

Rinnoji Temple

Rinnoji Temple was founded in 766 CE by the Buddhist monk and saint Shodo (735–817). He had resolved to found a religious center at Nikko, and after studying Nara Buddhism, he endured great hardship before finally reaching Nikko. Over the centuries, the temple developed from its modest origins as a simple thatched-roof hut to a huge complex of beautiful halls and shrines. The temple received the patronage of the Tokugawa shogunate, which ruled Japan from 1603 to 1867. Today, the temple is one of the largest and most important religious institutions in the country. It includes the Taiyuin Mausoleum, a national treasure, as well as thirty-eight other Important Cultural Properties.

From Simple Hut to Magnificent Halls

Though the first building that Shodo and his followers built in 766 CE was hardly more than a simple thatched-roof hut, the community fervently worked to develop this secluded area into a prosperous temple complex. Within a century after its founding, Rinnoji had already grown to such an extent that even the most powerful holy men in Kyoto, then the cultural and political capital of Japan, began visiting the temple, contributing further to its development. Thanks to the devotion of these early believers, the temple quickly established itself as one of the greatest religious institutions in the country and continues to develop to this day.

Two Shrines and One Temple

Today Nikko is home to the Buddhist Rinnoji Temple and two Shinto shrines, the Nikko Futarasan Shrine and Nikko Toshogu. In the not-so-distant past all three were united under a single leadership structure, known collectively as Nikkosan. Nikkosan combined Buddhism and Shinto, a uniquely Japanese fusion of the two traditions called *shinbutsu shugo*. After the end of samurai government in 1867, the new government decided in 1871 to create a clear distinction between the two religions. It issued the Shinto and Buddhism Separation Order, which required all religious institutions in the country to affiliate with either Shintoism or Buddhism. Nikkosan, with its history of more than a millennium of fusion between the two belief systems, could not so easily choose one or the other, so instead, it was separated into three parts, creating the present system of Two Shrines and One Temple.

Where Mountains Are Buddhas

The centuries of syncretism between Shintoism and Buddhism at Nikko created a special set of beliefs. As Shintoism is a religion based on the veneration of natural spirits manifested physically in the environment, the three great mountains in the area—Mt. Nantai, Mt. Nyoho, and Mt. Taro—are themselves considered deities. Rinnoji Temple's three principal Buddhist deities—Senju Kannon,

Amida Nyorai, and Bato Kannon —are also considered to be incarnations of these mountains and vice versa.

Political Patronage

In the early seventeenth century, the Nikkosan temple complex came under the patronage of the ruling Tokugawa shogunate, during which period the temple's most iconic structures were built. In 1613, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), the first Tokugawa shogun, installed his trusted religious adviser, the high priest Tenkai (1536–1643), as head priest of Nikkosan and ordered him to restore the temple. Most notably, Tenkai oversaw the construction of Toshogu Shrine and the enshrinement of Ieyasu's spirit there as the guardian deity for eastern Japan. Later, Ieyasu's grandson Iemitsu (1604–1651) continued Tokugawa support of Nikkosan, working to make the temple one of the most magnificent in the country. His impressive mausoleum, the Taiyuin, was built at Nikko in accordance with his will. Thanks to the efforts of these three leaders—Ieyasu, Tenkai, and Iemitsu—Nikkosan became the splendid complex that we see today.

Imperial Leadership

In the early days of Tokugawa rule, Ieyasu worked to develop a close relationship with the imperial family in order to secure the legitimacy of his rule over the country. By the mid-seventeenth century, this resulted in Nikkosan being designated as a *monzeki jin*, a temple headed by a prince of the imperial family who has taken Buddhist vows. The prince heading the temple was called “Prince Rinnoji” and was also the head of the Kan'eiji Temple in Tokyo and the Enryakuji Temple near Kyoto, both very important temples of the Tendai sect of Buddhism. During the Tokugawa shogunate, members of the imperial family enjoyed considerable political and religious discretion, and a strong relationship formed between the Tokugawa shogunate and the imperial family which lasted for over two centuries.