

The Five Great Kokūzō Bodhisattvas and Aizen Myō-ō

Five mounted deities are enshrined in Kanchi-in's main hall. The statues were brought back from China in the ninth century by Eun (798–869), a Shingon monk and student of Kūkai (774–835). These deities are manifestations of the Five Great Buddhas who appear at the center of the Diamond World Mandala, one of the two main mandalas used in Shingon Buddhism. The central figure, riding a horse, represents Dainichi Nyorai, the cosmic or primordial Buddha. The others ride a lion, an elephant, a peacock, and a garuda—a mythical bird with origins in Hinduism.

Another notable statue in the main hall depicts Aizen Myō-ō, a red-skinned, six-armed Wisdom King—one of a group of wrathful-looking deities who safeguard Buddhism by chastising the wicked and disciplining the faithful. The statue dates from the Edo period (1603–1867). Surprisingly, perhaps, given Aizen Myō-ō's fearsome appearance, devotees pray to him for good marriages and peaceful homes.