

East Gate (Tōmon)

Though Gangōji is over 1,300 years old, this gate has been the temple's main entrance for only the last five centuries. Its presence shows how the temple layout was altered to meet the growing popularity of Pure Land Buddhism during the fifteenth century.

For over 500 years, Gangōji's front gate (*seimon*) was in the south. The layouts of Japan's oldest temples were often influenced by Chinese geomancy, in which the south is regarded as an auspicious direction. However, sometime after the construction of the new **Gokurakudō** in 1244, the temple's main entrance was reoriented to face east. This shift in direction was a response to the growing popularity of Pure Land Buddhism.

Japan's medieval period (1185–1568) was a time of widespread social unrest. Pure Land Buddhism and its concept of rebirth in paradise were a source of comfort for people enduring famines, plagues, and other turmoil. Previously, Buddhism had been practiced mainly by the social elite, but during this time it became popular among common people as well.

Within Pure Land belief, west is the direction of Amida Buddha's Pure Land, an idyllic realm where all living beings can achieve enlightenment. Visitors who entered Gangōji from the east would naturally be facing west as they came to the Gokurakudō, where **Chikō's Mandala** of the Pure Land was displayed. This orientation created the sense that visitors to the temple were progressing toward the Pure Land itself. The change from south to east reflects how important Pure Land Buddhism was to the temple's survival: it was support from Pure Land believers that kept the temple functioning after Gangōji lost the patronage of the imperial court.

In 1411, the gate from Sainan'in Temple, a sub-temple of Tōdaiji Temple, was relocated to Gangōji. The gate dates to the Kamakura period (1185–1333) and is a typical example of architecture from that time. Its entryway is a single bay (approximately 1.8 meters) in width, and the gate rests on two main pillars and four support pillars. This design, called *shikyakumon*, is typically used for a front gate rather than a side entrance.