

Sanmon (Main Gate)

The Sanmon is the official entryway to the Eiheiiji Temple complex and the oldest of the seven buildings of the main temple compound. It was constructed in 1749 by local carpenters using only traditional wood-joining techniques; the gate is held together without the use of a single nail. Monks at Eiheiiji will only pass through the gate twice: once when entering the temple, and again when their period of training is complete.

Statues of the Shitennō (Four Heavenly Kings)—Tamonten, Zōchōten, Jikokuten, and Kōmokuten—are housed inside the gate. They are known as the protectors of the four cardinal directions and are said to live on the four continents surrounding Mt. Sumeru, the towering mountain that stands at the center of the world in Buddhist cosmology. The Shitennō are usually depicted with ferocious expressions, wearing armor, and holding weapons and sacred objects. They are also shown crushing demons called *amanojaku* under their feet as a representation of their power to defeat evil. It is said that after having been trampled by the Shitennō, the demons repented, and they now carry lanterns to light the way for the Buddha.

Although it is not open to visitors, the upper floor of the Sanmon contains a hall dedicated to the 500 arhats, the immediate disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha. Twice a month, the monks climb the steep staircase and chant sutras in the hall. Pilgrims were allowed to enter the hall during the Edo period (1603–1867), and old graffiti marking the successful completion of one pilgrim's journey is still inscribed on the wall.