

Spring Equinox Festival and Hoshi Matsuri

Temples and shrines around Japan celebrate the spring equinox on February 3, a date that corresponds to the start of a new year in the premodern lunar calendar. At Engyōji, this festival is called Setsubun (literally, “dividing the season”), and it is both solemn and celebratory. The formalities begin at 1:00 p.m., with an esoteric fire ritual performed by the chief abbot in Maniden Hall. The ceremony addresses any inauspicious fortune attached to people who were born under that year’s unlucky star sign. By praying for their health, longevity, and prosperity, the abbot engages in a widespread East Asian tradition in which bad star signs (*akusei*) are converted into good star signs (*zensei*). The attention given these signs reflects Engyōji’s close association with the Bodhisattva Kannon, who is thought to oversee the heavens. This special event is also known as the “Star Festival” (Hoshi Matsuri).

Observances continue into the afternoon, with an esoteric ritual held to honor Fudō Myōō, a Buddhist Wisdom King whose fierce appearance stands in stark contrast to his limitless compassion. The event closes with a bean-scattering (*mame-maki*) ritual at Maniden Hall, in which three or four men who were born under that year’s star sign distribute packets of beans with the help of the temple administrator and various monks. This tradition comes from the belief that beans (*mame*) serve to “extinguish evil” (*mame*) from the temple grounds. In preparation, 8,000 packages of beans are blessed on Maniden’s main altar. Those packets are later thrown in handfuls to the crowd of attendees. Though held at other temples, the event is particularly exciting at Engyōji, where the packets can also contain cash, raffle tickets, vouchers for small gold and silver statues of Kannon, and other prizes.

A practice similar to the bean-scattering, in which people throw beans at male relatives dressed up like demons, is a Setsubun tradition that takes place at Engyōji and in households throughout the country. Local school children are released from classes early that day so they can attend. The Spring Equinox Festival is considered an extension of the Festival of Peace and Bounty held on January 18. The aim of both events is to cast out demons and pray for a prosperous year to come.