

Tatsu-ga-Ike Benten and the Dragon God

The Yokawa district was developed by Ennin (794–864). It was the last of the three districts of Enryakuji to be developed and is the furthest north. The area was expanded by Ryogen (912–985), who led a revival of Tendai Buddhism in the latter part of the tenth century. According to legend, a large serpent once lived near the Dragon Lake (also referred to as the Serpent Lake or the Red Lake). The serpent caused much harm to the local community, which caused a decrease in the number of pilgrims. Ryogen captured the serpent and said, “I heard that you have the power to freely transform the size of your body. Show me!” The great serpent answered, “As you wish,” and grew so large that his body extended all the way around the Central Hall of Yokawa. Next Ryogen asked, “How small can you be?” The serpent shrank so much in size that he fitted into the palm of Ryogen’s hand. Immediately Ryogen called upon the power of the bodhisattva Kannon to confine the serpent within the waters of the lake. The serpent became a servant of Benzaiten, the goddess of everything that flows including water. The dragon god protects travelers, and is also the god of rainfall.

In ancient times during a drought, people from the neighboring villages would come and seclude themselves for seven days at the Hiyoshi Taisha shrine, after which they would raise a ceremonial flag, and visit the lake to pacify the serpent and to pray for rain.

J: Japanese S: Sanskrit

Ryu-ga-ike (Dragon Lake)
Kannon (S. Avalokitesvara)
Benzaiten (S. Sarasvati)
Dragon God (J. ryujin)