

Daishoin: Niomon Gate

The Niomon, or gate of the guardian kings, marks the entrance to Daishoin and separates the sacred grounds of the temple from the secular world. The two fierce-looking guardians keeping watch over the doorway are believed to ward off evil and to protect the temple from harm. The guardian on the left is depicted with his mouth open, pronouncing the letter “a” (the first sound of the Sanskrit syllabary), while his partner, who is seen speaking the syllable “un” (the last sound in Sanskrit), has his mouth nearly closed. This combination of letters represents the sum of all things, and is the Buddhist equivalent of the way the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega* are used in Christianity. The original Niomon at Daishoin was lost in 1887 when a fire burned most of the temple’s structures to the ground. The current version was built entirely from Japanese zelkova wood in 1939.