

Kan'eiji Temple: Konpon Chudo

The Konpon Chudo or main hall of Kan'eiji Temple is a structure more than 350 years old, but has only stood on its current spot since 1879. The building was constructed in 1638 as the main hall of Kitain Temple in Kawagoe, a city that is now part of Saitama Prefecture northwest of Tokyo, and served its purpose there for centuries until disaster befell Kan'eiji in 1868. That was when the temple's original main hall and most other structures were burned to the ground by forces loyal to Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) after they had overthrown the ruling Tokugawa shogunate, with which Kan'eiji was closely associated. About a decade later, Kan'eiji's former priests and devotees sought to revive the temple, but were stymied by the lack of a main hall.

At this point the priests of Kan'eiji turned to the Kitain Temple. Tenkai (1536?–1643), the founder of Kan'eiji, had served as a priest at Kitain before becoming a trusted advisor to shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616). He went on to become one of the most influential Buddhist figures in Japanese history. The relationship between Kitain and Kan'eiji had been close ever since, so when the hard-hit Kan'eiji clergy came calling with the remarkable request that Kitain donate its main hall to Kan'eiji, the abbot agreed. The building was carefully dismantled and loaded onto boats, which carried it downriver all the way to Tokyo. The hall was reassembled on a modest plot on the north side of Ueno Park set aside from the vast grounds from which Kan'eiji had been banished after 1868. It opened as the new Kan'eiji Konpon Chudo in 1879. The hip-and-gable roof and unpainted walls are typical features of traditional Japanese architecture, while the main statue of Buddha inside is said to have been carved by Saicho (767–822), the priest credited with founding the Tendai school of Buddhism to which Kan'eiji belongs.