

## **Lady Nanjo, A Woman of Strength: Overcoming the Death of Loved Ones**

NICHIREN Daishonin wrote “A Letter of Condolence” on September 6, 1280, while living on Mount Minobu when he was 59. The letter was formally addressed to Nanjo Tokimitsu, also known as Lord Ueno, who was the steward of Ueno District, Suruga Province. Tokimitsu is considered an exemplary disciple of the Daishonin. He played a valiant role in protecting peasant believers from government oppression during the Atsuhara Persecution of 1279, when three believers were beheaded. Throughout his life, he provided consistent support to the Daishonin and Nikko Shonin, including donating a tract of land for the establishment of the head temple, Taiseki-ji.

The letter’s content, however, clearly indicates that it was meant for Tokimitsu’s widowed mother, Lady Nanjo. The Daishonin penned this letter in response to the sudden death of Lady Nanjo’s youngest son Shichiro Goro. The teenager died on September 5. The cause of death is unknown, but his premature passing at 16 brought profound pain and sadness to the Nanjo family as well as to the Daishonin. He wasted no time in sending encouragement to the grief-stricken mother.

Lady Nanjo’s father was Lord Matsuno Rokuro Zaemon and her mother was known as Lady Matsuno. The family lived in Matsuno Village in Ihara District, Suruga Province. It is believed that Lord Matsuno took faith in the Daishonin’s Buddhism through either his daughter or Nikko Shonin. Lady Nanjo married Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro, a retainer of the Kamakura government who was originally based in the Nanjo District, Izu Province, hence the family name. Later he was transferred to Ueno District, Suruga Province, and became a steward there.

It is believed that Lord Nanjo met the Daishonin in Kamakura and took faith in his teaching sometime between February 1263, when the Daishonin returned to Kamakura from his exile in Izu, and the fall of 1264, when the Daishonin went back to his native Awa Province to care for his ailing mother. Encouraged by her husband, Lady Nanjo also took faith. On March 8, 1265, soon after Lady Nanjo started practicing the Daishonin’s Buddhism, however, her husband died, leaving her with eight children (four daughters and four sons) and pregnant with the youngest son. Upon hearing of Lord Nanjo’s death, the Daishonin traveled from Kamakura to Ueno Village in Suruga Province to pray at his grave. It was probably on this occasion that 7-year-old Tokimitsu first met the Daishonin.

Following the custom of her day, Lady Nanjo became a Buddhist nun to pray for the repose of her husband while continuing in her secular responsibility as the mother of nine. After the death of her husband, Lady Nanjo was also known as Ueno-ama Gozen, which means “the lady nun of Ueno.” It is difficult to imagine today Lady Nanjo’s difficulties in raising nine young children as a single mother in thirteenth-century Japan, when women had no choice but to rely on their husbands or adult sons for survival—neither of which she had.

Even though Lady Nanjo was very young in faith when she lost her husband, she continued in her faith through the turbulent years during which the Daishonin

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was nearly beheaded and then exiled to the remote northern island of Sado. This was followed by an all-out crackdown on the Daishonin's followers by the shogunate government. Lady Nanjo's consistent faith no doubt helped her raise her family despite the hardships and prejudice that she went through as a widowed mother, not to mention the oppression she was subjected to as a follower of the exiled priest.

When news of the Daishonin's return from Sado and relocation to Mount Minobu reached the Nanjo family, they immediately sent offerings in July 1274. Toward the end of the same month, Tokimitsu, now 16, brought gifts to the Daishonin deep in the mountains. One month later in August, Lady Nanjo's eldest son, Shichiro Taro, passed away and her second son, Tokimitsu, became the head of the household and assumed responsibility as a steward of the Ueno area.

For the nine years the Daishonin lived on Mount Minobu, until his death in 1282, the Nanjo family consistently supported him. It is recorded that they sent offerings to him more than forty times during this period. The Daishonin's life at Mount Minobu was a difficult one, lacking in the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter. In a letter dated January 27 of the same year that he wrote "A Letter of Condolence," the Daishonin describes his life at Minobu:

In the midst of these four mountains and four rivers is a flat area no broader than the palm of a hand, and here I have built a little hut to shield me from the rain. I have peeled bark off trees to make my four walls, and wear a robe made of the hides of deer that died a natural death. In spring I break off ferns to nourish my body, and in autumn I gather fruit to keep myself alive. But since the eleventh month of last year the snow has been piling up, and now, when we are into the first month of the new year, it goes on snowing. My hut is seven feet in height, but the snow is piled up to a depth of ten feet. I am surrounded by four walls of ice, and icicles hang down from the eaves like a necklace of jewels adorning my place of religious practice, while inside my hut snow is heaped up in place of rice. (MW-7, 207-08)

In the late 1270s, epidemics and famine swept through Japan so it is not difficult to imagine how appreciative the Daishonin felt toward the Nanjo family's support when they were experiencing their own economic hardships.

The sudden death of the youngest son, Shichiro Goro, in 1280, in the wake of the Atsuhara Persecution, was devastating to Lady Nanjo. He was especially dear to her since she had raised him by herself. Lady Nanjo must have felt that all her struggles after the death of her husband had been rewarded in the blossoming of her youngest son. As the Daishonin states in the postscript to "A Letter of Condolence," about three months before his death, on June 15, 1280, Shichiro Goro, accompanied by his elder brother, Tokimitsu, visited the Daishonin at Mount Minobu. With the image of Shichiro Goro fresh in his mind, the Daishonin was greatly pained by the loss of this fine young disciple.

As the Daishonin writes in his letter, Lady Nanjo's life was not an easy one. She experienced the death of family members one after another. She lost her parents,

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her siblings, and her husband. Then in the midst of numerous difficulties in raising her nine children as a single parent, she lost her eldest son, Shichiro Taro. After all this came the death of her youngest son.

Lady Nanjo's sorrow was profound. In "A Letter of Condolence," the Daishonin shares the mother's pain and embraces her with the warmth of his humanity. In the letter, the Daishonin honestly expresses his sorrow and empathy over Shichiro Goro's sudden death. Of course, death is natural, and Buddhism expounds on it at great length. As a teacher of Buddhism, the Daishonin could have preached to the mother about Buddhist theories on death. But he did not. The Daishonin, throughout the letter, speaks to the mother as her friend, as an ordinary human being who is equally saddened by the death of Shichiro Goro.

The Daishonin's attitude expressed in "A Letter of Condolence" stands in contrast to that of many Japanese Buddhist priests who would regard the death of their believers as an opportunity to make money from conducting services. When people study Buddhism and its views on death, some may become detached from the reality of death—especially, the sorrow and suffering of those who have lost loved ones. It is not enough to tell people who are grieving that "It is your karma to lose so-and-so," or "It is a matter of faith to accept so-and-so's death."

In "A Letter of Condolence," the Daishonin shows us the importance of developing our humanity and compassion through practice and study. Knowledge of Buddhist principles is most valuable when it serves to develop our compassion. It is only natural for a mother to grieve over the death of her child. And it is Buddhist compassion to share her suffering and embrace her. What Lady Nanjo needed most was someone to share her feelings, not a lecture on the theory of death. Of course, the Daishonin's intent was not to dwell forever in the hellish state with the mother, but to instill courage in her heart and thereby help her overcome the death of her child. Nevertheless, the Daishonin was deeply aware of what would lessen the burden of sorrow in her heart. It was for her to know that by her side was someone who knew exactly what she was going through.

The Daishonin demonstrates in this letter to Lady Nanjo that Buddhist philosophy is best defined through our actions. Just reciting Buddhist principles without concern or compassion for others is the antithesis of Buddhist study. In "A Letter of Condolence," we can see that our practice and study of Buddhism must be directed toward the expansion of our humanity.

The Daishonin's encouragement of Lady Nanjo continued despite his poor health. As a result, Lady Nanjo grew stronger in faith. Although she felt great sorrow over Shichiro Goro's death, she did not allow it to break her spirit. Every letter the Daishonin wrote to Lady Nanjo after the death of her youngest son mentioned him. About one year before his own death, the Daishonin wrote to Lady Nanjo: "If I see [your late son at Eagle Peak] before you do, I will tell him how much his mother laments" (GZ, 1584). The Daishonin died on October 13, 1282. About two years later, on May 10, 1284, Lady Nanjo peacefully breathed her last while Tokimitsu and the rest of her family watched over her. Until the end, she maintained her faith in the Daishonin's teachings. □

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