

ON MY SICKNESS

The following text from Nichiren Daishonin's letter titled "On My Sickness," and the accompanying commentary, are taken from SGI President Ikeda's book, Learning From the Goshō: The Eternal Teachings of Nichiren Daishonin, pp. 172-77.

From the seventeenth day of the sixth month of the eleventh year of Bun'ei (1274), when I retired here [Mount Minobu], through the eighth day of the twelfth month of this year [1281], I have not ventured away from this mountain. For the past eight years I have become weaker year by year because of emaciating sickness and old age, and my mental powers have waned.

I have been ill since the spring of this year, and with the passing of autumn and arrival of winter I have grown weaker by the day, and each night my symptoms have grown more severe. For more than ten days now I have hardly been able to eat anything. Meanwhile the snow grows deeper and I am assailed by the cold.

My body is as cold as a stone, and the coldness in my breast is like ice. At such times, I warm up some sake and consume *kakko*,¹ and it's as though a fire has been kindled in my heart, or like entering a hot bath. Sweat washes my body and the droplets cleanse my feet.

As I was happily thinking about how I might respond to your sincerity, tears welled up in my eyes....

While I, Nichiren, have been refraining from responding to letters from people on account of my illness, I am so saddened by this matter [of Shichiro Goro's death] that I have taken up my brush to write you. I, too, shall not be long in this world. I believe that I will certainly meet Lord Goro. If I should see him before you do, then I will inform him of your grief. (*Goshō Zenshu*, pp. 1583–84)²

The Spirit to Struggle for Others at All Times

The Daishonin describes his condition without embellishment. He is entirely unaffected; he makes no attempt to make himself appear to others as somehow special. In so doing, he reveals true greatness.

What sense does it make for ordinary people of the Latter Day of the Law to put on airs? What can they possibly stand to gain? We should focus instead on the self, polishing the self and striving always to live with honesty and sincerity, modesty and humility.

Since we are human, we will as a matter of course undergo the four sufferings—birth, aging, sickness and death. The important thing is that we withstand the onslaught of these sufferings and overcome them with true nobility.

Several years before this letter was written, the Daishonin wrote with calm detachment to Abutsu-bo of Sado Island: "I was born and since I have already reached nearly 60, there is no doubt that I have also experienced aging. Sickness and death are all that remain" (GZ, 1317). What a lofty state of life! It is as though he is calmly looking down on the dark clouds of sickness and death from blue skies high above.

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The Daishonin wrote this letter to Ueno-ama Gozen in December 1281—just ten months before his death—in response to an offering of food and medicine she had sent knowing that he was physically weakened and not eating. The offering included unpolished rice, clear sake and medicinal herbs for use as stomach medicine.

He describes his physical condition in detail. This suggests just how grateful the Daishonin must have been for Ueno-ama Gozen's sincerity. He may have taken her gesture of concern as an indication that she had recovered from her grief at her son's death and regained the capacity to respond to others' needs.

More than a year had passed since Shichiro Goro had died. Time, it is said, is an excellent physician that eventually cures all ills. Even so, a void in the heart cannot easily be filled.

The Daishonin again touches on Shichiro Goro's passing, sharing Ueno-ama Gozen's sorrow. He concludes the letter by telling her in effect, "If I should die before you do, then I will meet the late Lord Goro and tell him of your sorrow."

WHEN he wrote this letter, the Daishonin had grown so weak and emaciated that he didn't even feel like taking up his writing brush. He does so in this case not simply to express his gratitude for the offerings but as an indication of how highly he treasures Ueno-ama Gozen's feelings. No doubt he wanted to write her even if it meant pushing himself unreasonably.

The Buddha continually prays for people's happiness. The verse section of the "Life Span" chapter of the Lotus Sutra reads:

*At all times I think to myself:
How can I cause living beings
to gain entry into the unsurpassed way
and quickly acquire the body of a Buddha?*
(LS16, 232)

This prayer of the Buddha concludes "Life Span." The Buddha, twenty-four hours a day, day after day and month after month, is constantly concerned about others' well-being. Continually and unswervingly, he sends people encouragement. This is the world of Buddhahood.

We who have embraced the Gohonzon should struggle to thoroughly protect all the people in our communities and organizations—to help them become happy, stand up and receive benefit. We should do so with the spirit of this passage, "At all times I think to myself..." Everything depends on leaders having such a sense of responsibility.

Leaders must always have the sensitivity and compassion to lend a hand where help is needed. They must also give guidance that is both warm-hearted and reasonable. The Daishonin's encouragement is a model for all Buddhists and for all leaders in society.

Embraced by his mother's strong faith, Nanjo Tokimitsu overcame a severe illness and went on to live to 74. In Buddhism, everything has meaning. It may be that Shichiro Goro "bequeathed" his own life span to Tokimitsu.

Carrying on the flame of his father and younger brother, Tokimitsu dedicated his life to kosen-rufu in keeping with the vow he made during his youth. And his magnificent life also attests to the victory of his mother and Shichiro Goro.

footnotes:

1. Kakko: A medical herb, tamalapatra (sandalwood) fragrance.
2. “Ueno Dono Haha Gozen Gohenji” (*Gosho Zenshu*, pp. 1583–84), written in December 1281 when the Daishonin was 59.

“On My Sickness” BACKGROUND

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter to Lady Nanjo (also known as Ueno-ama Gozen) on December 8, 1281. The Daishonin, then 59, was residing at Mount Minobu, and it was less than a year before his death. The letter was written in response to offerings Lady Nanjo had given to the Daishonin. It opens with a detailed list of these offerings: a bushel of brown rice, a container of sake, twenty metal pots and a bag of medicinal herbs (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 1583). After thanking Lady Nanjo for her consideration, the Daishonin touches on his deteriorating physical condition—hence the letter’s name, “On My Sickness.” Next the Daishonin consoles Lady Nanjo on the death of her youngest son, Shichiro Goro. Sensing his own approaching death, it seems, the Daishonin concludes his letter: “If I should see him before you do, then I will inform him of your grief” (GZ, 1584).

LADY NANJO: PROFILE

Family: Lady Nanjo’s father was Lord Matsuno Rokuro Zaemon and her mother was known as Lady Matsuno. The family lived in Matsuno Village in Suruga province (present-day Shizuoka Prefecture, on the southwest flank of Mount Fuji). It is believed that Lord Matsuno took faith in the Daishonin’s Buddhism after being introduced to it by his daughter or by Nikko Shonin.

Marriage: Lady Nanjo married Nanjo Hyoe Shichiro, a retainer of the Kamakura government who was originally based in the Nanjo District, Izu province (present-day Shizuoka Prefecture), hence the family name. Later he was transferred to Ueno District, Suruga province, and became a steward there.

Conversion: Around 1263 or 1264, Lady Nanjo and her husband met the Daishonin in Kamakura and took faith in his teaching.

Husband’s death: On March 8, 1265, Lord Nanjo died, leaving his wife with eight children and pregnant with the youngest son.

Single-parenthood: 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 parent 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.

Persecution (1271–1274): She continued in her faith through the turbulent years during which the Daishonin 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.

Supporting the mentor: In July 1274, when news of the Daishonin’s return from Sado and relocation to Mount Minobu finally reached the Nanjo family, they immediately

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sent offerings. Toward the end of the same month, Tokimitsu, the second eldest son, then 16, brought gifts to the Daishonin deep in the mountains. From that time on, Lady Nanjo consistently supported the Daishonin by sending offerings on numerous occasions, despite her family's economic difficulty.

The deaths of loved ones: After her husband died, Lady Nanjo continued to experience a series of deaths in her family. In 1274, her eldest son Shichiro Taro died. Her second son, Tokimitsu, became the head of the household and assumed responsibility as a steward of the Ueno area. In 1280, her youngest son Shichiro Goro died suddenly. His death was especially devastating to her, since she had raised him alone after her husband's death. Following those deaths, the Daishonin continued to encourage Lady Nanjo through his letters to her.

Triumph: 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. In 1289, Nanjo Tokimitsu invited Nikko Shonin to Ueno and helped him establish Taiseki-ji, thereby preserving the integrity of the Daishonin's Buddhism, protecting it from the corruption and distortion perpetrated by the other five senior priests. Lady Nanjo, as well as her family, made outstanding contributions to the spread and protection of the Daishonin's teaching, attesting to her genuine and steadfast faith, which never wavered, even under the weight of numerous persecutions and personal difficulties.

(Source: "Lady Nanjo, A Woman of Strength: Overcoming the Death of Loved Ones," *Living Buddhism*, September 1998, pp. 11–13)