

Shijo Kingo: "My Story"
(Part III)
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What follows is a fictionalized first-person account of Shijo Kingo's thoughts. The last time [March 1998 issue] we saw Nichiren Daishonin's steadfast follower, he was awakened by a messenger in the middle of the night on September 12, 1271. The messenger tells him that the Daishonin is being taken to Tatsunokuchi Beach by Hei no Saemon's warriors to be executed. Shijo Kingo hastily leaves his residence without his boots to go to the Daishonin's side. This concludes Fay Hovey's piece on Shijo Kingo.

URGING my horse through the night, his mane streaming in my nostrils, I knew I could not let my mentor, Nichiren, go to his death alone. "Nichigen!" I sent my thoughts back to her. "Pray for us both, wife, and for our children!" The horse under me was damp with sweat as my brothers and I bounded down the road toward Tatsunokuchi, "Dragon's Mouth," the place of execution for common criminals on a remote beach. I didn't know what we would meet out there in the dark that night or whether we were already too late. If we were too late, there would be nothing to do but retrieve my mentor's body and perhaps his head, if the Deputy Chief of Police Hei no Saemon was too cowardly to claim it. Ordering a surreptitious execution under the cloak of night meant that Hei no Saemon had no reason for pride in this deed. It was likely that a conniving rival priest somewhere paced his veranda, waiting for the death notice.

Reining in abruptly above the worn track to the beach, we sensed them before we spotted them. Heard the steady pace of horses, the clink of metal and creak of leather. Hei no Saemon had brought along a small army to do his dirty work. I wasn't surprised. Nichiren appealed to our rough-and-ready warriors of the Eastern provinces. Hei no Saemon would never attempt such a thing in the bright inquiry of daylight. Nor did he want to encounter some of the most skilled samurai in the region over a meddlesome priest who wouldn't shut up and go away. Without the messenger, I would have awoken in the morning to the news of my mentor's death. Instead, there I was, barefoot with only a sword. It was clear that we wouldn't stand in anyone's way for long!

Then, I saw him as he rode surrounded by soldiers. His confident voice floating up over the ridge and dense foliage was compelling. I heard him tell them not to feel badly because they were taking him to his death. At the sound of his voice, I dug my heels sharply into my horse's flanks and we crashed through the brush, making our presence clearly evident. The escort halted with a swift snicker of drawn swords and bows. "Master!" I cried, and felt a great surging emotion in my chest. "I cannot let you go to your death alone! Let me go with you!" Across the space between us, our eyes locked. "You don't have to do this, Yorimoto," they seemed to say. "Don't do this."

The escort scowled at me, ill-tempered at having to be out in the middle of the night on such an unsavory mission. "Let them come along," Hei no Saemon said. "Let them watch this fellow die like a common thief." I grabbed the reins of my mentor's horse and glared back at them until they allowed me to take my place

beside him. The escort closed in around us and continued warily on. I couldn't stop the tears that flowed down my cheeks. I had trained all my life for death. I was a hardened man. Yet this man knew me like no other, this master of life sitting astride his horse next to me. "I cannot believe this is happening, that these are your last moments!" I choked, overwhelmed with grief. I didn't care who saw me! A part of me was going to die and I felt the irresistible impulse to send the rest of me along with him!

"Yorimoto, this is the happiest of days for me. Do not suffer so! Tonight I go to be beheaded and for me, this is the greatest honor," he told me gruffly. It was true that when I peered at his face in the gloom, his eyes were bright with anticipation and he was smiling. "Besides," he said, "do you not remember the vow you made long ago?" I couldn't think straight. "What vow?" I groped. I felt such pain and frustration that there was nothing I could do. I was outmanned and helpless as a newborn with feet as naked.

"If you must die tonight, I will die with you!" I blurted. "My mind is made up!"

His eyes blazed at me. "No one has been as loyal as you. You are like my own son. Think of your family! There is more to life than you can see just now, Yorimoto! This is not your time!"

"You cannot stop me. This is my wish! I cannot think of life without you and if I must die one day, let it be now!"

"You are as intemperate and rash as ever!" He shook his head and staring straight ahead with resolve, he dismounted without aid of his escort. Those harsh men stepped back with respect at the sight of his fearlessness. It was a chill autumn night and the horses stomped restlessly in the sand. The men were eager to get on with such business and be home in their beds before anyone knew they had been a part of it. Hei no Saemon proudly sat in a chair brought along for him, glad to be finally getting rid of this priest.

A straw mat was spread quickly upon the sand as Nichiren warmly greeted the executioner, telling him that he would cooperate fully. Looking around at the soldiers and directly into Hei no Saemon's eyes, he slowly knelt. "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo," he intoned in a full, deep voice. He stretched his neck forth so the executioner would have a clear aim and said, "Go ahead, sir, I am ready to give my life for the Lotus Sutra!"

It was as if all movement and life were frozen at that moment. The dark beach, the sound of the waves breaking, the breathing and jostling of horses. I knelt and opened my robe as one of my brothers handed me a small dagger. My life distilled into this one moment as I chanted for the protection of my country and family. I closed my eyes and sensed the executioner shifting his weight as he raised his sword. The time had come. "Oh, no, this is it!" I cried.

Suddenly, behind my closed lids, I saw the brilliant flash of light, like lightning! This accompanied by the startled neighs of the horses. Opening my eyes, I saw a white orb shooting across the sky, illuminating the beach as if it were day. Horses bolted away in fear. Men hid their faces in their hands. I ventured a quick look at the executioner who had fallen face down in the sand. Snarling, Hei no Saemon tried to restore order and my mentor shouted: "Come now, kill me, are you all afraid? Why

do you shrink from this miserable prisoner? Come closer!" Soon, the light disappeared over the horizon northwest of us and everything around us was falling apart. I was stunned. How could this have happened? The turn of events happened so suddenly I hadn't had time to think!

Most of the escort hastily regrouped and we were pulled along as fast as they could ride away from Tatsunokuchi. "We're not going to kill him tonight!" I heard them shout. "Let some other fool do this work, I'm done with it!" another gasped. We dashed along toward the dawn to the estate of Homma Rokuro Zaemon where retainers threw open the gates.

I hadn't had the chance to look at my mentor after I had helped him onto his horse at Tatsunokuchi. In the lighted courtyard, some of the men fell to their knees in front of him, casting down their Nembutsu beads. He walked slowly among them, touching a shoulder here and there, telling them he did not hold them responsible. At the entrance to the mansion, he bowed deeply to his host, apologizing for the disturbance. I looked closely at him and saw a new set of his shoulders and a light in his face. He was the same man, yet somehow different. There was a great assurance and something more I couldn't guess. Before passing through the door, he paused and respectfully requested sake for all the men, such a night it had been. □

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