

Covered Stairway

Important Cultural Property

This covered stairway forms the principal approach to the Hasedera Temple Main Hall. It was built in 1039 by Nakatomi no Nobukiyo, the chief priest of Kasuga Taisha Shrine in what is now the city of Nara. He had the stairway built to express his gratitude after one of his children recovered from an illness.

The first two pillars of the stairway are adorned with wooden plaques to honor both Buddhist and Shinto deities. The stairway then progresses into lower and middle sections over a small bridge that symbolizes the division between the secular and spiritual worlds. The theme of fusing Buddhism and Shinto is seen again in the Zaodo, a small shrine located about two-thirds up the stairway. It was built to honor Zao Gongen, a guardian deity that represents a mix of Shinto and Buddhism.

Lanterns were added when the lower and middle sections of the stairway were rebuilt in 1889. Every year on New Year's Eve, hundreds of additional lanterns are set up along the stairway as part of the Kannon Mandoe (Kannon 10,000 Light Ceremony). Visitors ascend the 399 stone steps through this corridor of light to pray. The roughly 200 meters of the stairway are equivalent to 108 *ken* in the traditional Japanese measurement system, and represent the 108 destructive desires in Buddhism that must be overcome to reach nirvana. It is said that each defilement fades as visitors climb each *ken* toward the Main Hall.