**Hojuzan Risshakuji**

More than one thousand stone steps lead to the uppermost reaches of Risshakuji, the mountain temple complex also known as Yamadera. The complex is built on the forested slopes of Yamagata Prefecture’s sacred Mt. Hoju, and the journey to the top and back is a vicarious experience of *samsara*, the Buddhist cycle of rebirth. Through the Sanmon Gate, which sits at the main entrance to the temple grounds, visitors gradually pass into the “afterlife.” As they ascend the mountain, they are purified. After meditation and prayer at the top, they descend, and are born anew with the teachings of Buddhism.

The monk Ennin (794–864) founded Risshakuji in 860 while traveling the frontiers of northern Japan to spread Buddhism on orders of the emperor. Risshakuji is a branch temple of Enryakuji, the headquarters of Tendai Buddhism located on Mt. Hiei, a sacred peak which straddles Kyoto and Shiga prefectures. Ennin was the third head of the Tendai school, a form of Buddhism brought to Japan from China.

*The base of the mountain*

The entrance to the temple complex is a short walk from Yamadera Station, past several shops and restaurants. Konpon Chudo, Yamadera’s main hall, is the first building that visitors reach. It houses a statue of Yakushi Nyorai, the Buddha of Healing, which Ennin may have carved himself. Konpon Chudo also contains a sacred flame known as the “Undying Light of Buddhism,” which Ennin brought from Enryakuji. Over the centuries, when the flame in one of the temples went out, it was relit using the other. In this way, the flame shared between the temples has burned for over 1,200 years.

Past the Konpon Chudo, there is a statue of the famous poet Matsuo Basho (1644–1694), as well as a stone monument inscribed with his well-known cicada haiku. Basho wrote the haiku while visiting Yamadera, inspired by the temple’s sublime tranquility. It is included in his famous collection of poetry and prose, *Oku no hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Deep North). This celebrated work is a travelogue of Basho’s journey—undertaken mostly on foot—from Edo (present-day Tokyo) through the northern part of Honshu Island. Another monument to Basho’s cicada haiku, the Semizuka (“Cicada Mound”), is farther up the mountain.

The journey through *samsara* and up the mountain begins from the Sanmon Gate, after visitors pass the Hobutsuden Hall, the Nenbutsu Hall, and Hie Shrine.

*Ascending the mountain*

A path lined with stone lanterns winds past statues and through towering trees to the Ubado Hall, a symbolic gateway between heaven above and the underworld below. It houses a striking statue of Datsueba, a fearsome old woman who strips the dead of their clothes before they cross the Sanzu River, which separates the world of the living from the realm of the dead. Traditionally, worshippers cleansed themselves at Ubado Hall, offered their clothes to Datsueba, and changed into new attire before continuing up the mountain. This was a symbolic shedding of their worldly sins and desires.

Farther up the mountain, near the Semizuka monument, there is a weathered rock face called the Midahora. Over time, the elements have naturally carved the stone so that it evokes the image of Amida Nyorai, the Celestial Buddha. Visitors who can see the likeness are thought to receive Amida’s blessing.

The Niomon Gate marks the halfway point up the mountain. Fierce Nio guardian statues flank the path through the structure, warding off evil. Beyond, there are four temple buildings: Shozoin, Konjoin, Chushoin, and Kezoin.

*Rebirth*

Past the four temple buildings, visitors come upon the upper reaches of Risshakuji, which represent heaven. Here, visitors meditate on the teachings of Buddhism in preparation for rebirth. The path splits, with one branch leading up to the complex’s innermost buildings—the Nyohodo Hall and the Daibutsuden Great Buddha Hall—which are collectively referred to as the Okunoin. The Nyohodo Hall enshrines statues of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, and Taho Nyorai, the Buddha of Abundant Treasures. The monk Ennin is said to have brought both statues back with him from China after studying Buddhism there. The neighboring Daibutsuden Great Buddha Hall contains a 4.8-meter-tall golden statue of Amida Nyorai.

The other branch leads to the Kaisando, a hall honoring Ennin. Enshrined within is a wooden statue of the founder, to which monks offer food both morning and night. The small red structure perched on the nearby rock outcropping is the Nokyodo sutra hall. This building is storage for sutras copied by monks in training. A narrow stairway leads to the Godaido, a hall built on the cliffside above the Kaisando. It offers an unobstructed view of the temple complex and the valley below.