

Myohozan Amida-ji Temple

Amida-ji is a Shingon Buddhist temple on the slopes of Mt. Myohozan, 749 meters above sea level. It traces its founding to 815, when the priest Kukai (also known as Kobo Daishi) performed austerities on the mountain. He built a small temple to house a sculpture of Amida Buddha, who presides over the Pure Land far to the west where believers are reborn after passing from this world. Kumano was believed to be a liminal zone between this life and the next, and Amida-ji was considered the terminus—the point beyond which only the afterlife awaits.

All of the pilgrims who returned from Kumano were reborn in a sense. One Japanese word for resurrection, *yomigaeri*, means “returning from the Land of the Dead,” which is exactly what a Kumano pilgrim did. A pilgrimage meant weeks or even months of walking in silent contemplation, so many pilgrims were changed people by the time they returned home.

Mountain of the Sublime Dharma

The name Myohozan comes from *Myoho Renge Kyo* (Sutra of the Sublime Dharma of the Lotus), the full Japanese title of the Lotus Sutra. It was given to the mountain in 703 by a monk named Renjaku, who buried a copy of the sutra at the summit and carved a sculpture of Amida Buddha from a tree. Like many mountains in Japan, Mt. Myohozan was considered a deity—in this case, a Buddha. The mountain and the temple complex on it appear at the upper left of the Nachi Pilgrimage Mandala.

The Bell of Souls

At the entrance to Amida-ji Temple stands a red wooden torii gate and paling fence. These more typically mark the boundaries of Shinto shrines, but they are used by the temple specifically to show respect for this other important element of the syncretic Kumano faith. Inside the torii, to the left, hangs the Hitotsu-gane (One-Strike Bell), which was most recently recast in 1678. Tradition holds that every soul in Japan rings this bell once before leaving the mortal plane, and that the bell sometimes gently resounds even when no one is there to strike it.

The Main Hall and O-Kamiage Hair Offerings

Directly ahead of the entrance is the main hall (*hondo*), which enshrines the temple's chief image of Amida Buddha. The pillars holding up the roof over the external stairs are ornamented with carvings of *baku*, mythical creatures that eat nightmares. The main hall is where *o-kamiage* offerings are left.

O-kamiage (hair-giving) is a practice dating from the Heian period (798–1185) in which pilgrims would leave a lock of their hair at the temple to ensure rebirth in the western Pure Land after their death. Later, in the Kamakura period (1185–1333), people started to bring locks of hair, and sometimes bones, belonging to deceased loved ones. These customs live on today.

The temple grounds include halls for statues of Sanpo Kojin, a deity said to be the temple's protector, and Jizo, a bodhisattva who watches over travelers.

Osho's Fire Samadhi

Mossy stones occupy a grassy open space on the temple grounds. This is the site of a furnace where an ascetic named Osho immolated himself in the tenth or early eleventh century in a practice known as the "Samadhi of Living within the Flames" (*kasho zanmai*). Osho was inspired by a passage in the Lotus Sutra about a bodhisattva who burned his own body to help all sentient beings. Records of the event claim that Osho continued to recite passages from the sutra from within the flames.

The Okuno-in and Kumano Nuns

Deeper in the grounds are the stairs to Okuno-in, a part of the temple located even higher up the mountain. Okuno-in was closely associated with the Kumano *bikuni* (nuns), who traveled the country promoting pilgrimages to Kumano, and was known as the "Women's Mt. Koya." Mt. Koya itself was off-limits to women at the time, but openness to all has been a central tenet of the Kumano faith.