

Inside the Lecture Hall: A Three-dimensional Mandala

The Lecture Hall is not only a place to hear sermons and chant mantras; the building itself is designed to be a tool for meditation. The 21 statues inside are arranged to form a three-dimensional mandala, a depiction of the sacred cosmology of esoteric Buddhism.

Of the 21 statues in the hall, 15 were created in the early ninth century. According to tradition, the statues were designed by Kūkai (774–835) while he was abbot of Tōji and were installed in the hall in 839. The remaining six are replacements created after the Lecture Hall's reconstruction in 1491. All the statues are made of wood and lacquer, and most are decorated with gold leaf.

The figures are arranged in groups. There are three groups of five deities surrounded by six additional deities. At the center of the dais are the Five Great Buddhas (Gochi Nyorai), fully enlightened beings who occupy the highest rank of the Japanese Buddhist pantheon. To the east of the Buddhas are the Five Great Bodhisattvas (Godai Bosatsu), compassionate deities who help humans achieve enlightenment. To the west are the ferocious-looking Five Wisdom Kings (Godai Myō-ō), chastisers of the wicked and discipliners of the faithful. At each corner of the dais is one of the Four Heavenly Kings (Shitennō), who protect the four directions. The two attendants of the Buddha who stand to either side, Bonten and Taishakuten, are Hindu gods incorporated into Buddhist mythology. The deva Bonten is on the eastern side, while the deva Taishakuten stands on the western side.