I HAVE carefully looked over your letter. In it you say that you were concerned about what teaching was best to propagate in the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law. And that when you encountered the instruction of the Sage Nichiren, and heard that one should propagate only the daimoku of the Lotus Sutra, you resolved to become one of my disciples.

In particular you ask what the origins of the five seasonal festivals are, what they signify, and how one can correctly observe them. Well, I am unfamiliar with the details of this matter. I do, however, understand it in a general way, and it is said that there is a transmission handed down from the Great Teacher Kompon [Dengyō].

Broadly speaking, it is a custom practiced in both the True Word and Tendai schools. For specifics, I have explained the matter to Soya, so please talk with him the next chance you have.

First, when we consider the order of the five seasonal festivals, we find that they are festivals corresponding to the order of the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo.

The festival of the New Year corresponds to the character “myō,” and the Sun Goddess is honored as the guardian deity of the crops. The third day of the third month is the festival corresponding to the character “hō,” and the “dragon” is honored as the guardian deity. The fifth day of the fifth month is the festival corresponding to the character “ren,” and the “horse” is honored as the guardian deity. The seventh day of the seventh month is the festival corresponding to the character “ge,” and the “monkey” is honored as the guardian deity. The ninth day of the ninth month is the festival corresponding to the character “kyō,” and the “dog” is honored as the guardian deity.

Please look upon it in this way and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo. There can then be no doubt about the words “peace and security in their present existence and good circumstances in future existences.”

Sutra passages make it perfectly clear that all the heavenly beings are bound to diligently protect practitioners of the Lotus Sutra. The fifth volume of the Lotus Sutra says, “The heavenly beings day and night will for the sake of the Law constantly guard and protect them.” Again, it says, “The young sons of heavenly beings will wait on him and serve him. Swords and staves will not touch him and poison will have no power to harm him.” The “heavenly beings” refer to Brahmā, Shakra, the gods of the sun and moon, the four
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great heavenly kings, and others like them. The "Law" refer to the Lotus Sutra. The "young sons" refer to the seven luminaries, the twenty-eight constellations, Marichi, and the like. The words "Those who join the battle are all in the front lines" correspond to the passage "Swords and staves will not touch him."

These things are exceedingly important transmissions. Please be sure to think them over carefully. The sixth volume of the Lotus Sutra reads, "No worldly affairs of life or work are ever contrary to the true reality." And so, even when you commemorate the five seasonal festivals, simply chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and strive to attain the way. I will explain in detail on another occasion.

You also say that you became my disciple when you were told that the Lotus Sutra would surely spread in the first five hundred years of the Latter Day of the Law. Entering into the relation of teacher and lay supporter is the result of a bond that bridges the three existences. Never seek the three benefits of sowing, maturing, and harvesting from anyone else. These golden words cannot possibly be wrong: "Those persons who had heard the Law dwelled here and there in various Buddha lands, constantly reborn in company with their teachers," and "If one stays close to the teachers of the Law, one will speedily gain the way of enlightenment. By following and learning from these teachers one will see Buddhas as numerous as Ganges sands."

How could the person mentioned in the "Devadatta" chapter where it says, "In the place where they are born they will constantly hear this sutra," refer to anyone but you? The reason is that the passage just before that says, "In future ages if there are good men or good women..." "Good men" means the laymen who uphold the Lotus Sutra. You should exert yourself in faith all the more!

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The eleventh day of the first month

Reply to Akimoto

Sent from Hota in Awa Province

Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter at Hota in Awa Province to Akimoto Tarō in Shimōsa Province on the eleventh day of the first month in 1271. Akimoto had written to the Daishonin asking about the origin and meaning of the five seasonal festivals. Answering in brief, the Daishonin emphasizes that basing one's celebration of these festivals on Nam-myoho-renge-kyo ensures peace and security in this existence and good circumstances in future ones. Responding to Akimoto's comment that he became a disciple of the Daishonin when he heard from him that the Lotus Sutra is the correct teaching to spread in the Latter Day of the Law, the Daishonin says that the bond of teacher and disciple is a matter not merely of this lifetime, but bridges the three existences of past, present, and future.

Notes

1. Soya Kyōshin, a follower of the Daishonin who lived in Shimōsa Province. He was a leading believer in the area and was on friendly terms with Akimoto Tarō.
2. Lotus Sutra, chap. 5.
3. Ibid., chap. 14.
4. Ibid.
5. A quote from a fourth-century Taoist work, Pao-p'iu Tzu. Chinese soldiers believed that reciting this phrase while drawing four vertical and five horizontal lines in the air with their fingers would protect them from harm. This practice later spread to Japan and was widely adopted by the samurai of the Kamakura period (1185–1333).
6. This passage actually appears in T'ien-t'ai's Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra as an annotation to the following passage from the “Benefits of the Teacher of the Law” chapter of the Lotus Sutra: “The doctrines that they preach during that time will conform to the gist of the principles and will never be contrary to the true reality. If they should expound some text of the secular world or speak on matters of government or occupations that sustain life, they will in all cases conform to the correct Law.”
7. Lotus Sutra, chap. 7.
8. Ibid., chap. 10.