

Otagi Nenbutsuji Temple

Otagi Nenbutsuji Temple is located in the quiet Okusaga area, which lies just past Saga-Arashiyama in western Kyoto. This serene temple with a welcoming atmosphere stands on a mountainside along a historic pilgrimage path that leads to the sacred Mt. Atago. Otagi Nenbutsuji is most notable for the 1,200 stone statues of Buddhist arhats (*rakan*) placed beneath the numerous maple trees throughout the grounds. Its main hall, which houses a statue of the thousand-armed bodhisattva Kannon, dates back to the Kamakura period (1185–1333) and is a nationally designated Important Cultural Property.

According to temple records, Otagi Nenbutsuji was originally established in 766 near what is now Kyoto's Gion district, but was repeatedly damaged by natural disasters and rebuilt several times. When the temple was moved to its current location in 1922 for preservation, the main hall was carefully dismantled and reassembled, and several other structures were added to the new precincts.

A series of major renovations began in 1980 to repair damage caused by typhoons. Around the same time, chief abbot Nishimura Kocho (1915–2003), also a sculptor of Buddhist statues, launched a project to revive the temple. People were invited to carve stone statues of arhats that would be placed on the grounds, and the resulting 1,200 statues have become a distinct feature of Otagi Nenbutsuji.

The temple has a number of other notable statues and structures. These include a statue of the bodhisattva Kannon that was designed to be touched, a statue of the bodhisattva Jizo said to protect against fire and to grant long life, and a set of three temple bells with distinct tones that represent important concepts of Buddhist teachings.