

## Eiheiji Temple

Eiheiji Temple is one of Japan's two head temples of the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism. Since its establishment by Zen Master Dōgen (1200–1253) in 1244, Eiheiji has been the foremost temple of the Sōtō school in Japan and a place of pure Zen practice. The temple still operates just as it did centuries ago, and dozens of monks live and practice there.

In 1227, Dōgen returned to Japan from China, where he had spent some years studying and practicing under Zen Master Nyojō (Ch. Rujing; 1163–1228). For several years after his return, Dōgen lived in the region around Kyoto, where he founded Kōshōji Temple and wrote a treatise on the correct form of zazen (seated Zen practice) titled *Fukan zazengi* (Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen). In 1243, Dōgen moved to Echizen Province (now Fukui Prefecture) at the invitation of Hatano Yoshishige, a samurai who was lord of Echizen at the time. It was there that Dōgen would eventually found Eiheiji Temple.

Dōgen was motivated to leave the capital by Master Nyojō's dying words: "Do not live among the crowds of a town, but rather stay in a glen deep in the mountains, receiving very few people, and work to continue our true teachings." Dōgen spent his first year in Echizen practicing zazen at Kippōji Temple, where he preached and composed some of his lectures and commentaries on Zen practice and Buddhist teaching that would later be collected under the title *Shōbōgenzō* (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye). After a year at Kippōji, Dōgen established Eiheiji Temple in the same area.

Eiheiji Temple is an active monastery where monk-trainees (*unsui*) devote themselves to Buddhist practice according to Dōgen's ideals. In one of his works, titled *Shōji* (Life and Death), Dōgen gives the following directive: "Just let go and forget about both your body and mind. Throw yourself into the house of the Buddha." Dōgen considered Eiheiji Temple to be perfectly suited for this task. He envisioned the temple as the Buddha's abode, the mountains as the Buddha's body, and the flowing streams as the Buddha's voice. Dōgen's successors rigorously follow his teachings, and the wholehearted practice of zazen is still the central focus of life at Eiheiji Temple.

The temple receives visitors from around the world, but it is much more than a tourist destination. Though many people come to Eiheiji to see its beautiful grounds and attend Buddhist sermons, the temple is primarily a living, breathing Zen monastery for Sōtō Zen

practice, and over 130 trainees reside there.