

## Lessons to be Learned from the Hokkeko Believers of Atsuwara

After Nichiren Daishonin took up residence in Minobu in the 11th year of Bunnei (1274), Nikko Shonin began to propagate in the provinces of Kai (present day Yamanashi Prefecture), Suruga, and Izu (present day Shizuoka Prefecture). As a result of his efforts, many people took faith in true Buddhism within a short period of time.

One after another, they embraced true Buddhism through the shakubuku efforts of Nisshū and the others. Jinshirō, Yagorō, and Yarokurō, who would later come to be called the Three Martyrs, embraced true Buddhism in the first year of Kō'an (1278) and became leaders among the believers of the Atsuwara farmers.

However, the deputy chief priest Gyōchi was upset to see this. First, he pressed Nisshū and the other priests to sign a contract stating that they would discard the Lotus Sutra, recite the Amida Sutra (*Amida-kyō*), and chant the Nembutsu. He said that if they agreed to do so, he would allow them to continue to live at the temple. Being of stalwart faith, the priests did not succumb to Gyōchi's threat. Nichizen left Ryūsenji Temple to stay with relatives. However, Nisshū and Nichiben, who had no relatives, stayed within the territory of Ryūsenji and continued their shakubuku activities.

On the eighth day of the fourth month of the second year of Kō'an (1279), Gyōchi's sinister deeds extended to the Hokkeko believers of Atsuwara. During a horseback archery festival, Shirō, a Hokkeko believer from Atsuwara, was attacked with a blade by an unknown assailant. This incident definitely served as a dire warning that if the believers did not renounce their faith, next time, they would lose their lives. However, the Hokkeko believers did not falter and upheld their faith and practice.

In the eighth month of that year, a believer named Yashiro was killed. In light of these conditions, Nichiren Daishonin dispatched two disciples, Daishim-bō and Sammi-bō to the scene, but they were terrified when they faced the reality of the sharp swords, ready to kill them. They abandoned their faith and followed Gyōchi.

On the 21st day of the ninth month of that year, the rice crop was ripe for harvest, giving the entire Atsuwara region of Fuji a golden hue. The farmers had split up their work load and cooperated with one another to harvest the rice. Suddenly, they were ambushed by a large group of farmers and warriors under Gyōchi's control, carrying swords and bows. Among the attackers was Daishinbo, who had renounced his faith.

The attackers forcibly harvested and stole the rice crop from not only Nisshū's rice paddy, but also from the fields of other Hokkeko believers of Atsuwara. Despite the strong resistance of the Hokkeko believers, 20 farmers including Jinshirō were arrested.

No investigation was conducted on the circumstances surrounding the case, in which the Hokkeko believers were forcibly taken to Kamakura. Instead, Iinuma Hōgan, the son of Hei-no Sa'emomono-jō Yoritsuna, tortured them using toad-eye arrows, called *hikime-no-ya*. These arrows were equipped with turnip-shaped wooden whistling arrowheads called *kabura*. They are not lethal, but being shot by one of these arrows causes great pain, and the whistling sound arouses fear in those who are attacked. The

reason for the torture was not associated with the case. It was totally irrational. The Atsuwara farmers were told: “You must discard the Lotus Sutra and uphold the Nembutsu.”

When Nichiren Daishonin heard of this, he immediately wrote the Goshō, *On Persecutions Befalling the Buddha* (Shōnin gonan ji) to encourage his disciples and followers. He stated:

You all must encourage everyone in Atsuwara. Do not let them renounce their faith. Tell them that they must sincerely strengthen their resolve. It will be extraordinary if things turn out well. Expect bad times to be the norm. If they complain about being hungry, tell them about the world of hunger. If they protest that the prison is cold, teach them about the eight cold hells. If they say that they are afraid of being tortured, advise them imaging the fear of a pheasant preyed on by a hawk or a mouse cornered by a cat as your own fear. (Goshō, p. 1398, summarized)

Nikko Shonin and the other disciples and followers of the Daishonin who read this Goshō encouraged the Hokkeko believers of Atsuwara. Furthermore, the Atsuwara believers encouraged each other and, as a result, no one renounced his or her faith. Regardless of being shot by numerous toad-eye arrows, they all continued to confidently chant Daimoku.

Then, on the 15th day of the tenth month, Hei-no Sa’emon-no-jō Yoritsuna cruelly beheaded Jinshirō, Yagorō, and Yarokurō, the key individuals in this case. These men continued to chant Daimoku until the very end.

The profound significance of the Atsuwara Persecution is the fact that common farmers did not falter when they encountered persecutions from Hei-no Sa’emon-no-jō Yoritsuna, who represented the tremendous power of the national government authorities. They continued to uphold true Buddhism without slackening or renouncing their practice. Nichiren Daishonin looked upon the Atsuwara Persecution as the occasion to establish the Dai-Gohonzon for all of Jambudvīpa [for the entire world], which shall be upheld by all the people throughout the world. In other words, it was the time to establish the Dai-Gohonzon of the High Sanctuary of the Essential Teaching.

The Daishonin states the following in the Goshō, *On Persecutions Befalling the Buddha* (Shōnin gonan ji):

It took Shakyamuni Buddha forty-odd years, the Great Teacher Tiantai thirty-odd years, and the Great Teacher Dengyō twenty-odd years to accomplish the purpose of their advent. The great and severe persecutions that befell them during those years are indescribable. I, Nichiren, already have discussed this matter with you. It has taken me twenty-seven years. (Goshō, p. 1396)

Thus, on the 12th day of the tenth month of the second year of Kō’an (1279), the Daishonin established the Dai-Gohonzon of the High Sanctuary of the Essential Teaching, which was the ultimate purpose of his advent into this world.

In the *Articles to be Observed after the Passing of Nikko* (Nikko ato jōjō no koto), Second High Priest Nikko Shonin wrote the following about the Dai-Gohonzon of the High Sanctuary of the Essential Teaching:

The Dai-Gohonzon of the second year of Kō’an (1279), which Nikko inherited [from Nichiren Daishonin], is hereby bequeathed to Nichimoku. (Goshō, p. 1883)

The Dai-Gohonzon was transferred from Second High Priest Nikko Shonin to Third High Priest Nichimoku Shonin, and since then, it has been inherited and strictly protected by the successive High Priests at the Head Temple Taisekiji, awaiting the ultimate day when kosen-rufu will be achieved.

We can see that the prime point of faith for Hokkeko believers lies in the Atsuwara Persecution. We must emulate the faith and practice of the Atsuwara Hokkeko believers in our own lives and develop an absolute conviction in our faith of the Dai-Gohonzon. Regardless of what hardships and obstacles we may encounter, let us chant Daimoku, form a solid unity based on different bodies but one mind, and share this Buddhism through shakubuku, with those with whom we have a karmic relationship.

High Priest Nichinyo Shonin gave us the following guidance:

You should look upon those times when obstacles and devils compete with one another to impede your progress as the very occasions through which to solidify your faith and practice. It is important for you to develop a conviction in the great benefits of embracing the mystic Law (*Myoho*), as you firmly and sonorously chant Daimoku and resolutely confront obstacles and crush them. Regardless of how powerful the obstacles and devils may be, they can never win against the Buddha. With this conviction in your hearts, you must increasingly strengthen your resolve, form a powerful unity based on different bodies but one mind (*itai dōshin*), and exert your utmost efforts to do shakubuku. I sincerely pray that you will be able to achieve your shakubuku objectives without fail.

(*Dainichiren*, No. 840, p. 45)

As priests and lay believers of Nichiren Shoshu, let us firmly uphold the High Priest's guidance to form a solid unity based on different bodies but one mind and to endure hardships to propagate the Law. This way, we will not live an empty life that we will regret in the end. I pray that all the Hokkeko chapters in the various countries around the world will advance with devotion and strive to achieve our designated shakubuku goals, both for the ultimate accomplishment of kosen-rufu, and the more immediate goal of establishing a Hokkeko membership of 800,000 believers by 2021, when we will be celebrating the 800th anniversary of the advent of our Founder, Nichiren Daishonin.