

## **Dōmyōji Temple**

Dōmyōji is one of the few Buddhist convents still in operation in Japan. Within its grounds are an impeccably tended rock garden and a thousand-year-old statue of Kannon.

Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, is the central object of worship at Dōmyōji. The statue is believed to have been carved by Sugawara no Michizane (845–903), the noted scholar and poet who was later deified as the Shinto kami of learning, Tenjin. The statue is approximately a meter high and carved from a single piece of Japanese cypress. Kannon is depicted atop a lotus blossom and is wearing a crown made of 10 incarnations of Kannon's head. Each head represents a stage on the bodhisattva's path. Above the 10 heads of Kannon is the head of Amida Buddha, representing full enlightenment. The statue is displayed to the public on the 18th and 25th of each month.

It might seem strange that a man who later became a Shinto deity carved a Buddhist statue. But from the sixth century, when Buddhism was introduced to Japan, to the end of the nineteenth century, Buddhism and Shinto were not seen as distinct religious traditions. Shinto kami were believed to be Buddhist deities and Buddhist deities had Shinto kami avatars. In fact, some of Dōmyōji's buildings were moved from nearby Dōmyōji Tenmangū Shrine when laws enacted in 1868 forced the Buddhism and Shinto to separate.