

## **Zaodo Hanakusen Poe**

Hanakusen Poe is one of Kinpusenji Temple's most important rituals, and has been held for over 1,000 years. It takes place annually over three days, from April 10 to 12, to announce the blossoming of the sacred cherry tree of the Zao Gongen, the three blue-skinned avatars of the Buddha enshrined within Kinpusenji Temple's Zaodo Hall. This announcement of spring is also a chance for believers to pray for the happiness of humankind and repent for sins committed the previous year.

The first day of the festival is mainly dedicated to female Shugendo practitioners, who take part in a large-scale fire prayer ritual called *goma*, in which wishes are written on wooden plaques (*gomaki*) and set afire. Visitors are welcome to join in the "1,000-stick rice pounding," a tradition dating back to the Heian period (794–1185), in which long sticks are used to pound glutinous rice into *mochi* rice cakes, which are then distributed to participants.

The final two days of the festival feature a parade of people dressed as *yakko* (guards and porters), followed by Buddhist priests, children dressed in elaborate traditional garb, and Shugendo practitioners, who march from Chikurinin Temple to the Zaodo Hall.