

The Thirteen Buddhas

The group of 13 stone Buddhist statues in the Nishi Yoshida area of Ureshino were carved on the island of Shikoku and transported by boat to nearby Shiotatsu. The statues were then hand-carried to their inland mountain location in the early Showa era (1926–1989).

The “Thirteen Buddhas” actually consists of five buddhas (*nyorai*, meaning enlightened being), seven bodhisattvas (*bosatsu*), and one wisdom king (*myo-o*). Of the buddhas, only Shakyamuni (known in Japan as Shaka Nyorai) is considered a historical figure. The *nyorai*, *bosatsu*, and *myo-o* are Buddhist deities.

Although the bodhisattvas are enlightened beings like the buddhas, they are believed to have voluntarily remained in this world until all beings can attain enlightenment, rather than simply entering nirvana for themselves. *Myo-o* are originally Hindu deities adopted into the Buddhist pantheon as guardians to protect people against evil. One of the best known of these “wisdom kings” is Fudo Myo-o (Acala in Sanskrit), who is characterized by his fierce expression, a lasso in his left hand to catch demons, a sword in his right hand to destroy them, and a large flame behind him to burn away anger and passion so as to purify the mind.

Gongen-san

Gongen-san is the familiar name for an indigenous deity, known as the god of water, who is said to have resided in the cave behind the Thirteen Buddhas for over 1,000 years. The deity is believed to bring successful rice harvests to the area.

A cliff looms over the entrance to the cave, and the natural rock formation there is said to resemble the frightening expression of a demon. The cliff, the cave, and the statues of Gongen and the Thirteen Buddhas in front of it are one of the 88 pilgrimage sites of Ureshino as well as a popular resting place on the Kyushu Olle Ureshino Course.