

Secret Cosmologies: Yoshino's Unique Brand of Esoteric Buddhism

Over its 1,300-year history, Yoshino has nurtured the development of a unique syncretic religious culture, which blends Shinto, the native faith focused on nature worship, and Buddhism, originally a foreign religion introduced to Japan via Korea and China. Buddhism has taken on special characteristics in Yoshino, and visitors can learn much about the school known as Esoteric Buddhism, or *mikkyo* in Japanese.

While I had become acquainted with the spiritual traditions of Shugendo at Yoshino's Kinpusenji Temple, I was eager to gain a deeper understanding of Esoteric Buddhism. To my surprise, I was able to learn more at Dainichiji Temple, a compact sanctuary in the Naka-senbon district of Yoshino which is part of the Shingon Esoteric Buddhist sect founded by the Buddhist monk Kukai (also known as Kobo Daishi; 774–835). Kukai is one of Japan's most venerated religious figures, known for establishing Mt. Koya, or Koyasan, as a Shingon retreat. He is believed to have had connections to Yoshino as well. Some scholars have speculated that he may have spent part of his youth in Yoshino and even visited one of the precursors to Dainichiji. His statue stands at Dainichiji today, and a 55-kilometer trail running event called the Kobo Trail, named after Kobo Daishi, is held every year between Yoshino and Koyasan.

Dainichiji is believed to be the oldest Buddhist temple in Yoshino. It is said that the current structure was erected in the Edo period (1603–1867) on the site of a previous temple named Hinoji that was lost to fire. Aside from its distinctive tented roof, the temple stands out for its superlative collection of Buddhist statuary. It houses statues of the Five Tathagatas, or Five Wisdom Buddhas, from Vajrayana Buddhism, that are all designated Important Cultural Properties. Wearing facial expressions that radiate a timeless serenity, the buddhas are seated on lotus-flower pedestals and framed by intricately carved halos in the form of lotus leaves.

Scholars believe the statues were made in the Fujiwara period (897–1185), possibly by sculptors from the Kei school, and were likely first housed in a temple in Kyoto. They represent a period when Esoteric Buddhism was gaining acceptance in mainstream Buddhist thought in Japan. Kukai and fellow monk Saicho (767–822), who founded the Tendai sect, had both studied in China and brought back ideas that influenced the imperial court while deepening and transforming Buddhism in Japan.

The statues in Dainichiji are known as the Five Wisdom Buddhas. Dainichiji takes its name from the principal image of the group, Dainichi Nyorai, the Great Sun Buddha,

which is the main deity of Esoteric Buddhism in Japan. This statue, with its tall crown, is the largest of five and easy to spot at the center of the group. Flanking Dainichi Nyorai are: Amida Nyorai, the Buddha of infinite light, positioned to the west; Miroku Nyorai, or Maitreya, the Buddha of the future, to the south; Shaka Nyorai, or Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, to the north; and Yakushi Nyorai, the Buddha of medicine and healing, to the east.

The arrangement of these statues is significant, said to be based on an arrangement of statues in Hosshoji, a high-ranking Buddhist temple built around 1017 in Kyoto by the statesman Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1028). Hosshoji was lost to fire in 1053. The statues also represent a Buddhist cosmology depicted in the *Taizokai*, or Womb Realm Mandala as well as the *Kongokai*, or Diamond Realm Mandala. Such mandalas are hung on the east and west walls, respectively, of Shingon temples and symbolize the early development and final evolution of the central figure, the Great Sun Buddha.

Dainichiji is well worth a visit. This humble temple, tucked away in a corner of Yoshino, is a microcosm of some of the greatest developments of religious belief in Japan.