

MY STORY–NIIKE
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The following story is a fictionalized first-person account of Niike Saemon-no-jo and what it might have been like for him to live in thirteenth-century Japan as a follower of Nichiren Daishonin. Nikko Shonin converted him and his wife to the teachings of the Daishonin. Niike was a samurai official in the Kamakura government of Japan and a dedicated believer despite the government's opposition to his practice.

Niike is the recipient of “Letter to Niike” which appeared in last month’s issue as the study material for April. One of the most familiar quotes from the Daishonin is written in this letter: “The journey from Kamakura to Kyoto takes twelve days. If you travel for eleven but stop with only one day remaining, how can you admire the moon over the capital?” (The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin, p. 1027).

A discreet but firm knock on the gate comes, and one of the servants brings the messenger to me. It is a priest, Nikko, obviously weary from his travels. He has a letter addressed to me from Nichiren Daishonin. I think of Nichiren at Minobu, like a beacon in the darkness of this age. The earnest face of the priest and the packet he unwraps from the sleeve of his garment moves me to suggest we sit in the far reaches of the garden, rather than risk the paper-thin walls of my house.

As a representative of the government, I cannot be too careful. Oh, they know of my conversion and that of my wife, and though we are a good distance from them, their reach is long. We face a stream of criticism and are considered to have suspicious motives, yet they leave us alone. Why the military government hasn’t removed me, I can only guess. Perhaps they think I am more useful alive and in my village where I might be party to information that could be forced from me later on. At any rate, these are dreadful times — most animals act with more reverence and humility than human beings.

“Nichiren asks that I read this to you several times,” Nikko says. As the letter unfolds before us, I think how wise Nichiren is. Although I can read and cipher well enough, there is something profound in hearing his words — words that have traveled so far from his mountainous retreat. As I hear his words, my heart can see the twists and turns of the trails and the narrow places washed away. The dizzying glance down sheer cliffs is enough to frighten an experienced climber. As birds fly, it is not far; but by foot, it is a journey to the moon.

At dusk, I offer Nikko a meal. We are both hungry from our discussions, and I have asked my share of questions, especially about Zen, a popular religion that many embrace. With Nichiren in retreat at Minobu, it is Nikko who has traveled the country sharing the true teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Kamakura is thick with Zen temples and samurai officers; courtiers and bureaucrats alike satisfy themselves with strutting and arrogance.

The world is changing so much. There was always strife of some kind in the past — locusts, famines, fires and floods — but now it comes in multiples. Just this month, we have been ordered by the Imperial government to pray for victory over the Mongols again. We wouldn’t be teetering on the edge of foreign invasion if the governor at Kamakura didn’t see fit to lop off the heads of every Mongolian delegation that dares show itself on our shores. In this age, however, civilized mercy is considered weak.

Soldiers leave the arms of their crying wives and children to march to the front at Hakone to await the armies of the merciless Kublai Khan. I pondered these things late into the night. It was quiet save for the pacing of the guard and the sounds of bamboo clacking and groaning in the grove. I lay abed, and the memory of a journey I made to Minobu less than a year ago rises before me. Once again, I see the endless twisting trails.

Did I say “trails”? It is better to say “foot paths.” The howling of wolves and the calls of monkeys seem ghost-like. But I get ahead of myself. I am not the vigorous man I once was. I traded the saddle for the writing desk. I travel from time-to-time, but only on the Tokaido road or other well-worn thoroughfares. A week in the saddle over rough terrain leaves me hobbling for days. The road to Kamakura boasts an assortment of civilized inns, but the way to Minobu is populated by mountain demons and “accidents” too numerous to mention.

My wife is a brave woman, braver than I am. Still, she frowned at my departure, thinking I could send a more able messenger with offerings than risk losing me. I had to see Nichiren for myself after hearing about him from his chief follower, Nikko. I felt I needed to see the source of the river after having tasted its waters, and a river’s source in the mountains is where the peaks are so high, the birds have difficulty flying over them. I took with me two men skilled with sword and bow and two horses loaded with food, supplies and gifts. We set off in the fragrance of April where the warmth of sun is on the lowlands and one could almost forget the threats of war on such a day. I was reminded of my brothers and I hunting with my father.

Once one leaves sea level, there is rough going. The dragons of the earth still live and breathe fire. Hot springs and steaming places make the rocks a danger. In some regions, it looks as if a giant tossed boulders into the sky and they rained down indiscriminately upon these mountains, each boulder and outcropping offering ample cover to thieving folk. A more treacherous place than the mountains of old Japan could scarcely be found.

At night, we slept in the worst hovels, or we would decline such mean shelter and sleep only at dawn in the woods with one man standing guard. Even the horses were reluctant to go further, their ears twitching and nostrils shivering. In the higher reaches, it is easy to disappear without a trace. The Fuji River roared down steeply through a massive gorge, tumbling down into mist and foam — a white mass growling with menace. Thick forests of birch, cypress, pine and cedar carpeted the land, and a deep, impenetrable gloom hugged the pathway. An army of 40,000 men could lurk there without so much as a glint off their armor.

Resolutely, I chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, keeping our destination in mind. My men, toughened by many campaigns, would have gladly quit that place if I so much as raised my hand. How appropriate it was to hear the Daishonin’s words about the journey to Kyoto and how one will never see the full moon there if one turns back. His words described the very challenge I faced, as it became clear that we might be lost.

Life requires a good deal of courage and a deaf ear to fear and danger. We pushed on. All I had were the directions given to me by others who had gone before. At any point we might have taken a wrong turn. We roamed the crags endlessly like beggar spirits squinting at passersby. There is a numbness that comes with such travel. Every mountain looks like the one previously climbed, each valley a copy of the one before. So it was with a startle that we heard something, a crack in the forest and stopping, we twisted on our saddles to catch the direction. There it was again, crack, and the crashing of a tree in the underbrush.

Dismounting, we ventured off the path into the forest and found them: two woodcutters and quite a pair they were! They were well muscled and stripped to waist and covered in mud from the eyebrows to boots. They looked to be less like men than spirits of those woods.

“Ho, there!” I called out as we advanced on them carefully. “I seek a priest who lives here in

these mountains somewhere close by. His name is Nichiren. I bring him food and offerings from the province of Totomi. Do you know of this man?"

They looked at me and then at one another. We looked fairly unsavory ourselves.

"How do we know you tell the truth and are not out here to kill him?" one spat out.

"I have a letter from him," I said, reaching for my pack.

"We don't read. Your letter means nothing to us!" the other said, still holding his axe at ready.

"But I have many things that he could use. Food, seaweed, rice, writing materials—and I am friend of his disciple, Nikko."

At the mention of Nikko's name, they lowered their axes and agreed to take only me and the horse-load of goods to the Daishonin. I don't know who had to trust more, for they could have killed me and made off with the horses and everything we'd brought. After a half day's journey, we arrived at a clearing 100 yards wide at the confluence of four rushing rivers. The sound of the spring surge, icy cold echoed off the surrounding ramparts.

We were hailed from afar by a slight figure and as we drew closer, his appearance was surprising. He was dressed like a wild man of the mountains. His cape of broad leaves kept off the late afternoon drizzle. His eyes were penetrating and bright in spite of the shabby deerskin he was clad in. It was the very person I was seeking, Nichiren.

"I have just been seeing off an old friend, he said. A monkey. There's something about him, something in his eyes that reminds me of one of my father's friends who was a fisherman. In the winter months, the monkeys are my only visitors. And now that you both have appeared, it is like a vision or mirage!" He clapped the woodcutter on the shoulder. "To see a human being coming down the ravine in the early spring is to be disbelieved at first!"

I bowed low and introduced myself. My legs trembled from the long ride and my relief at finding him at last. I found it difficult to speak and fell to one knee.

"I know, Lord Niike, it is a far and mean way you have come. Surely you must have been my father or brother in another life to forge on bringing gifts and food. Most men don't have the gratitude of the otter, which always leaves part of his meal as an offering. Please come and rest yourself. My house is rude and humble but not as bad as the lodgings along the way, eh? I sometimes think I have become a spirit of this place myself. It is so good to hear a human voice!"

That night, I slept in his bark-sided hut after we cooked sweet potatoes and rice over a small fire. We'd never met, yet we were fast friends and there was much to say. I marveled at his vibrant face, intelligent eyes and eloquence. Glancing discreetly into the darker corners of the small dwelling, I saw his altar, a magnificent Gohonzon, some sumi ink and brushes with paper and a few pots and pans. I wondered to myself what he had been eating all this time, as I saw no food stores.

"Fern shoots," he said, as if he could read my thoughts. "And berries in the spring. In the winter there is snow for rice. In the summer, I have more visitors and my meals are more tasty," he chuckled. I could see the things I had brought him were invaluable. My wife had sent a warm robe and medicinal herbs.

How long will he be able to go on like this? I thought to myself, hoping he didn't hear my concern. I fell asleep listening to the chill howl of wolves and the roar of cascading rivers.

Stirring in my warm bed this night at Niike village, I remember his face smiling into mine when I awoke. "How did you know seaweed is one of my favorite things to eat?" he asked. "It takes me back to the time when I was Zennichi-marō, a fisherman's son — a child of the ocean side."

Each moment of my stay with him at Minobu is an irreplaceable treasure to me. I asked every question I could think of, we chanted the Lotus Sutra and daimoku together. We sat by the river's edge and spoke of the changes to come, the dangers of life we would have to face.

When I left many days later, he warmly embraced me saying: "Be diligent in your faith, Lord Niike — until the last moment of your life. Think how much regret you would have carried home in your heart if you had not pushed on and made it here. If you had turned back, we would not have enjoyed this remarkable time together. This is the kind of faith to have. But I will write more of these things to you later. Please give my appreciation to your wife, who was so brave to stay at home when surely she would have ridden by your side if she could. See me in the sun, Lord Niike, I am there in the sun, he pointed to the sky. And bring your family here if things go badly!"

Outside my hall where everyone soundly sleeps, the moon has risen and soon the sun will rise. I hear the Daishonin's voice again telling me to never give up. I take my strength from his words. In a world filled with every vice and threat, I had finally met my mentor. I will ask Nikko to read the letter again to us in the morning.