

Gate of the Guardian Kings

The imposing entranceway to the Ninnaji complex is the Gate of the Guardian Kings, or the Niomon. Ninnaji's history stretches back to the ninth century, but this gate (*mon*) was erected as part of a large rebuilding project after most of the temple's buildings burned down during the Onin War (1467–1477). The gate has undergone extensive renovation and conservation work over the years. The people of old Japan esteemed it so highly that they named it one of the “Three Great Gates of Kyoto,” along with the gates of Chionin and Nanzenji temples.

The Niomon not only allows the pious to pass through, but also symbolically wards off evil spirits, thieves, and those who harbor ill will toward Buddhism. To this end, Ungyo and Agyo, the “Nio” guardian deities, stand on either side of the gate. These two fierce-looking and physically imposing protectors can be found at the main entrances to many temples across Japan. While they look similar, you can easily tell them apart: Agyo's mouth is always open; Ungyo's is always closed. You can almost hear them, Agyo roaring “Ah,” and Ungyo rumbling “Un.”