

MY STORY—NICHIGEN-NYO BY FAY HOVEY, MAUI, HAWAII

The following story is a fictionalized first-person account of Nichigen-nyo and what it might have been like for her to live in thirteenth-century Japan as a follower of Nichiren Daishonin. Along with her husband, Shijo Kingo, she was one of the foremost disciples in Kamakura, an important center of power. Those who practiced the Daishonin's teachings bore the brunt of persecution from government and religious authorities.

One of the most familiar quotes from the Daishonin is contained in his letter "Reply to Kyo'o." Kyo'o, Nichigen-nyo's second daughter became seriously ill when she was less than a year old—even though Shijo Kingo was skilled in the art of medicine. In the letter addressed to her, the Daishonin encourages her parents' faith in the Gohonzon by stating:

In inscribing this Gohonzon for her protection, Nichiren was like the lion king. Believe in this mandala with all your heart. Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle?...I, Nichiren, have inscribed my life in sumi ink, so believe in the Gohonzon with your whole heart. The Buddha's will is the Lotus Sutra, but the soul of Nichiren is nothing other than Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 412)

Nichigen-nyo was the recipient of "The Gods Same Birth and Same Name" which appeared in last month's issue, as the April study material. An earlier installment of Nichigen-nyo's story appeared in the June 1998 *Living Buddhism*.

Nichigen," my husband said, "I must make the journey to Sado Island to see how things are for him!" This determination of his came abruptly one morning as we were about our household duties. Because my husband was not currently in the favor of the mercurial and powerful Lord Ema, we couldn't afford even a few servants to help us during this period.

My husband's exploits as a samurai warrior and his utter lack of fear had earned him grudging respect, if not ongoing support, from the military shogunate at Kamakura. He could be very passionate and outspoken, and our circumstances were always ebbing and flowing like the tides at Tatsunokuchi.

I am just a woman, and as the wife of Shijo Kingo, it is not likely that I will ever know completely what he must have gone through to keep the holdings we still had. My husband had led the Daishonin's horse to that beach at Tatsunokuchi, defying Hei no Saemon who was bent on executing the priest who would not go away. The descriptions of the angry and easily swayed Lord Ema, to whom my husband was attached in service, were enough for me to know that the ground we walked on was in jeopardy. So we had been treading very carefully since that dark night by the shore.

The Daishonin had our very hearts. It was as if a great mountain surrounded by magnificent vistas had arisen in our midst. He awoke within his followers a new-found hope that defied the pitiful evidences of these times. Confident, even in times of near poverty and unremitting natural disasters, we navigated through it all—chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, studying the Lotus Sutra and holding close to his guidance.

We had been fortunate to live near him when he lived at Matsubagayatsu. Our bond was strong and could not be broken by the disdain and, yes, even the hatred of people who

could not understand what it is to live with a vibrant, optimistic viewpoint. He knew what we faced and never failed to mention it. He never took our loyalty to him for granted and always considered it wondrous. This was completely in character with his genuine concern for all of his followers. His letters flowed to us in a steady stream of confidence and support from his exile on the desolate and dangerous island of Sado in the Japan Sea.

I looked up into the crisp spring sky. I knew there was no holding my husband back once a notion took him. With our two children, there would be more work for me. I could rely upon his brothers for some protection, but surely my days would be spent with one ear waiting to hear his returning horse and deep voice. He was right. He would have to go to see that the Daishonin was still alive and safe. This was a certainty, and yet in my heart, I still harbored a fear of losing my husband. Ours was not a marriage of convenience. We truly loved one another in all the ways two people can love. He was my life. However, the Daishonin taught us that a sword is useless in the hand of a coward, and my faith was strong despite any fear I felt.

“Husband,” I said, “of course you must go to him and very soon. I will help you prepare.” As a woman I was dependent upon him for everything. But I knew that we both had great lives to live as we shared the Daishonin’s Buddhism with others, and so I put my fear aside and made ready for his departure. While he saw to his horses, I washed and dried his clothing. In our dim hall, I took out his swords and polished them to brilliance. In the kitchen—children playing underfoot—I folded rice cakes into paper, slipping them into a package along with dried fish and other items.

I heard him in the courtyard speaking with his brothers. His voice urgent and firm. We gathered things we thought the Daishonin might need: a thick, quilted silk robe, writing materials, rice and sake. As I tied things together with cord, I thought how much he would appreciate these things, so little he had. And I thought of my husband’s journey there: the rugged mountain passes, bandits lurking in wait for the unsuspecting, the dangerous crossing to Sado Island, and then the return.

I gathered his healing herbs, potions and instruments into a small traveling box so that he could treat the Daishonin should there be a need.

“Ah, good, Nichigen, you have thought of everything!” he exclaimed. Soon, all was in readiness. That night we slept closer. Can there be a greater thing for two people than to hold fast to their faith? In the morning, we gathered together in front of our Gohonzon for morning prayers. The sound of our voices filled the hall and floated with confidence across the courtyard, over the gate and into the world outside our small estate. Facing the Gohonzon, I knew that I had courage enough to face anything while he was away. He left to me the task of encouraging the followers in our area in his absence.

We said our farewells to each other privately for that was the way it was between husband and wife. As I bowed low, I heard his voice saying, “I will return as surely as geese fly south in autumn, and I will bring a letter to you from our mentor.” Touching his leg lightly in the stirrup, I felt the horse, eager to be on his way, wheel and turn. They clattered through the gate.

My young children clung sadly to my robe. “Come, little ones,” I said. “Let’s go chant together for your father’s successful journey and for the Daishonin!” and I gathered them up in my arms and walked up the steps of our home.

He always returned, just as he said he would. We lived a long and loving life together. Perhaps it is true that Shakyamuni Buddha and the bodhisattvas Universal Worthy,

Medicine King and Constellation King Flower dwelt in our hearts as the Daishonin wrote. I like to think it was because we knew the truth when we heard it and we followed it, making of our lives a great journey of true happiness and hope. □