

Five-Storied Pagoda

Tōji's pagoda is a Kyoto landmark visible from around the city. It is 55 meters high and the tallest traditional wooden building in Japan. Despite its slender form, it is surprisingly resilient to earthquakes—but not, unfortunately, to lightning. The pagoda has burned down four times and was rebuilt most recently in 1644 with support from Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651), the third Tokugawa shogun.

Pagodas evolved from Indian stupas, structures used since ancient times for burials and for housing sacred relics. This one was originally built to enshrine relics of the historical Buddha (Siddhārtha Gautama, sixth century BCE) brought to Japan from China by Kūkai (774–835), founder of the Shingon school of Buddhism. The relics are stored within the pagoda's central column.

The central column represents Dainichi Nyorai, the primordial or cosmic Buddha, who occupies the most important place in Shingon Buddhism. Inside the pagoda, the column is surrounded by four other Buddhas. Together with Dainichi Nyorai, they comprise the Five Great Buddhas found in the center of the Diamond World Mandala, a symbolic representation of the universe as understood in esoteric Buddhism. The same arrangement of Buddhas can be found in the statues in the Lecture Hall.

On the interior walls are paintings of Kūkai and other masters of esoteric Buddhism, and of a dragon. Dragons are water creatures in Chinese and Japanese mythology, and this image is intended to protect the wooden building from fire. A final distinctive touch can be found on the outside of the building: a carving of a small, demon-like creature called a *jaki* is perched on a protruding beam on each corner, where he appears to be helping to support the roof.