

The Great Buddha (Daibutsu) of Kamakura at Kotokuin Temple

The Great Buddha (Daibutsu) of Kamakura is recognized around the world as an icon of Japan. For centuries, devotees and tourists alike have visited the monumental bronze statue, drawn to the beauty and serenity of this National Treasure.

The Kamakura Daibutsu is generally thought to be a depiction of Amida Buddha (“Buddha of Infinite Light”). The present mudra (hand position) suggests Amida Buddha in meditation but may have been remodeled at some point. The statue has been formally affiliated with the Pure Land (Jodo) school of Buddhism since the middle of the Edo period (1603–1868), with ties to Zojoji, the main Pure Land temple in the Kanto region, located in Shiba, Tokyo.

Pure Land Buddhism is one of the major branches of Mahayana Buddhism (the dominant form of Buddhism in East Asia). It traces its origins to India, and from there it spread to Tibet, Vietnam, China, and Korea, before eventually reaching Japan. According to the Pure Land teachings, the original doctrines and practices of early Buddhism have lost much of their efficacy in the present degenerate age. Believers should rely instead on Amida, who vowed to bring to his Pure Land in the West all those who have faith in him, who meditate on him, and who recite his name. The key practice in Pure Land Buddhism is the *nenbutsu*. *Nenbutsu* originally signified “contemplation of Amida” but has gradually come to mean “recitation of the sacred name of the Buddha, with trust in his power to save.” The *nenbutsu* is usually recited as “Namu Amida Butsu.”

The Kamakura Daibutsu is cast in bronze. The statue stands 11.35 meters high and weighs 121 tons. The name of the sculptor is unknown, but a medieval text informs us that construction began in 1252. The statue was initially housed in a large hall, but both the original building and its two successors were destroyed by natural disasters during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. After the third hall was destroyed by a tsunami, the statue was left exposed to the elements and the entire temple fell into disrepair. It was only in the middle of the Edo period that the image was restored. The temple was renamed Kotokuin Shojosenji and designated by the Pure Land school as a site for practice of the *nenbutsu*.