

About Myoe, Founder of Kosanji Temple

The influence of Kosanji's founder, the priest Myoe (1173–1232), extended well beyond the temple grounds. His various accomplishments included a new approach to Buddhist thought, the spread of tea cultivation in Japan, support for war widows, and a dream journal that continues to draw widespread interest.

Myoe's legacy is evident at Kosanji, a temple he built at the emperor's orders in 1206. At Kosanji, visitors can reflect on the life of a thirteenth-century priest whose achievements live on today.

Myoe's diverse beliefs

Myoe lost his parents at the age of eight, and began his training toward priesthood soon after at Jingoji, a Shingon temple near Kosanji's current location. He came to regard Butsugen Butsumo (a bodhisattva considered the mother of all Buddhas) and Shaka Nyorai (the historical Buddha and founder of Buddhism) as a mother and father figure, respectively. Their special importance in his life strengthened his commitment to Buddhist practice. He later trained in Nara at Todaiji, the most important temple in Kegon (Chinese: Huayan; Flower Garland) Buddhism.

Myoe would continue to practice both Shingon esoteric Buddhism and Kegon Buddhism throughout his life. He combined these traditions in his own esoteric beliefs, which also emphasized the previously obscure Mantra of Light. His distinctive teachings are often credited with the popularization of the Kegon school in Japan.

Myoe's teachings followed the syncretism that then flourished between Buddhism and the worship of native Shinto deities (kami). The close relationship of the two traditions was relatively widespread until a decree to separate them was issued following the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Myoe was especially devoted to Kasuga Daimyoin, a Shinto deity that combines the four deities enshrined in Kasuga Taisha Shrine in Nara. His faith was so strong that he claimed Kasuga Daimyoin dissuaded him from making a long-dreamed-of pilgrimage to India, the home of Buddhism. Kasuga Daimyoin is still enshrined in the Kosanji precinct, in Kasuga Myojin Shrine.

Cutting off an ear: an act of devotion

Myoe spent years trying to identify an appropriate way to show his reverence for Buddhist teachings. At age 24, he 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. This

disfigurement of his handsome features was his way of further distancing himself from worldly desire.

The seeds of tea culture

Myoe received tea seeds from the influential Zen master Eisai (1141–1215), who had recently returned from studies in China. Myoe planted the seeds in a plot near Kōsanji and helped spread the cultivation of tea in Japan. The know-how flowed from Kōsanji to Uji, about 30 kilometers to the southeast, and Uji went on to become one of Japan's most famous tea-growing areas.

Tea growers from around Japan continue to pay homage at Kōsanji in recognition of Myoe's pioneering contributions to the Japanese tea tradition. A small tea field is still cultivated at Kōsanji, and first-picked *shincha* tea is harvested every year in May.

Respect for women

Myoe cared deeply for those in need. He was especially concerned about the plight of women in distress, and many became his students and supporters.

After the bloody Jōkyū Rebellion of 1221, when the forces of the emperor's court in Kyoto revolted against and were defeated by the armies of the Kamakura shogunate, many war widows came to seek his help. He took them in, taught them Buddhism, and eventually built a temple and nunnery for them called Zenmyōji.

Zenmyōji is named after Zenmyō (Chinese: Shanmiao), a woman of Chinese legend who transformed herself into a dragon to protect a priest. Myoe invoked the spirit of Zenmyō in his support for women.

Art, animals, and nature

Myoe loved the arts, and convened gatherings of great artists and intellectuals at Kōsanji. The rich milieu he cultivated lives on in the many treasures passed down at Kōsanji. The most famous of all is the *Chōju jinbutsu giga*, a collection of picture scrolls featuring animals behaving like people.

Myoe was very fond of the natural world. From his early years at Jingōji he enjoyed meditating outside, with the Kyoto mountains as a backdrop. One portrait shows him meditating in the crook of a forked tree, surrounded by wildlife. His affinity for dogs in particular is evident in a wooden carving of a puppy that is said to have been among his prized possessions.

Prolific dream journal

In recent decades, Myoe has become widely known beyond the world of Japanese Buddhism thanks to the popularity of a meticulously kept dream journal.

Over the course of about 40 years, Myoe set down a record of his dreams, and dreams made a strong impact on his teachings. The dream journal's emphasis on mindfulness, conservation of nature, and personal fulfillment have made it a valuable resource for religious and secular scholars alike, and it has drawn the interest of people around the world.