-day Mano), the seat of the provincial government of Sado, they were referred to as the *ama* (nun) and *nyudo* (lay priest) of Ko.

The Daishonin might have written numerous letters to the couple, but only two exist today. From the contents of these letters, we can tell that Ko-ama and her husband had genuine faith in the Daishonin's teachings and encouraged one another. It is also clear that the couple protected the Daishonin by providing food and clothing like another elderly couple, Abutsu-bo and Sennichi-ama. This was done at considerable risk since any support for an exile was punishable.

In October 1271, after the failed execution attempt at Tatsunokuchi Beach in Kamakura, the Daishonin was exiled to Sado on false charges. In March 1274, he was pardoned and returned to Kamakura, the seat of the shogunate government. Ko-ama and Ko Nyudo continued to support the Daishonin and seek his guidance when he moved to Kamakura and then to Minobu. By the time the Daishonin left Sado, they had developed genuine respect and affection for their teacher. The Daishonin wrote of his feelings for the couple when he left the island—a place of indescribable hardships yet filled with the fond memories of his followers:

However, while I was in exile there, you and your husband Ko Nyudo, avoiding the eyes of others, brought my food by night. You were both ready to give your lives for my sake without fearing punishment from the provincial officials. Therefore, although life on Sado was harsh, I was loath to leave, feeling as if my heart were being left behind, and I seemed to be pulled back with each step I took." (MW-4, 142)

Long after he left the island, the Daishonin continued his friendship with the couple. His letters show that he cared deeply for the couple who were facing their later years without children to rely on. For example, in "Reply to Ko Nyudo," which is thought to have written in April 1275, the Daishonin states:

Because the Lotus Sutra is difficult to believe, the Buddha assumes various forms, such as that of one's child, parent or wife, to enable one to take faith in it. However, you have no children, and live alone as husband and wife. The sutra states, "... the living beings in it [this threefold world] are all my children." If this is so, then Shakyamuni Buddha, the lord of teachings, must be a compassionate father to both of you. I, Nichiren, must be your child, but, wishing to save the people of Japan, I am residing for the time being in the central part of the country. (MW-7, 87–8)

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Having no children made the couple's life difficult not only emotionally but economically as well. In a letter to Sennichi-ama dated July 1278, the Daishonin describes the circumstances under which Ko Nyudo and Abutsu-bo set out to visit the Daishonin at Minobu but had to "turn around and go back home" because "the early rice was nearly ripe" and "he had no sons to help him harvest it" (MW-6, 258).

While warmly embracing them, the Daishonin also instructed them on essential Buddhist principles. He concludes "Reply to Ko Nyudo" by stating: "No place is secure. Be convinced that Buddhahood is the final abode" (MW-7, 88). The Daishonin explains to the couple the most important thing of all is to reveal their innate Buddhahood through faith and practice so that they may enjoy ultimate happiness and freedom, no matter where they live or what the circumstances.

The Daishonin's letter to Ko-ama in June 1275 tells us that Ko Nyudo traveled the long distance from Sado Island to Minobu to visit his teacher, bringing an unlined summer robe from his wife and money from Sennichi-ama. In this letter, the Daishonin writes, addressing Ko-ama and Sennichi-ama: "Since both of you are of the same mind, have someone read this letter to you and listen to it together" (MW-4, 139). Ko-ama and Sennichi-ama were close friends who practiced together on a remote island among many hostile Nembutsu believers. At the end of this letter, the Daishonin encourages Ko-ama, who probably would not see him again, by reassuring her that their relationship transcends distance: "Whenever you yearn for me, Nichiren, look toward the sun which rises in the morning and the moon which appears in the evening. I will invariably be reflected in the sun and the moon" (MW-4, 143).

The relationship that Ko-ama and Ko Nyudo developed over the years with the Daishonin provides us with some important insights into the mentor-and-disciple relationship in Buddhism. This relationship is not based upon class or other artifices of society; rather, it is based upon faith and expressed through mutual love and respect. Buddhism teaches that practitioners should revere the Law or the Buddha's teaching and follow it, rather than people whose minds easily stray from the Law. But it also teaches that practitioners should pay respect to those who act in accord with the Law because the Law, abstract by itself, is revealed in people's behavior. The Daishonin's relationship with this elderly couple shows us that all the profound Buddhist doctrines would be of no value unless expressed in our everyday behavior, in our compassion for others. □

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