

Hondo, Main Hall

The magnificent main building of Rinnoji Temple is also known as the Hall of Three Buddhas. The three Buddhas are Amida Nyorai, Senju Kannon, and Bato Kannon.

The statue to the right is Senju Kannon, the goddess of mercy, in each of whose one thousand hands is held a tool representing her many abilities to help humankind to reach enlightenment. In the middle is Amida Nyorai, the Buddha of infinite light and life. On the left is Bato Kannon, the horse-headed Buddha. The horse represents power and, despite his angry expression, Bato Kannon is considered a kind Buddha. At Rinnoji these three Buddhas are enshrined as one group, with each different Buddha a different manifestation of one common meaning. The three Buddhas are identified with the three mountains of Nikko: Senju Kannon is Mt. Nantai, Amida Nyorai Mt. Nyoho, and Bato Kannon represents Mt. Taro.

The hall was first constructed in 848 CE by the monk Ennin (ca. 794–864), a high priest of the Tendai sect of Buddhism, which was introduced to Japan from China in 806. Tendai Buddhism is one of the most influential as well as comprehensive and diversified schools of Japanese Buddhism. Tendai Buddhism incorporates the teachings of other schools of Buddhism and also reconciled Buddhist teachings with Shinto. The main hall was first located where the Toshogu Shrine stands today and has been moved and reconstructed several times. The current structure dates from 1645.

When Edo (Tokyo) became the center of Japanese politics under the Tokugawa shogunate in 1603, the ruling Tokugawa family sought to build a new capital to rival the grandeur of Kyoto, which had been the seat of Japanese politics and culture for nearly a millennium. To this end, the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu, ordered the construction of the largest, most magnificent main hall in the country at Rinnoji. A lack of resources meant that the main hall did not realize this goal, although the building is the largest east of Kyoto.