

Daishoin: Introduction and History

This vast Buddhist temple complex is located at the foot of Mt. Misen (535 meters) and belongs to the Omuro branch of esoteric Shingon Buddhism. According to legend, the temple was established in 806 by Kukai (774–835), the founder of Shingon, who in that year is said to have ascended Mt. Misen to perform ascetic rites and various rituals, including the *goma* fire ritual that remains a central practice of the Shingon school. The fire lit by Kukai is said to have burned on the mountain ever since.

What is now Daishoin first appears in twelfth-century records that mention a grand temple on or near Miyajima. That temple's main hall is said to have been built on the orders of Emperor Toba (1103–1156), who is known to have visited Miyajima to pray for the peace and well-being of the realm. This event marked the start of Daishoin's special relationship with the court, which lasted for centuries. One of Emperor Toba's sons, Kakusho (1129–1169), was the chief abbot of Ninnaji in Kyoto, the head temple of the Omuro branch and a sanctuary with very close ties to the imperial family. Kakusho favored Daishoin as did his father, and the temple eventually became an affiliate of the powerful Ninnaji. Documents detailing the 1181 visit of retired Emperor Takakura (1161–1181) to Miyajima describe Daishoin as the “administrator” of Itsukushima Shrine, hinting at the temple's authoritative position.

With royal backing, Daishoin continued to flourish and eventually became the primary subsidiary of Ninnaji in the sixteenth century. At the height of its strength, it had 12 branch temples of its own and enjoyed the favor of many powerful individuals. These included the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), who unified all of Japan under his banner but died before he could establish a stable government.

However, Daishoin has suffered hard times as well. In 1868, the new government led by Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) initiated a policy of cultivating the native Shinto faith as a vehicle of modern nationalism. The Meiji government ordered the forced separation of Shinto and Buddhism, ending a tradition of religious syncretism that had endured in Japan for more than a thousand years. Like many temples throughout Japan, the grounds and status of Daishoin were greatly reduced as a result of these changes.

Daishoin suffered another severe setback in 1887 when a fire laid waste to the temple's precincts and burned all but a few buildings to the ground. The current halls, gates, and other structures were all built months, years, or even decades after the blaze. The summit of Mt. Misen, where the monks of Daishoin watch over Kukai's eternal flame day and night, has also experienced repeated natural disasters over the years and now hosts a string of newer buildings. The peak can be climbed in an hour and a half by following a hiking trail from the main temple.