**Overview of Tōji Temple**

Tōji is the oldest Buddhist temple in Kyoto. It was founded in 796, only two years after the city itself was established under Emperor Kanmu (735–806). Tōji was built to provide spiritual protection for the Imperial Court, the new capital city, and the country as a whole. At the time, Tōji was one of only two temples allowed within the city boundaries. Literally “East Temple,” Tōji is located to the east of what was then the main gate of the capital. Its counterpart, Saiji or “West Temple,” burned down in 1233 and was never rebuilt.

Tōji is closely associated with the Buddhist monk Kūkai (774–835), the scholar, architect, and calligrapher known posthumously as Kōbō-Daishi, or “Great Teacher of Buddhist Doctrine.” Kūkai traveled to China in 804 to study the teachings and rituals of esoteric Buddhism, which had spread from India to China during the rule of the Tang dynasty (618–907). Esoteric Buddhism is known for the prominent use of mandalas, which are visual depictions of Buddhist cosmology. Mandalas can be found throughout Tōji in paintings, buildings, and the arrangement of statues.

Kūkai returned to Japan in 806 and began teaching what he had learned in China. In 823, Emperor Saga (786–842) appointed Kūkai to lead Tōji, and he became the abbot the next year. By this point, he had formalized his teachings into the Shingon school of esoteric Buddhism. Kūkai accepted the post at Tōji on the condition that only Shingon would be practiced at the temple. This was a radical departure from the common practice at the time of multiple schools practicing at the same temple. As abbot, Kūkai refashioned the temple, expanding it with new buildings including the Lecture Hall and the five-story pagoda.

Like the rest of Kyoto, Tōji has survived more than twelve centuries of fires, earthquakes, wars, and other disasters. Many of its structures have been rebuilt, sometimes more than once. A devastating fire swept through the complex in 1486, and for more than a century afterward, repair efforts were hampered by civil war. Most of Tōji’s buildings date from the late-1400s to the mid-1600s. Five of its structures are designated National Treasures, as is much of the temple’s religious art. In 1994, UNESCO designated Tōji as a World Heritage Site as part of the Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto site.