

## History of Rinnōji

The story of Rinnōji begins in 766 when the monk and mountain ascetic Shōdō Shōnin (735–817) crossed the Daiya River and headed into the mountains of Nikkō. His immediate goal was to climb Mt. Nantai. He succeeded in 782, on his third try. Shōdō and his followers built a few thatch-roofed temple buildings and explored the area. Before long, many religious practitioners had moved to Nikkō, and a thriving religious community grew up on the mountainside. Over the centuries, Rinnōji would become one of Japan's most powerful Buddhist temples, receiving the patronage of both the shoguns and the emperors.

In 848, Emperor Ninmyō (808–850) sent Ennin (794–864), a Tendai monk and abbot of the powerful Enryakuji Temple at Mt. Hiei in Kyoto, to Nikkōzan. Ennin's mandate was to develop the various temples and shrines at Nikkōzan into a unified entity that would spiritually protect the country.

The next milestone in Nikkōzan's development was the appointment of the monk Benkaku (dates unknown) as the twenty-fourth abbot in 1210. Benkaku had strong ties with the Kumano region on the Kii Peninsula and its Shugendō practices. Shugendō is a belief system that fuses elements of ancient mountain worship, esoteric Buddhism, and Shinto. Organized in the late Heian period (794–1185), it stresses physical endurance as the way to enlightenment. In the same way that three sacred mountains at Kumano are associated with three Buddhas and three Shinto deities, Benkaku equated the three sacred mountains at Nikkō with three Buddhist deities and three Shinto deities. Benkaku enlarged the precinct surrounding Shihonryūji, the first temple built by Shōdō, and the temple complex on the shore of Lake Chūzenji.

Temples in Japan often have cemeteries attached, and Nikkōzan became the grandest and most famous mausoleum in Japan when the first Tokugawa shogun, Ieyasu (1543–1616), was enshrined at Tōshōgū Shrine in 1617. His grandson, Iemitsu (1604–1651), the third shogun, was interred at Taiyūin Mausoleum in 1652.

The ties between Nikkōzan and the emperor and his court were also quite strong. In 1308, Prince Ninchō (d. 1318) became head abbot, the first of many members of the imperial family to be appointed to the post. Indeed, in 1655, Nikkōzan's head temple was designated a *monzeki*, a temple whose abbot is of imperial or aristocratic lineage. The same year, the temple was given the name "Rinnōji," and Prince Shuchō (1634–1680) was made abbot of both Rinnōji and Kan'eiji Temple in Edo (now Tokyo). He and his successors were given the title "Rinnōji no Miya."

Rinnōji's *monzeki* status continued until 1868, when the Japanese government ordered the separation of Shinto and Buddhism throughout the country. By 1871, Rinnōji had reverted to its former name of Manganji. Twelve years later, however, the temple regained its *monzeki* status and received permission to use the name Rinnōji again.