

Kan'eiji Temple: Five-storied Pagoda

The pagoda is an East Asian version of the Indian stupa, which in its earliest form was a repository for sacred relics of the Buddha. Pagodas have been built in Japan since the arrival of Buddhism to the archipelago in the sixth century, and they remain a common sight at temples throughout the country. The five-storied pagoda in Ueno Park was erected in 1639, when it replaced an earlier version financed by high-ranking government official Doi Toshikatsu (1573–1644) and dedicated to Ueno Toshogu Shrine in 1631. In other words, the pagoda was originally the property of a Shinto shrine rather than a Buddhist temple. That shrine, however, stood within the vast grounds of Kan'eiji Temple, the expansive complex which in the latter half of the 1600s encompassed an area larger than today's Ueno Park. The mingling of Shinto and Buddhist religious traditions and even their structures was long considered natural in Japan, where beliefs and practices were closely intertwined until the end of the Edo period (1603–1868).

The leaders of the new Meiji government, established after the sovereignty of the emperor was restored, were determined to modernize the country and sought to institutionalize the native Shinto religion as a vehicle of modern nationalism. In 1868, after the government order that Buddhist and Shinto institutions should be separated was issued, violence and destruction ensued. Many nominally Buddhist buildings, statues, and artworks throughout Japan were destroyed, and it was at that time that the Kan'eiji precincts were drastically reduced and the temple eventually relocated to a small site north of today's Ueno Park. The Ueno pagoda would also have been destroyed but for some quick thinking by Ueno Toshogu's head priest, who filed an official report declaring that the structure was the property of Kan'eiji Temple and not part of Toshogu Shrine. This spirit of cooperation between the two institutions continued during World War II, when the priests of the shrine helped protect the statues of Buddhist deities housed within the pagoda. The relatively long distance between the tower and the relocated Kan'eiji, however, meant that the temple could not maintain the pagoda sufficiently in the postwar era. It was donated to the Tokyo city government in 1958 and is now part of Ueno Zoo.