

STUDY MATERIAL COMMENTARY TOKI JONIN: A MAN WORTHY OF TRUST

TOKI Jonin (1216–1299?) was a steward of the Chiba clan, a samurai family group that was influential in the shogunate government. He lived in Wakamiya, Shimosa province (present-day Ichikawa City, Chiba Prefecture, near Tokyo on Japan's eastern seaboard). Because Nichiren Daishonin sent Jonin many letters concerning important Buddhist teachings, he is thought to have been well educated and well versed in Buddhism.

Jonin probably met the Daishonin in Kamakura or Shimosa around 1254—one year after the latter declared the establishment of his Buddhism—and took faith shortly thereafter. Jonin was one of the earliest converts to the Daishonin's Buddhism.

On the night of August 27, 1260, about one month after Nichiren Daishonin submitted his thesis "Rissho Ankoku Ron"¹ to Hojo Tokiyori, a retired regent and de facto ruler of the shogunate government, a band of Pure Land (Nembutsu) school zealots ambushed the Daishonin's cottage in Matsubagayatsu in Kamakura. Upon hearing of the incident, Jonin invited Nichiren Daishonin to his estate, where he stayed until the following year, spreading his teaching in the area.

Around this time, other significant followers such as Ota Jomyo and Soya Kyoshin are said to have taken faith. Through the efforts of the Daishonin and his followers, many people began to practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, and Jonin became a leader of the Shimosa area.

In September 1271, the Daishonin underwent his greatest persecutions. He was taken into custody, nearly beheaded at Tatsunokuchi, then exiled to remote Sado Island. Around the same time, the government also started cracking down on the Daishonin's followers. At every important juncture during this turbulent time, the Daishonin sent a letter to Toki Jonin.

After the failed execution attempt at Tatsunokuchi near Kamakura, the Daishonin was transferred to the estate of the Honma clan in Echi, Sagami province (present-day Atsugi City, Kanagawa Prefecture). The very next day, the Daishonin sent Jonin a letter titled "Letter from Echi," the very first letter to be written by the Daishonin after the Tatsunokuchi Persecution.

In this letter he boldly shares his unflinching conviction and encourages his disciples: "The government's persecution of me has clearly demonstrated my faith in the Lotus Sutra. There is no doubt that the moon wanes and waxes and that the tide ebbs and flows. In my case, too, since punishment has already occurred, benefit must be forthcoming. What is there to lament?" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 7, p. 17).

While the Daishonin was detained in Echi, some efforts were made to facilitate his pardon. However, the government decided to exile him to Sado. A concerned Jonin then dispatched an attendant to look after the Daishonin. After a long journey, the Daishonin's party arrived in Teradomari, Echigo province. From there, he sent Jonin another letter, known as "Letter from Teradomari," at the beginning of which he states: "Those resolved to seek the Way should all gather and listen to the contents of this letter" (MW-4, 97). The letter offers encouragement to the Daishonin's disciples who might have been shocked and confused by their teacher's exile. During this time, the government jailed five of the Daishonin's followers and harassed many others. Before departing from Teradomari, the

Daishonin instructed the attendant Jonin had sent to return.

FROM Teradomari, the Daishonin was ferried to Sado. There, he was assigned to a small hut at Tsukahara on the northern part of the island, a place particularly exposed to winter cold. After arriving at Tsukahara, the Daishonin sent Jonin another letter, which he concludes by pointing out the importance of dedicating oneself to the spread of Buddhism despite great difficulties: “Life is limited, and we must not begrudge it. What we should aspire to, after all, is the Buddha land” (MW-5, 132).

During those difficult times, the Daishonin continued to write to Jonin. Clearly he entrusted Jonin with the task of communicating to his followers their teacher’s circumstances and, more important, of sharing the Daishonin’s encouragement to them to maintain their faith despite relentless persecutions.

During the Daishonin’s exile on Sado, many believers renounced their faith, and some openly criticized him. Under those difficult circumstances, Jonin remained steadfast and continued to support the Daishonin through offerings such as coins and clothing. The Daishonin sent many important writings to Jonin from Sado, such as: “The True Object of Worship” (MW-1, 45–83); “Letter From Sado” (MW-1, 33–42); “Shingon Shoshu Imoku” [The Errors of the True Word and Other Schools] (*Gosho Zenshu*, pp. 139–41); and “The Votary of the Lotus Sutra Will Meet Persecution” (MW-6, 77–83). No one among the Daishonin’s followers received more letters than Jonin during the Sado exile.

The most noteworthy among those letters is “The True Object of Worship.” In this writing, the Daishonin explains the Gohonzon as the fundamental object of worship that enables all people to awaken to their innate Buddha nature and points out that the direct path to enlightenment lies in embracing the Gohonzon.

Since the Daishonin reveals the object of worship in terms of the Law of Nam-myohorenge-kyo in “The True Object of Worship,” the letter is regarded as one of the Daishonin’s most important writings. During his exile on Sado, he wrote another important letter called “The Opening of the Eyes,” in which he explains the object of worship in terms of the Person. He sent this letter to another trusted lay follower, Shijo Kingo. The fact that Jonin and Kingo received those important letters from the Daishonin during his exile indicates that they were mainstays of the order at a time of great difficulty.

In the postscript of “Letter from Sado,” the Daishonin states: “There is very little writing paper here in the province of Sado, and to write to you individually would take too long. However, if even one person fails to hear from me, it will cause resentment. Therefore, I want all sincere believers to meet and read this letter together for encouragement” (MW-1, 42). The Daishonin’s life on Sado was made extremely difficult by severe weather as well as by the lack of basic necessities such as food, clothing, shelter and writing materials. Under these circumstances, he relied upon Jonin to communicate his encouragement to the other believers.

ON March 26, 1274, after the nearly two-and-half-year exile on Sado, Nichiren Daishonin was pardoned and returned to Kamakura. On April 8, he met Hei no Saemon, the powerful deputy chief of the Office of Military and Police Affairs, and remonstrated with the shogunate government for the last time. On May 12, the Daishonin left Kamakura and, on May 17, he arrived at Mount Minobu. He penned a letter that same day to Jonin, describing his journey. And on May 24, he sent Jonin another important letter, “Hokke Shuyo Sho” [The Essentials of the Lotus Sutra] (GZ, 331–38). In this letter, the Daishonin clari-

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fies that Nam-myoho-renge-kyo of the Three Great Secret Laws is the correct teaching to be spread in the Latter Day of the Law.

THUS it is clear that at every crucial turning point in his life—the Tatsunokuchi Persecution, the Sado exile and his arrival at Mount Minobu—the Daishonin made certain to write to Jonin. This demonstrates the great and consistent trust he placed in Jonin.

After the Daishonin moved to Mount Minobu in May 1274, Jonin continued to send offerings to his teacher. Every time the Daishonin received those offerings, he would write back, expressing his appreciation and explaining the great benefit that one receives from supporting the spread of Buddhism. For example, when Jonin sent the Daishonin a robe that his elderly mother had made, he wrote back: “This unlined kimono was a present given by a merciful mother, more than 90 years old, to you, her beloved son. She must have strained her eyes and expended her life to make it. As her son, you must have sent it to me knowing that it would be difficult for you to repay the debt you owe her for this robe. And it will also be difficult for me, Nichiren, to repay my debt” (GZ, 968). In the same letter, the Daishonin goes on to tell Jonin that his sincerity in offering the robe would elicit great protection from the heavenly deities—an allegorical expression that the Daishonin often uses to describe the protective workings of one’s environment.

In February 1276, Jonin’s elderly mother died. Though she lived a long life, her death caused Jonin great pain and sadness. Later he visited the Daishonin at Mount Minobu, bringing his mother’s ashes. He told his teacher that his mother passed away in peace, and that his wife had extended warm care to the ailing mother until her last moment. He also told the Daishonin that now his wife was also suffering from illness. After receiving much encouragement from the Daishonin and praying for his mother’s repose, Jonin left Mount Minobu.

On that occasion, the Daishonin wrote a letter to Jonin’s wife, praising her support in sending her husband to Minobu. He also tells her how much appreciation Jonin has for all her efforts to look after his mother. The Daishonin states at the beginning of the letter: “It is the power of the bow that determines the flight of the arrow, the might of the dragon that controls the movement of the clouds, and the strength of the wife that guides the actions of her husband” (MW-7, 125).

The Daishonin goes on to state in the same letter: “Lord Toki has told me that, while grieved at his mother’s death, he was grateful that she passed away peacefully and that you gave her such attentive care. He said joyfully that he would never be able to forget this in any lifetime to come” (MW-7, 125). The Daishonin may well have sensed that Jonin was not sensitive enough about his wife’s efforts toward her mother-in-law. In this letter, the Daishonin attempts to nurture the affection between the husband and the wife and bring them closer.

REGARDING her illness, the Daishonin writes to Jonin’s wife: “You also are a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra and your faith is like the waxing moon or the rising tide. Be deeply convinced, then, that your illness cannot possibly persist and that your life cannot fail to be extended! Take care of yourself and do not burden your mind with grief” (MW-7, 126). Those passages eloquently attest to the Daishonin’s detailed concerns and warm affection for his followers.

In another letter written to Jonin, the Daishonin states: “Since I think of your wife’s sickness as my own, I am praying to heaven day and night [for her recovery]” (GZ, 978). The

Daishonin's care and encouragement to his followers were not mere words. He sincerely prayed for the good health and happiness of his beloved disciples. This is precisely why his words of encouragement struck the deepest chords in the hearts of his followers. Prayer was the source and, at the same time, the expression of the Daishonin's compassion and humanity.

WHEN Jonin left Mount Minobu, he forgot his copy of the Lotus Sutra. The Daishonin had it sent back to him along with a letter. In this letter, rather than taking him to task for such an important oversight, the Daishonin humorously and affectionately refers to Jonin as "the most forgetful person in Japan" after relating episodes about the forgetfulness of famous persons in India and China (GZ, 976). The Daishonin then goes on to state that when Jonin chants daimoku and brings forth his Buddhahood, his mother as well will eradicate her negative karma and attain enlightenment (GZ, 977–78).

In September 1278, two years after his mother's death, Jonin engaged in a debate about Buddhism with Ryosho-bo, a scholar of the Tendai School who resided in Shimosa province. In the debate, Jonin refuted the Tendai priest. Jonin's victory demonstrates that his understanding of Buddhism surpassed members of the Buddhist clergy.

When Jonin wrote to the Daishonin about this, the Daishonin expanded further on the debated points. At the end of the letter, however, the Daishonin instructs Jonin not to have more debates with other priests: "From now on, you need not hold debates in Shimosa. Having defeated Ryosho-bo and Shi'nen-bo, were you to debate with others, it would only dilute the effect. I hear that these priests Ryosho-bo and Shi'nen-bo have been slandering me for some years now. These mosquitoes and gadflies, as it were, are such fools that they groundlessly revile Nichiren, who is like the lion king, when they have neither listened to nor seen him" (MW-7, 133).

In the wake of Jonin's impressive victory, the Daishonin probably sensed a potential pitfall that he may start regarding Buddhist debates as a primary activity while neglecting his basic practice of chanting daimoku and sharing Buddhism with others. Here once again we can see the Daishonin's exacting care and concern for Jonin.

Even after the Daishonin moved to Mount Minobu, he continued to send Jonin many letters containing his important teachings. For example, Jonin received, among others: "Hokke Shuyo Sho" [The Essentials of the Lotus Sutra] (GZ, 331–38); "On the Four Stages of Faith and the Five Stages of Practice" (MW-6, 211–28); and "A Sage Perceives the Three Existences of Life" (MW-2, 257–60). Jonin received all together more than forty letters from Nichiren Daishonin.

While this fact may indicate that Jonin excelled in understanding Buddhist doctrine, it points to something more important. The Daishonin probably thought that Jonin's stable social standing and his trustworthy character made him most suited to guarantee the safekeeping of those important writings for posterity.

ENTRUSTED by the Daishonin with this important task, Jonin made sure that these writings were kept safely, protected from humidity or other damaging factors. Prior to his death, Jonin even wrote a document concerning the safekeeping of the Daishonin's writings. In this document, Jonin strongly forbade the removal of the Daishonin's writings. Anyone who wished to read them, Jonin warns, should handle them carefully and read them in the building where they are kept. Jonin also strictly charges those responsible to take utmost care in preserving the writings after his death.

Jonin never forgot the importance of the Daishonin's writings for perpetuating his teachings. The existence and availability of many of the Daishonin's writings today are due to Jonin's sincere efforts to preserve them. □

*Compiled by the SGI-USA
Study Department*

1. "Rissho Ankoku Ron": "On Securing the Peace of the Land Through the Propagation of True Buddhism," submitted to the government July 16, 1260. In this treatise, the Daishonin teaches that the people should abandon erroneous teachings and embrace the true Law, which is the basis for establishing a peaceful land.

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