

### **Eikan, the *Nenbutsu* Monk**

The monk Eikan (also known as Yōkan) first entered Eikandō as an acolyte when he was just 10 years old. At the age of 40, he returned to become a pivotal character in the history and development of the temple. Eikan is associated with numerous contributions to Eikandō's history, including introducing Pure Land Buddhism and East Asian Mādhyamaka Buddhism (Sanronshū) to Eikandō, establishing a facility to care for the sick and poor, and witnessing the miraculous “Looking-back Amida” in 1082. Through association with Eikan, the temple that had been known as “Zenrinji” since 863 eventually came to be called “Eikandō,” meaning “Eikan’s Hall.”

Eikan (1033–1111) was born in Kyoto to the aristocratic Minamoto family and adopted by the head of Iwashimizu Hachimangū Shrine. Even at a young age, Eikan showed prodigious talent. In 1043, he went to Eikandō to take the Buddhist precepts under its sixth abbot, the monk Jinkan (1001–1050). A year later, Eikan left for Tōdaiji Temple, where he studied the East Asian Yogācāra (Hossōshū), East Asian Mādhyamaka, and Kegon schools of Buddhism. In 1064, he departed from Tōdaiji to spend 10 years in studious retreat at Kōmyōsenji Temple on Mt. Kōmyō, to the south of Kyoto. After traveling to several other temples, Eikan returned to Eikandō in 1073 to succeed Jinkan as abbot.

While on Mt. Kōmyō, Eikan spent much of his time practicing the *nenbutsu*, a ritual invocation of the name of Amida Buddha. Up until that point, it was generally believed that the only way to reach the Amida Buddha’s Pure Land paradise was through frequent meditative visualization, dutiful study, and rigorous monastic practices. Eikan’s views were different. Eikan strongly believed that, through the *nenbutsu*, anyone could be granted rebirth in the Pure Land, where enlightenment was assured. In order to promote this practice, Eikan himself recited the *nenbutsu* as many as 60,000 times each day. The *nenbutsu* practice would eventually become the basis for Pure Land Buddhism in Japan under the monk Hōnen (1133–1212), but Eikan was the first to introduce the *nenbutsu* to Eikandō.