

Nikkōzan Rinnōji Temple

“Nikkōzan” refers to the entire religious community that lives and worships at the temples and shrines in the mountains of Nikkō. Buddhism and Shinto had been fused for over 1,000 years, but this ended in the late nineteenth century when they were separated by order of the Japanese government.

The name “Nikkō” is said to have been suggested by the famous monk Kūkai (774–835), who is believed to have visited the area in 820. He noted that the Chinese characters for “Futarasan”—an alternate name for the nearby sacred Mt. Nantai—could also be read as “Nikōsan,” since Chinese characters in Japan can often be read several different ways. Over time, the general area and religious community came to be known as “Nikkōzan.”

The Rinnōji Temple complex is spread throughout the Nikkō area and includes sites near Lake Chūzenji and elsewhere in Oku-Nikkō. The Sanbutsudō is the main hall of the entire community. Across the plaza opposite the Sanbutsudō are the Treasure House and Shōyōen Garden. Behind the Sanbutsudō is the Dai-Gomadō, where the *goma* fire ritual is held three times daily.

The simplicity of the temple buildings near the Sanbutsudō contrasts sharply with the elaborate carvings, lacquered walls, and gilded, polychrome ornamentation of the Taiyūin Mausoleum, which is located farther up the mountain.

The Taiyūin Mausoleum is the final resting place of the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu (1604–1651). Iemitsu had it built near the mausoleum of his grandfather, Ieyasu (1543–1616), which is at Tōshōgū Shrine. In Iemitsu’s time, centuries prior to the separation of Shinto and Buddhism, Tōshōgū and Rinnōji were considered part of the same institution. Indeed, the funerary services for Ieyasu were conducted by Tenkai (1536?–1643), the fifty-third abbot of Nikkōzan, in the *sannō ichijitsu shintō* style—a rite that mixes Shinto and Buddhism.

Evidence of the historical melding of Shinto, Buddhism, and mountain worship can still be seen throughout Nikkō. For example, the three mountains of Mt. Nantai, Mt. Nyohō, and Mt. Tarō are said to be manifestations of Rinnōji’s three principal deities: Senju Kannon (Thousand-Armed Bodhisattva of Compassion), Amida Nyorai (Buddha of Infinite Light and Life), and Batō Kannon (Horse-Headed Bodhisattva of Compassion), respectively. The Shinto counterparts of these three Buddhist deities are venerated at Futarasan Jinja Shrine.

Rinnōji is part of the Shrines and Temples of Nikkō, which was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999. The Rinnōji complex contains one National Treasure, 37 Important Cultural Properties, and four Prefectural Tangible Cultural Properties.