

SIGNIFICANT DATE: Sept. 12, 1271: The Tatsunokuchi Persecution

No Turning Back

By LISA JONES, Staff Writer

Your home is stormed by soldiers. They tear up floorboards, rip apart walls. Looking for weapons, they say. Why? Because you practice Buddhism, they believe you're a terrorist, an enemy of the state. Today, this would be as Kafkaesque, as frightening, as it was on Sept. 12, 1271, when Nichiren Daishonin's home was raided by warriors. He had been forthright in his criticism of the militarist government and had publicly rebuked religious leaders who exploited the people's hopes and fears. Consequently, he had made enemies in high places. The Daishonin had no weapons, of course, except for his faith. And the only thing he had up his sleeve (literally) was a heavy scroll on which a Lotus Sutra chapter was written — the chapter predicting that the votary of the Lotus Sutra would be attacked. One warrior hefted the scroll and batted the Daishonin across the face with it.

The Daishonin was arrested and charged with treason. Later, around midnight, a squad took him to the beach at Tatsunokuchi, or Dragon's Mouth, an execution ground. Some people speculate that the Daishonin went gladly to his execution, happy to give his life for Buddhism. I think that's true, but I doubt he was lighthearted or cavalier.

Rather, I imagine the Daishonin felt unshakable conviction, a profound sense of purpose. He had seen the power of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, of Buddhahood. And he was concerned only with fulfilling the Buddha's wish to free all beings. His sole motive was compassion.

His hands unbound, the Daishonin seated himself in front of his executioner. He is said to have chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo several times, then stretched his neck so that the executioner's sword could sever his head in one stroke. No turning back, no future — the Daishonin's whole life came down to this moment.

To me, this is the spirit of Tatsunokuchi: entrusting everything to faith. I'm at a point in my Buddhist practice where I don't think that I'll ever quit practicing. So I ask myself, how should I continue? The only way is with full, life-on-the-line commitment, I feel. That doesn't mean being reckless or fanatical. It means to make my entire life — everything I say, do and will — a prayer of compassion, a prayer worth dying for.

As the Daishonin sat, awaiting the cold sweep of the executioner's blade, a blazing ball of fire tore across the night sky.

It lit up the beach like a flash of noonday sun.

Soldiers hid in fear. They were too spooked to carry out the execution. The Daishonin lived — to be exiled to Sado Island, which was a different kind of death sentence in those days.

In his later writings, the Daishonin spoke as if he had died at Tatsunokuchi — and been reborn there. He had “discarded the transient and revealed the true.” That is, Nichiren, the common mortal, gave up his life (metaphorically), but the Daishonin, the true Buddha, emerged.

To me, Tatsunokuchi represents a major impasse — a problem that can be solved only through faith. Until we come up against such an impasse and can rely only on faith for a solution, our Buddhist practice could be said to exist on a theoretical level. Our practice becomes actual, our Buddhahood is revealed, when we stake everything on the power of our faith.

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Subject: World Tribune 08/14/98 n.3204 p.2 WT980814p02

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Keywords: Back Dates History Kosen-rufu Persecution Sept. Significant Tatsunokuchi Tribune Turning World