

Kūkai's Three-Dimensional Mandala

Mandalas are symbolic depictions of the universe in which Buddhist deities and symbols are arranged to point the way towards enlightenment. The statues in the Lecture Hall were commissioned by Kūkai (774–835) as a three-dimensional mandala. Of the 21 figures, 15 are originals dating from the early ninth century, while the other six are replacements of statues lost in a fire in 1486. The statue of Dainichi Nyorai was rebuilt in 1497, and the five others were remade during the Edo period (1603–1867). The statues are made of wood and lacquer, and most are covered in gold leaf.

In the middle of the mandala are the Five Great Buddhas, centering on Dainichi Nyorai, the primordial or cosmic Buddha. They are flanked by the Five Great Bodhisattvas to the east and the Five Great Wisdom Kings to the west. Surrounding and protecting this pantheon are the Four Heavenly Kings, standing guard at each corner, and two guardian devas, one each on the eastern and western ends of the dais.

Five Great Buddhas (Gochi Nyorai)

Nyorai, or fully enlightened Buddhas, are beings who occupy the top of the Japanese Buddhist pantheon. The five Buddhas at the center of the dais embody the five fundamental wisdoms that help living beings escape the cycle of life and death. At their center is Dainichi Nyorai, the primordial or cosmic Buddha, who occupies a special place of veneration in Shingon and other esoteric traditions.

Dainichi Nyorai (in the center)
Ashuku Nyorai (at the northeast)
Hōshō Nyorai (at the southeast)
Amida Nyorai (at the southwest)
Fukūjōju Nyorai (at the northwest)

Five Great Bodhisattvas (Godai Bosatsu)

Bodhisattvas are compassionate beings who have put off their own enlightenment in order to help other living beings. The five bodhisattvas here appear as they do in the Diamond World Mandala, a fundamental text of esoteric Buddhism. Each is associated with one of the Five Great Buddhas.

Kongō Haramitta Bosatsu (in the center)
Kongō Satta Bosatsu (at the northeast)
Kongō Hō Bosatsu (at the southeast)
Kongō Hō Bosatsu (at the southwest)
Kongō Gō Bosatsu (at the northwest)

Five Great Wisdom Kings (Godai Myō-ō)

The Wisdom Kings safeguard Buddhism by chastising the wicked and disciplining the faithful. They are depicted surrounded by flames, which represent the purification of the mind through the burning away of material desires. Although they have a fearsome appearance that contrasts with that of the kindly bodhisattvas, the Wisdom Kings protect and guide living beings in their pursuit of enlightenment. Like the bodhisattvas, each of the Wisdom Kings here is also an aspect of one of the Five Great Buddhas.

Fudō Myō-ō (in the center)
Kongō-Yasha Myō-ō (at the northeast)
Gōzanze Myō-ō (at the southeast)
Gundari Myō-ō (at the southwest)
Daiitoku Myō-ō (at the northwest)

The Four Heavenly Kings (Shitennō)

These guardians of the four cardinal directions are protectors of Buddhism and are usually depicted as warriors. They carry spears and swords to combat evil and fight the enemies of Buddhism, and they are often shown standing on top of defeated demons. One of the kings, Tamonten, holds a pagoda in addition to his weapon.

Tamonten (at the northeast corner)
Jikokuten (at the southeast corner)
Zōchōten (at the southwest corner)
Kōmokuten (at the northwest corner)

Bonten and Taishakuten

These two deities usually appear as a pair and are considered protectors of the historical Buddha. Both are manifestations of powerful Hindu deities: Bonten is associated with Brahma, and Taishakuten with Indra. In Buddhist art, they often appear on either side of the main deity in a triad. Bonten is usually on the main deity's left side, as is the case here, where he is on the east side of the dais, and Taishakuten is on the west.

Bonten (on the east side)
Taishakuten (on the west side)