

## **Gokurakudō (Mandala Hall)**

The Gokurakudō is the first structure that visitors see when entering Gangōji Temple. Together with the mandala inside, the hall's layout is intended to evoke association with the Pure Land, a place that is central Pure Land Buddhism. The Pure Land is an idyllic realm in the west presided over by Amida Buddha. In recognition of this, the hall's entrance is on its east side, causing visitors to face west as they enter. People who are reborn in the Pure Land are said to spontaneously appear within lotuses in front of Amida's pavilion, and rows of potted lotuses are placed outside the Gokurakudō from June to August. For centuries, followers of the Pure Land school of Buddhism have come to the Gokurakudō (literally, "Hall of Paradise") to view **Chikō's Mandala** and pray for their rebirth in the Pure Land.

### Layout and Architecture of the Gokurakudō

Before seeing the famous mandala, it is worth taking a moment to consider the Gokurakudō's architecture from the outside. The square hall dates to 1244. It has an uncommon combination of a gable-side entrance and a hip roof (in which the roof slants down in four directions from a central ridge). Along with the **Zenshitsu**, the Gokurakudō was formerly part of one of Gangōji's large dormitories, which was disassembled and used to construct separate buildings. Much of the Gokurakudō is made from materials that were brought to Nara when the temple was relocated in 718, and parts of the structure are over 1,300 years old.

Inside the hall, Chikō's Mandala is kept within a standing tabernacle on a central dais. On either side are statues of **The Monks Chikō and Raikō**. Before the temple dormitory was remodeled into the Gokurakudō (then called the Gokurakubō), Chikō and Raikō inhabited this central section. The Gokurakudō was later redesigned to enclose their room as its focal point. The surrounding space allows visitors to walk around the central dais while chanting the *nenbutsu*, a special prayer to Amida Buddha. This practice is believed to accrue positive merit (*kudoku*) and increase a person's chance of being reborn in the Pure Land.

### Ancient Records of Prayer Commissions

Acrylic sheets are attached to several of the pillars in the center of the hall. The sheets protect carved messages that are older than the Gokurakudō itself. As the popularity of Pure Land Buddhism grew in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, people commissioned the monks at Gangōji to perform the *nenbutsu* on their behalf. These carvings record

such commissions, including the amount paid, the service received, and whom the service was meant to benefit. In total, there are seven such messages inscribed on the pillars around the dais. Messages such as these are extremely valuable sources of information about the past. Using them, it is possible to track the evolution of the *nenbutsu* as a service: a message from 1171 records the commission of a costly, 100-day period of prayer that could only have been requested by a wealthy individual, but messages from a century later record much shorter, less expensive periods. This shows that as Pure Land Buddhism became widespread, common people began to commission the *nenbutsu* as well. Rather than commission the priests to chant the *nenbutsu*, many visitors to the Gokurakudō also recited the *nenbutsu* themselves while circling clockwise around the central dais.

On the tabernacle's opposite side, facing the rear, hangs a reproduction of second version of Chikō's Mandala that is believed to date to between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Because of the Gokurakudō's connections to the Pure Land, the hall also became a desirable place to inter the bones of the deceased. Monuments to past monks and others once lined the inner walls and tie beams (*nageshi*), but today they remain only on the far side of the hall.