

Seven Wonders of Eikandō

Since the mid-Edo period (1603–1867), seven strange and fantastic aspects of the temple have circulated through rumor as the “Seven Wonders of Eikandō” (Eikandō no Nanafushigi). It is not uncommon for temples to be associated with strange phenomena that often involve water, unusual tree or plant growth, and mysterious sounds and lights. The Seven Wonders of Eikandō can be seen in the order below by turning left after the entrance and taking the path through the Kohōjō and the Zuishiden Hall before following the covered wooden walkway past the Shaka-dō Hall and through the Mieidō Hall.

1) Missing Sparrow (Nukesuzume)

Inside the Kohōjō is the “Peacock Room,” named after the peacocks depicted on the sliding partitions. Strangely, the transom above the entrance to this room is asymmetrical: the left side is painted with five sparrows, but the right has only four. The birds are believed to have been painted by Kanō Tan’yū (1602–1674), the successor to the famous Kanō school of painters who established them as official artists to the shogunate. Supposedly, one of the sparrows he painted was so lifelike that it came to life and flew off the wood. Similar miracles can be seen on transoms at the nearby temples of Chion’in and Nishi-Honganji.

2) Fire-Warding Amida (Hiyoke Amida)

According to temple legend, this statue of Amida Buddha was miraculously spared by an inferno that destroyed most of the temple complex in the first year of the Ōnin War (1467–1477). The Fire-warding Amida is believed to be one of the five wooden statues that the monk Shinjō (797–873) used as the basis for founding the temple in 863. The statue’s style, however, is typical of the Kamakura period (1185–1333), and certain visual elements suggest that it may even have been carved centuries after the end of the Ōnin War.

3) Almsgiving Plum (Hidenbai)

A wooden plaque on one of the columns of the Shaka-dō Hall marks the Hidenbai, or Almsgiving Plum tree. The tree is a remnant of an orchard planted by the monk Eikan (1033–1111) for the Yakuōin, a clinic he established on the temple grounds where the sick and poor could receive medical care and traditional medicine made from plums. The tree’s name comes from one of the *sanpukuden*, or three types of meritorious habits that an individual should cultivate within themselves. The three habits are: compassion

for the poor and needy (*hiden*), gratitude toward one's parents (*onden*), and respect for the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha (*kyōden*), also referred to as the “Three Jewels of Buddhism.” The “*bai*” portion of the name means “plum.”

4) Mokugyo Frog (Mokugyo-gaeru)

Between late April and early June, visitors passing from the Miei-dō Hall to the Kaisan-dō Hall may hear a curious sound that resembles the sound of a *mokugyo*, a fish-shaped drum that is often used to accompany chanting at Buddhist temples. However, the source of this sound is believed to be a forest green tree frog that lives somewhere near the bridge. Many visitors each year report hearing the sound, but no one has ever seen the fabled frog.

5) Three-Needle Vajra Pine (Sanko no Matsu)

The tree on the opposite side of the bridge leading north from the Miei-dō Hall is believed to have over 1,200 years of history. According to legend, the tree is linked to the monk Kūkai (known posthumously as Kōbō Daishi; 774–835), the founder of the Shingon school of Esoteric Buddhism. When Kūkai was preparing to return home from China, he threw a three-pronged Buddhist ritual object called a *sankosho* (Sanskrit: *vajra*) toward Japan. Years later, Kūkai was wandering in the mountains near Nara when he came across the deity Kariba Myōjin, who had taken the form of a hunter accompanied by two dogs, one black and one white. When Kūkai mentioned that he was looking for a place to establish a new temple, the hunter had his dogs lead him to Mt. Kōya, where Kūkai found his *sankosho* dangling from a pine bough. The pine needles, which normally grow in pairs, were mysteriously long and growing in groups of three—resembling the *sankosho*. On that site, Kūkai founded Kongōbuji Temple, which became the headquarters of the Shingon school.

The Three-Needle Vajra Pine at Eikandō was grown from a transplanted portion of the roots of the original tree on Mt. Kōya. It is said that anyone who takes one of the three-pronged needle bunches will receive the three virtues of knowledge, mercy, and a true heart.

6) Sleeping-Dragon Corridor (Garyūrō)

The covered staircase leading up to the Kaisan-dō Hall, which curves gently to the right up the steep incline of the mountain, has been named the Sleeping Dragon Corridor (Garyūrō) for its resemblance to the shape of a dragon stretched over the rocks. The wooden staircase was remodeled slightly during the early twentieth century, but it was

originally built approximately 400 years before using only traditional Japanese wood-joining techniques.

7) Cliff-Face Maples (Iwagaki Momiji)

Below the Kaisan-dō Hall and the Sleeping Dragon Corridor is an eye-catching group of Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) growing diagonally outward from the side of the mountain. There are said to be 3,000 such trees in and around the grounds of Eikandō, and the temple is known as an excellent place to take in the autumn scenery. The original owner of the grounds, the scholar Fujiwara no Sekio (805–853), wrote this poem about the maples:

<i>okuyama no</i>	within the sheer cliffs
<i>iwagaki momiji</i>	autumn leaves must have fallen—
<i>chirinu beshi</i>	there is no time when
<i>teru hi no hikari</i>	the sun's light touches them so
<i>miru toki nakute</i>	deep in these mountains where they lie ¹

¹ Laurel Rasplica Rodd and Mary Catherine Henkenius, trans. and ed. *Kokinshū: A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern*. (Boston: Cheng & Tsui Company, 2004), 128.