

“Looking-back” Amida Statue (Mikaeri Amida)

In 1082, in Eikandō’s Amida-dō Hall, in the dim hours before dawn on February the fifteenth, a miracle occurred. The monk Eikan (1033–1111) was deep in his daily practice of circumambulating a statue of Amida Buddha while reciting Amida’s name. Eikan believed that by diligently performing this practice—called the *nenbutsu*—he could achieve rebirth in Amida’s western paradise, where enlightenment was guaranteed. It is recorded that Eikan recited the *nenbutsu* 60,000 times each day.

As he paced around the statue, Eikan saw something that made him freeze on the spot: the wooden statue of Amida gracefully descended from its lotus-shaped dais and began to walk ahead of him, as if leading him toward paradise. As Eikan gaped in amazement, Amida paused. He looked back over its left shoulder, to where Eikan stood dumbstruck.

“Eikan, stop dawdling,” said Amida.

It is believed that Eikan was so inspired by this vision of Amida urging him forward to the Pure Land that he begged the statue to remain in the same posture in order to inspire others. The “Looking-back Amida” (Mikaeri Amida) has been at Eikandō ever since.

Centuries later, the statue went on to become widely famous. In the mid-Edo period (1603–1867), it was featured in a number of guidebooks (*meisho annaiki*) to famous places in Kyoto. These guidebooks made the old capital come alive through poetry and vivid, woodblock-printed illustrations. The books circulated widely in Osaka and Edo (now Tokyo) as an inexpensive way to experience the thrills of travel without leaving the comfort of home. The Looking-back Amida became so well-known through these guides that the statue itself was taken to Osaka and Edo for public display. Through these exhibitions, vital funds were raised for the upkeep of Eikandō, and knowledge of the temple was spread throughout the country.

The Looking-back Amida’s popularity is likely due to the fact that the statue perfectly conveys the essence of Pure Land Buddhism and the concept of *jihi* (Sanskrit: *karuṇā*), or “compassion.” The statue’s posture presents Amida as patiently leading us toward salvation, simultaneously reassuring us and inspiring the same compassion. This conveys the boundless compassion and empathy that leads Amida to work tirelessly to free all living beings from suffering and help them to achieve enlightenment in the Pure Land.

According to legend, the statue originally arrived at Eikandō strapped to Eikan’s back. It was a gift from Emperor Shirakawa (1053–1129) in recognition of Eikan’s attainment of the rank of *risshi*, or state-appointed monk. Until it was given to Eikan,

the statue had been in storage at Tōdaiji Temple in Nara. It is said that when the monks at Todaiji pursued Eikan and tried to reclaim the statue, it became permanently stuck to his back and could not be removed. Today, the Mikaeri Amida is Eikandō's most renowned treasure.