

Ganjin

Ganjin (Ch. Jianzhen; 688–763) was a Chinese monk revered for his efforts to spread Buddhism in Japan. He is often referred to as the founder of the Hosso school of Buddhism, of which nearby Yakushiji is the head temple in Japan.

Born in Guangling, present-day Yangzhou, Ganjin began his monastic life when he was 14. At the age of 20 he traveled to the Tang Dynasty capital of Chang'an (today's Xi'an), where he studied Buddhism and medicine.

In 742 he accepted an invitation from Yoei and Fusho, two Japanese monks who were studying in China, to become the teacher of Buddhist precepts at the imperial court in Nara. Over the following 12 years, Ganjin would make five attempts to sail to Japan, each one thwarted by inclement weather or official intervention. On the fifth attempt, his ship was blown so badly off course that he was forced to return to Chang'an overland, a trip that took him three years and cost him his eyesight due to infection.

Unperturbed, Ganjin made a sixth attempt in 753, this time boarding a Japan-bound emissary ship of the kind that the monks Yoei and Fusho had boarded on the reverse journey more than a dozen years before. This time he succeeded in his quest and reached Nara in the spring of 754. Over the next decade, until the age of 76, he transmitted the Buddhist precepts to many people in Japan, including the emperor, first at Todaiji and then at Toshodaiji.