

Daiganji Temple: History and Statues

It is not known exactly when Daiganji Temple was founded, but it is believed to have been reestablished between 1201 and 1203 by Ryokai, the local Shingon Buddhist priest in charge of maintenance at the neighboring Itsukushima Shrine. Daiganji's place on the sacred island of Miyajima and its relationship with Itsukushima Shrine, visited by many pilgrims from all over the country, ensured it was nationally renowned.

Daiganji Temple continued to be responsible for Itsukushima Shrine until the Meiji era (1868–1912), when Shinto and Buddhism were officially separated by the government. Most of the Buddhist statues and images that had been housed at Itsukushima Shrine were brought to Daiganji. Daiganji was of such high stature that nearby shrines and temples, too, brought their sacred statues to the temple for safekeeping.

Unfortunately, Daiganji Temple's grounds were significantly reduced, and many of its buildings lost, in the course of separating the Shinto and Buddhist traditions. This put the temple in the difficult position of having a larger number of statues and sacred objects, but much less space to display them. The Main Hall (hondo) houses most of the temple's eclectic collection, which includes 20 Buddhist sculptures and many more relics saved from its own former halls as well as from temples elsewhere on Miyajima.

Daiganji Temple's central deity is Benzaiten, one of the Seven Lucky Gods in Japanese mythology and the patron of music, wisdom, and wealth. The temple's Benzaiten statue is considered one of the three most prominent sculptures of Benzaiten in Japan. However, the statue is kept hidden from public view, and is revealed only during the temple's annual festival on June 17. On permanent display in the main hall is a statue of Yakushi, the Buddha of medicine and healing, which is designated an Important Cultural Property. The statue dates from the Heian period (794–1185) and is said to have been carved by Kukai (774–835), the founder of Shingon Buddhism. Three statues, depicting Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, the Buddha of wisdom, and the Buddha of mercy, were moved to the temple from the island's five-story pagoda.