

History of Zojoji Temple

Over the centuries, Zojoji has played an important role in Japanese history. The temple was founded in 1393, when Edo (now Tokyo) was still a small village, situated just southwest of where Edo Castle was built (now the imperial palace). In 1590 the feudal lord Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) was relocated to Edo. Ieyasu would become the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, which ruled Japan from 1603 until 1867, and his castle would become the military capital.

Over a breakfast prepared by the chief priest, Ieyasu announced that Zojoji would become the Tokugawa family's official temple, and the temple's fortunes would thereafter be linked to those of the shogunate.

In 1598 Zojoji was relocated to its present location, where, under Ieyasu's patronage, it became increasingly powerful and prosperous. Ieyasu's funeral was held at Zojoji in 1616, and though he was buried elsewhere, the family continued supporting the temple. Six generations of shoguns were buried in elaborate mausoleums on the temple grounds, along with other members of their families.

Zojoji is the main Jodo sect temple for eastern Japan, making it second only to the sect's head temple of Chion-in in Kyoto. At its peak, the temple was unrivaled in size in eastern Japan: the temple grounds covered more than 82 hectares, with 48 subtemples, and 3,000 priests in training and administration. The elaborate architecture of Zojoji's gates, halls, and mausoleums were outstanding examples of the skills of Edo artisans.

After the end of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1867, the temple's fortunes suffered from the anti-Buddhist movement of the 1870s. Many of the buildings were destroyed by fires, and some of the grounds were converted to parks. The greatest disaster in the temple's history, however, was the aerial bombing of Tokyo in 1945, which left few of the temple's important landmarks standing.

Today, a number of structures have been faithfully rebuilt or restored, though the temple grounds have shrunk to around one-fifteenth its peak size. Zojoji remains an influential training center and place of worship for the Jodo sect of Buddhism, as well as a popular site for visitors from all over the world.