

Four Heavenly Kings

The Four Heavenly Kings are deities within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and are found throughout Asia. Clad in heavy armor and holding sturdy staves and spears, they guard the north, south, east, and west against enemies of the Buddha. As such, they are often arranged around a central icon and placed on a dais that represents Mt. Sumeru, the sacred, five-peaked mountain of Buddhist cosmology. It is thought that these statues of the Four Kings were originally meant to surround the Shaka Triad on the central dais in the Daikōdō (Great Lecture Hall). Since 1933, however, they have been shut inside tabernacles in Maniden Hall. The doors of the tabernacles are opened only once each year, when Engyōji marks the new year with its Festival of Peace and Bounty on January 18.

Each of the statues was carved from a single block of Japanese cypress in the late tenth century by the monk Kan'na, a disciple of Shōkū (910–1007), the founding abbot of Engyōji. While each of the Four Kings is unique, they share several common traits, including gilded halos and bases shaped like swirling clouds. They are depicted trampling demonic creatures (*amanojaku*) that represent ignorance of the Buddha's teachings.