I AM grateful that you took the trouble to send your messenger. According to his report, you are going to build a new residence—this is wonderful indeed! Sometime I would like to visit and offer my congratulations on your new dwelling. I know that you would like a plaque with a description pertaining to the construction of your residence, so I have inscribed one and will have Hōki-kō\(^1\) bring it to you.

This sutra passage\(^2\) is related to the following story. The wealthy man Sudatta built Jetavana Monastery. But what on earth was the reason that Sudatta had to experience the tragedy of fire seven times? When Sudatta asked the Buddha the reason why, the Buddha replied that it was due to the depths of greed among his relatives and retainers that these disasters of fire occurred. The wealthy man responded, “Well then, what can I do to prevent the calamity of fire?”

The Buddha answered, “There will be auspicious signs in the southeast. You must practice diligently, facing in that direction. When streams of light shoot forth from there, three spirits will approach and make an announcement. They will say that a bird called meifun\(^3\) lives in the region of the southern seas. No fires break out where this bird lives. Also, there is a certain passage that this bird sings. It goes, ‘Sage lord, heavenly being among heavenly beings, voiced like the kala-vinka bird, you who pity and comfort living beings, we now pay you honor and reverence.’ When this passage is recited, no fire will break out anywhere within an area encompassing three hundred thousand ri. That is what these three spirits will proclaim.”

When Sudatta did as the Buddha had instructed, what happened to him differed not in the slightest from what the Buddha had said. And as we see from a sutra, from that time on, not even a single fire broke out.

Because of this, from the time of the passing of the Buddha on down to the present latter day, people have written out this sutra passage to prevent fires. In your case too, you will surely enjoy the same protection. It is a sutra passage that you must put firm faith in. It is found in the “Parable of the Phantom City” chapter in the third volume of the Lotus Sutra. I have explained in more detail to the priest Hōki-kō.

With my deep respect,
Nichiren

The eighteenth day of the eighth month
Reply to Ueno
Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter on the eighteenth day of the eighth month in 1275 at Minobu to meet the request of Nanjō Tokimitsu in Suruga Province for a protective talisman for his new home. The Daishonin tells Tokimitsu that he has inscribed such a plaque and will have Hōki-kō, or Nikkō, carry it to him. He relates the story of Sudatta, who succeeded in preventing fire at his residence with a sutra passage he heard from three spirits. This passage, found in the Lotus Sutra, is apparently the one the Daishonin has inscribed on the plaque he is sending to Tokimitsu. Urging strong faith in this passage, the Daishonin assures Tokimitsu that he has asked Hōki-kō to explain its meaning to him.

Notes

1. Hōki-kō is another name for Nikkō, Nichiren Daishonin’s closest disciple and his successor.
2. This refers to a passage from the “Parable of the Phantom City” chapter of the Lotus Sutra that reads, “Sage lord, heavenly being among heavenly beings, voiced like the kalavinka bird, you who pity and comfort living beings, we now pay you honor and reverence.” “Sage lord, heavenly being among heavenly beings” is an honorific title for a Buddha. “Kalavinka” is the name of a bird said to possess a voice more beautiful and melodious than any other bird. This passage appears in this letter later.
3. No details about meifun are known.