

Shaka-dō Hall and the Two Rivers and White Path

Eikandō's Shaka-dō Hall (or "Shakyamuni Hall") was initially built between 1504 and 1511 by Emperor Go-Kashiwabara (1462–1526) and then rebuilt in 1627. The hall enshrines a central image of Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha, flanked by two bodhisattvas, Monju (Sanskrit: Manjusri) on the right and Fugen (Sanskrit: Samantabhadra) on the left.

It is unknown exactly who made the central statue, but it strongly resembles the work of Higo Jōkei (b. 1184), a talented sculptor who was active during the early Kamakura period (1185–1333). The statue's relatively full figure, the flatness of the oval-shaped crown of hair, or *nikkei* (Sanskrit: *ushnisha*), and its relatively large whorls (*rahotsu*) all show an influence from Buddhist paintings produced during the Song dynasty (960–1279). This Song influence is indicative of Jōkei's work. The statue is remarkably well preserved, and some the original gold leaf (*kirikane*) is still visible on the robe.

The white path through the center of the room illustrates the parable of the "Two Rivers and White Path" (*nigabyakudō*) first described by the Chinese monk Shandao (613–681), an influential scholar of Pure Land Buddhism. In the parable, a traveler is fleeing bandits and ferocious beasts when he arrives at a junction. On the left side is a raging river, and on the right is a river of fire. Between these two rivers is a perilously thin white path that leads to safety on the opposite side. From across the bank, the traveler hears the voice of Amida Buddha urging him across the path, and from behind, the voice of Shakyamuni Buddha reassures him that the path is safe. The traveler cannot turn back, and he cannot go left or right; he must go forward and trust that the path can be crossed.

The river of water in the parable represents greed and lust (Sanskrit: *raga*) and the fire represents its antithesis, fury and hatred (Sanskrit: *dvesha*). Together, these are two of the "three poisons" (*sandoku*), or innate human flaws that cause us pain and prevent our enlightenment. The white path represents the path toward enlightenment, and although it is narrow, it is the only path that will lead to release from the cycle of rebirth. As described in the parable, Amida Buddha is on the far side, beckoning us, and Shakyamuni Buddha is behind us, encouraging us forward.

The paintings of the rivers of water and fire on either side of the hall were donated by artist Sekiguchi Yuki (1923–2008), who also painted the depiction of the Pure Land in the Gasen-dō Hall.