

Shōdō Shōnin (735–817)

The monk and mountain ascetic Shōdō Shōnin is the traditional founder of the religious community of Nikkōzan. He was born 50 kilometers southeast of Nikkō and spent many years training at temples and monasteries in the area, including one of the largest Buddhist temples in Japan at the time, Yakushiji Temple in nearby Shimotsuke. In 766, he set out to climb Mt. Nantai as a means to achieve enlightenment through ascetic practice. While skirting the base of the mountain, he came upon Lake Chūzenji. Shōdō saw an image of Kannon (Bodhisattva of Compassion) rising from the lake, which inspired him to carve a statue of the deity from a living katsura tree. Shōdō reached the summit of Mt. Nantai on his third attempt in 782.

Ennin (794–864)

The monk Ennin, posthumously known as Jikaku Daishi, spent nine years in China studying esoteric Buddhism. He was the third head of the Tendai school of Buddhism, the school to which Rinnōji belongs. In 848, while abbot of Enryakuji Temple on Mt. Hiei in Kyoto, Ennin was sent to Nikkōzan by Emperor Ninmyō (808–850) to develop the community into a powerful religious organization that would provide spiritual protection for Japan. Ennin built the Sanbutsudō, as well as the Jōgyōdō and Hokkedō Meditation Halls. During his tenure, he was in charge of the 37 temples and subtemples at Nikkōzan and the introduction of Tendai teachings.

Tenkai (1536?–1643)

The Tendai monk Tenkai, known posthumously as Jigen Daishi, was the fifty-third abbot of Rinnōji. He had a close relationship with the Tokugawa shogunate, which appointed him to revitalize Nikkōzan in 1613. In 1616, the first Tokugawa shogun, Ieyasu (1543–1616), asked Tenkai to take charge of his funerary rituals and to choose his posthumous name. Tenkai performed the ceremonies to inter Ieyasu's body and enshrine his spirit at Tōshōgū. Tenkai built Kan'eiji Temple in Edo (now Tokyo) on the orders of the third shogun, Iemitsu (1604–1651). Since Tenkai's tenure, the abbot of Rinnōji has also been the abbot of Kan'eiji. Enryakuji, Kan'eiji, and Rinnōji are the three great temples of the Tendai school.