

Risshu School

The Risshu (or Ritsu) school is one of the “Six Buddhist Schools of Nara” (Nanto Rokushu). One of its main characteristics is study of the foundations of the theory and practice of Buddhism’s monastic precepts (rules for daily life).

Daoxuan (Jp. Dosen; 596–667), a monk of the Tang period (618–906), founded the school in China, where it is known as the Nanshan branch of the Precepts School of Buddhism. Daoxuan also helped translate the Buddhist scriptures brought to China from India by the monk Xuanzang (Jp. Genjo; 602–664).

It was Daoxuan’s disciple, Jianzhen (Jp. Ganjin), who established the school’s principal temple in Japan at Toshodaiji in 759, becoming its first head priest. In fact, the first four generations of head priests were non-Japanese.

Following the establishment of ordination platforms at Toshodaiji, the Shimotsuke-Yakushiji temple in Tochigi Prefecture, and the Kanzeonji temple in Fukuoka Prefecture, the Risshu school prospered significantly. With time, however, it went into decline, largely due to the appeal of other less demanding “instant enlightenment” schools of Buddhism that flourished from the twelfth century on. Records show that some 350 years after Ganjin established Toshodaiji, the temple fell into disrepair and eventually the teachings of the school ceased.

In the twelfth century, temple renovations were made and efforts begun to resurrect the Risshu precepts, but the school never fully regained its former glory. Following the Meiji Restoration (1868), when rule by the warrior class ended and the sovereignty of the court was restored, the Risshu school was brought under the jurisdiction of the Shingon school by governmental decree. This lasted until 1900 when Risshu regained its independence and its headquarters reverted to Toshodaiji.