

About Myoe, Founder of Kosanji Temple

Myoe (1173–1232) is widely known for his contributions to Buddhist thought, art, and tea. His devotion to Buddhism began when he lost his parents at the age of eight. He entered the esoteric Shingon temple Jingoji, near Kosanji's current location, the following year. He later studied Kegon (Chinese: Huayan; Flower Garland) Buddhism at Todaiji in Nara, one of the most important temples of the time. He would practice both Shingon esoteric Buddhism and Kegon Buddhism throughout his life, later incorporating their lessons into his own esoteric beliefs. His innovative teachings led to the spread of Kegon Buddhism in Japan.

Myoe spent years trying to identify an appropriate way to show his reverence for Buddhist teachings. He eventually settled on cutting off part of one of his ears as he knelt before an image of Butsugen Butsumo, a bodhisattva he regarded as a mother figure. By this disfigurement of his handsome features, he sought to further distance himself from worldly desires.

Myoe's beliefs reflected the syncretism that flourished in those days between Buddhism and worship of the native Shinto deities (kami). He was particularly drawn to Kasuga Daimyōjin, the Shinto deity enshrined at Kasuga Taisha Shrine in Nara. His reverence was so strong that he gave up a long-cherished wish to go on a pilgrimage to India, the home of Buddhism, in deference to the deity's warning against the plan. Kasuga Daimyōjin's influence on Myoe can still be felt at Kasuga Myōjin Shrine, which is located on the grounds of Kosanji Temple.

Myoe's exploits were not limited to religious thought. He is regarded as the father of tea cultivation in Japan. After receiving a packet of tea seeds from the Zen master Eisai (1141–1215), who had returned from studying in China, Myoe planted the seeds in a plot near Kosanji. The cultivation of tea spread throughout Japan from Kosanji, and tea is still harvested at the temple.

Myoe loved the arts, and convened gatherings of well-known artists and intellectuals at Kosanji. The rich milieu he cultivated lives on in the many treasures passed down at the temple. Myoe's own powers of expression are on display in his dream journal, kept for about 40 years. Its meticulous, extensive notes and relevance to the present day have drawn international interest.

Myoe was also a devoted humanitarian. He was especially concerned about the plight of war widows, many of whom became his students and supporters. After the bloody Jokyu Rebellion of 1221, when the emperor's forces in Kyoto revolted against and were defeated by the armies of the Kamakura shogunate, many women close to the court were widowed. When they came to the temple, Myoe offered them shelter and taught them about Buddhism. Eventually he built a temple and nunnery for them: Zenmyōji. This facility was named after

Zenmyo (Chinese: Shanmiao), a woman of Chinese legend who transformed herself into a dragon to protect a Kegon monk.

Myoe was nearly 60 when he passed away surrounded by his closest disciples and devotees. Some went on to write about their master in works that portrayed him as a popular hero, an image that has lasted to this day.