

## Great Ginkgo of Tanaka

This sacred ginkgo tree (*ichō*) stands 24.3 meters tall and has a circumference of 8.5 meters. It is estimated to be more than 500 years old and thought to be the reason Tanaka Shrine was founded.

Often called the “Great Ginkgo of Tanaka” because of its location in the Tanaka neighborhood, it is more properly known as the “Great Gongen Ginkgo.” A *gongen* is the manifestation of a Buddhist deity (a buddha or bodhisattva) in the form of a Shinto deity (*kami*). This intermingling of Buddhist and Shinto representations was common for much of Japanese history, and there are many *gongen* worshipped throughout the country.

According to local folklore, the ginkgo’s creation is attributed to the celebrated Buddhist monk and teacher Kōbō Daishi (774–835). Known in life as Kūkai, he was the founder of Shingon Buddhism. Kūkai traveled extensively, and one day stopped for lunch at this spot. When he finished his meal, the monk stuck his chopsticks into the ground. Such was his spiritual power that the chopsticks grew into the Great Ginkgo of Tanaka. This is also the origin story for the tree’s distinctive appearance, as if two trunks were joined together.

Another tale concerning the tree is that each year, during a single night in late November, all the leaves fall off at once. Anyone who witnesses the event is said to suffer bad luck.

The small structure (called an *odō*) next to the tree is Tanaka Shrine, the origin of which is unclear. It is known to have been rebuilt multiple times, most recently in 1978.