

Konpon Chudo Main Worship Hall (National Treasure)

Enryakuji temple was founded in 788 by the Buddhist monk Saicho (767–822), who introduced the teachings of the Chinese Tendai School of Buddhism to Japan in 806. The monastery is one of the most important monasteries in Japan, and many of the new schools of Japanese Buddhism were founded by monks trained at Enryakuji. Japanese Tendai Buddhism combines esoteric ritual and meditation, and its focus on the universality of the teachings of the Buddha allowed for the reconciliation of Buddhist teachings with native Shinto. Saicho was ordained at Todaiji in Nara in 785 at the age of twenty. He left the capital to find seclusion on Mount Hiei to pursue his study of the sutras and to meditate. In 788, as the number of his followers increased, he built the Ichijo Shikanin temple to house the statue of Yakushi Nyorai, the Buddha of healing, which he had carved from the wood of a sacred tree. That building is the predecessor of the Konpon Chudo. The eternal flame that Saicho lit in front of the Yakushi Nyorai has been kept burning for over 1,200 years. The choice of Mount Hiei by Saicho was fortuitous, since the temple is situated to the inauspicious northeast of the new capital when it was moved to Kyoto in 793. In order to protect the capital from evil from this direction, Enryakuji was ordered by Emperor Kanmu (r. 781–806) to recite sutras and perform the fire ritual daily to pray for the safety of the nation and for peace. Saicho's followers continue this practice today, praying for the whole of humanity and for world peace.

One of the special features of the Konpon Chudo is that the main Buddhist statue is at the same level as the outer sanctum where worshippers pray. This is because the inner sanctum stone floor is three meters lower than the outer sanctum, and is an architectural expression of the Tendai School teaching that everyone can achieve Buddhahood. The main hall of Saito, Tenpo Rin-do (Shaka-do), and the Yokawa Chudo (Konpon Kannon-do), are also built in this style.

Prayers for the peace and prosperity of the nation and its people are offered daily at Konpon Chudo. Sutras are chanted and wooden tablets on which prayers are written (*gomagi*) are burnt in a sacred fire.