

TITLE: Great Pagoda (Konpon Daito)

After founding Koyasan, Kobo Daishi (774–835), who was also known as Kukai, arranged for the construction of the Konpon Daito, or Great Pagoda. The pagoda was intended not only to serve as a place of worship, but also to contain a three-dimensional representation of the Womb Realm Mandala for use by Shingon priests as an important tool for training and ongoing meditation. Although construction of the Konpon Daito began in 816, Kobo Daishi entered his eternal meditation before the building was complete. His successor, Shinzen Daitoku (804–891), oversaw the remaining work, which was completed in 876.

The Konpon Daito is a two-storied pagoda, believed to be the first of its kind in Japan. In the rain, or in windy conditions, visitors can hear the ringing of the dozens of bronze wind bells connected to the spire. Portraits of the eight patriarchs who spread the teachings of esoteric Buddhism, known within the Shingon sect as the Eight Great Doctrine-Expounding Patriarchs, are painted on the corners of the Konpon Daito's interior walls. These patriarchs include not only Kobo Daishi but also Huiguo (746–805), known in Japanese as Keika, the Chinese Buddhist monk who taught Kobo Daishi the principles of esoteric Buddhism.

The pagoda interior houses the rare, three-dimensional representation of the Womb Realm Mandala, a ritual visualization of the metaphysical universe and an important part of Shingon Buddhist practice. At the center sits a massive statue of Dainichi Nyorai (known in Sanskrit as Vairocana), surrounded by other statues and pillars with paintings depicting the other Buddhist deities of the Diamond Realm. Most mandalas appear in painted form, or as tapestries, making the Konpon Daito a unique opportunity to experience this symbolic and sacred Buddhist teaching.

The pagoda has been destroyed by fire and lightning, and subsequently rebuilt, on multiple occasions, most recently during the early twentieth century.