

Sanmon Gate

The Sanmon Gate is one of the most significant structures of Kenchoji Temple and is the first thing encountered after entering the grounds. Such gates are a traditional feature of Zen temples and mark the boundary between the sacred space of the temple and the everyday world.

The Sanmon has no doors. This is to show that the temple is always open to anyone wishing to learn about Zen, one of the key principles of Lanxi Daolong (1213–1278), the founding abbot of Kenchoji. The wooden structure is roughly 20 meters high. The second story, called the *rojo*, contains statues of the 500 arhats (Buddhist saints). Passing through the gate and under the statues is said to purify one's mind in preparation to absorb the temple's teachings.

The current Sanmon was built in 1775 and is designated an Important Cultural Property. After the previous gate was destroyed by fire, donations were solicited from around the country to rebuild it. According to legend, a *tanuki* (raccoon dog) that was fed by the Kenchoji monks repaid their kindness by transforming itself into a Buddhist monk and collecting donations as well. To this day, the Sanmon Gate is also known as the Tanuki Gate.