

### **Hōjōike Pond and Shrine to Benzaiten**

Hōjōike Pond, located at the center of Eikandō's gardens, is inhabited by carp and other fish that have been saved through observance of the Five Precepts (*gokai*), a simple code of ethics that is common to virtually all forms of Buddhism. The first of these precepts prohibits harming any living being (Sanskrit: *ahimsa*). In addition to maintaining a vegetarian diet and avoiding actions that would cause harm to others, the monks of Eikandō observe this precept with a special ceremony called *hōjōe* that is held each year in early September. During the *hōjōe* (literally, “ceremony of releasing life”), fish are released into the pond as a way of showing respect for the importance of all life. The *hōjōe* is practiced in many forms at many different Buddhist institutions. In Japan, it dates back to at least the eighth century.

The stone bridge nearby leads over the pond to “Benten Island” (Bentenjima). On the small island is a shrine to Benten (Japanese: Benzaiten), a Hindu goddess associated with water, knowledge, and music who was incorporated into Buddhism and, later, Shinto practices. The 10 buckets stacked in front of the shrine bear Benzaiten's name and indicate her connection to water.

The shrine was donated to the temple in 1866 by Ōtagaki Rengetsu (1791–1875), a Buddhist nun and renowned artist of both poetry and pottery who is known to have lived at Eikandō for a brief period. The framed tablet bearing the shrine's name that hangs above the sacred rope (*shimenawa*) was written by Rengetsu herself.

The area surrounding Hōjōike Pond is especially beautiful during autumn, when the surrounding maple trees are reflected on the surface of the water.