

Hokkeji Imperial Convent

Empress Komyo (701–760), a key figure in the spread of Buddhism in Japan, established the Hokkeji Imperial Convent on the site of the former mansion of her father, the powerful courtier Fujiwara no Fuhito (659–720). And after the empress's husband, Emperor Shomu (701–756), designated Todaiji Temple as the head of a state temple complex, Empress Komyo designated Hokkeji as the head of a national system of convents. From the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, the daughters of imperial and noble families entered Hokkeji as Buddhist nuns.

The name Hokkeji can be roughly translated as the Temple of the Flower of the Law. Empress Komyo encouraged women in the convent to practice ikebana, or flower arrangement, and the Hokkeji Goryu school of ikebana continues to this day.

A deeply devout woman, the empress believed her duty was not only to care for the women in the convent, but also the less fortunate. She established an infirmary, as well as a residence for orphans and the disabled. It is said that she washed the dirt off a thousand people afflicted with illness in the Karafuro bathhouse, which was rebuilt in 1766 and still stands on the temple grounds today.

The other highlights of Hokkeji include the statues of Eleven-Headed Kannon and Yuimakoji, both National Treasures; the Hokkeji Garden, a National Historic Site famed for its Japanese irises (*Iris laevigata*); and the Main Hall, Main Gate, and Shoro bell tower, which date to the early seventeenth century.