

Daishoin: Statue of the Juichimen Kannon Bodhisattva

The Kannondo Hall was built to house the statue of Juichimen Kannon, the eleven-headed bodhisattva of compassion who is one of the temple's main deities. Kannon (Sanskrit: Avalokitesvara) is depicted in many forms throughout East Asia; the eleven-headed manifestation often carries prayer beads and lotus flowers, and offers protection from sickness, fires, and other misfortune. The standing Juichimen Kannon of Daishoin is almost 2 meters tall and stands against an elaborate golden halo in the shape of a leaf. The figure's peaceful facial expression contrasts with its imposing size and the poise and authority of its bearing.

The provenance of the statue is not entirely clear, but it has traditionally been attributed to Gyoki (668–749), a renowned Buddhist priest of the Nara period (710–794). Juichimen Kannon was the primary Buddhist deity of Itsukushima Shrine for centuries, and the Daishoin statue, or one like it, appears in several Heian-period (794–1185) records concerning the shrine. Foremost among these is the message addressed to Itsukushima Shrine in 1164 by Taira no Kiyomori (1118–1181), patron of the shrine and the most powerful man in Japan at the time, in which he professes his deep faith in the Kannon of Itsukushima. Kiyomori's message accompanied the *Heike Nokyo*, a set of opulent sutra scrolls donated to Itsukushima Shrine both as a pious offering and as a symbol of the power of Kiyomori's Taira clan. The *Heike Nokyo* contains the entire Lotus Sutra, in which Kannon plays a central role.

The Juichimen Kannon statue was kept at Itsukushima Shrine until 1868, when the government ordered the separation of Shinto and Buddhism and ended the tradition of syncretism that had dominated religious thought and practice in Japan for more than a thousand years. A result of the 1868 order was that all Buddhist imagery was removed from Shinto shrines, leaving the statue without a home. It was moved to Daishoin, where it has been revered ever since. The statue is designated an Important Cultural Property.