

Kobo Daishi in the Reihokan

Inside Ninnaji's Reihokan (Repository of Sacred Treasures) is a portrait of Kobo Daishi (774–835) sitting erect on a tatami mat and gazing out with a measured expression. In one hand he holds a *vajra*, a ritual implement representing the penetrating power of Buddhist wisdom; in the other he clasps prayer beads.

During his life, Kobo Daishi was known as Kukai; the name Kobo Daishi, meaning “Great Teacher of the Buddhist Law,” was conferred upon him posthumously. It is difficult to overstate his importance to Japanese Buddhism. He was one of the earliest monks to go to China for direct ordination by the established masters of Buddhism there. When he returned to Japan, he brought with him numerous papers, books, and paintings that would direct the teachings of the esoteric Shingon Buddhism—which he founded—for the next thousand years and beyond. After his death, Kukai became a subject of worship himself, resulting in the proliferation of his image in both statues and paintings.