

Chōkenji Temple

Easily distinguished by its red lacquer Chinese gate, Chōkenji was founded in 1699 as a Shingon Buddhist temple. The goddess Benzaiten, the only female member of the Japanese Seven Lucky Gods, is worshipped here. Benzaiten was originally the Hindu river deity Saraswati, whose name means “eloquence” or “flowing waters.” In her Japanese incarnation, Benzaiten remains the patron deity of springs, streams, rivers, canals, and all who depend on water for their livelihood. By extension, she is the protector of all flowing things, including poetry, music, the creative arts, and culture in general. She is also the guardian of that other great flowing Japanese work of art: sake.

Next to hall in which she is worshipped, spring water flows up into the temple grounds. The spring is called Akamizu, a word derived from the Sanskrit word *argha*, meaning “merit” or “good karma.” As with many of Fushimi’s famed spring waters, its waters are smooth and pure.

Tucked away in the west corner of the temple is a stone lantern. At first, it appears no different from any other, but a closer look at the base of the plinth reveals a small depiction of Mary, the mother of Christ. This lantern is a rare remnant of the secret Christian faith practiced here during the Edo period (1603–1867), when admitting to being a Christian was punishable by death.