

## **Gangōji's 1,300 Years of History**

In many ways, Gangōji Temple's history chronicles the development of Buddhism in Japan—its introduction, adoption, rejection, and revitalization. The temple has existed in many forms since its establishment in the late sixth century, but its legacy as Japan's first full-scale Buddhist temple remains unbroken. In recognition of this cultural value, in 1998 Gangōji was registered with UNESCO as one of the Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara.

### Asuka Temple and the Introduction of Buddhism

Hōkōji Temple, the precursor to Gangōji, was founded in Asuka, which was then the location of the imperial court and the seat of governmental power. The creation of Hōkōji in 588 represented the official adoption of Buddhism by the court—a step reached only after decades of struggle and conflict. According to a record of Gangōji's founding compiled in 747, Buddhist documents and images were brought to the court in 538 by an envoy from Baekje, a kingdom of the Korean Peninsula. The decision to accept or reject this foreign religion was a topic of heated debate among the emperor's advisors. The Mononobe and Nakatomi clans were strongly opposed; they feared that adoption of the new religion would disrupt indigenous kami worship and undermine the basis for their power. In contrast, the Soga clan expressed support for this new religion, and clan head Soga no Iname (d. 570) agreed to begin practicing Buddhism to determine its merits.

This decision was the start of several decades of infighting and division between the opposing contingents. Iname established a small, private temple on his estate in Asuka, and a plague broke out soon after. Iname's temple was blamed for the plague, and at the prompting of Nakatomi and Mononobe, agents of the imperial court burned the temple to the ground. However, the Soga clan continued to advocate for Buddhist worship, and tensions between the two groups escalated into armed conflict. In 587, the Soga clan successfully ousted the Mononobe and Nakatomi clans. Now unchallenged, the Soga were able to establish the first imperially supported temple in Asuka, which came to be called "Asuka Temple." In 679, the temple was given the name Hōkōji, or "Temple of the Blossoming of the Dharma." Over the next century, two major branches of Mahayana Buddhism—the Hossō sect and Sanron sect—were introduced to Japan by way of Hōkōji Temple, and it quickly rose to prominence.

### Becoming One of the Great Temples of Nara

Buddhism spread quickly with support from the imperial court. When the new capital at Nara was established in 710, Hōkōji was transferred there to become one of the Seven Great Temples of Nara. The transition was completed in 718, and the temple was renamed Gangōji, meaning “Original Temple of the Blossoming of the Dharma.” The court granted the temple approximately 2,000 hectares of land with which to support itself, and Gangōji flourished over the next several decades.

#### Rebirth through Pure Land Buddhism

The capital was soon moved again in 794, this time to Kyoto, but Gangōji remained in Nara and ultimately lost the patronage of the court. Buddhism gradually expanded over the succeeding centuries, and many powerful temples were founded in and around the new capital. Gangōji continued to operate, but without governmental support and facing competition from the other temples of Nara, it entered a period of decline.

In the late eleventh century, support for the temple was rekindled by growing interest in Pure Land Buddhism. Local merchants, laborers, and even farmers flocked to Gangōji to view **Chikō’s Mandala** (a sacred painting of the Pure Land), and the **Gokurakudō** was built to enshrine it. The Gokurakudō also came to be used by the wealthy elite and commoners alike for performing Buddhist funerary rites and the ritual recitation of a prayer called the *nenbutsu*. Thanks to this newfound support, Gangōji entered a second period of prosperity that lasted for several centuries. Worship of Buddhist holy figures, such as the monk Kūkai (774–835) and Prince Shōtoku Taishi (572–622), reached its zenith. Many of the temple’s finest images and relics, such as the **Statues of Prince Shōtoku, Statue of Kōbō Daishi Kūkai, and Statue of Amida Nyorai**, were donated during this period.

Around the turn of the fifteenth century, what is now Gangōji’s **East Gate** was relocated from Tōdaiji Temple to the northeast, and **Taishidō Hall** was built on the temple grounds as a complement to the existing Gokurakudō and **Zenshitsu**.

#### Turbulent Pre-Tokugawa Years

During the fifteenth century, armed uprisings by peasants became increasingly common. The uprisings were typically a response to heavy debts, and temples that received governmental support were often targets of attack during these insurrections. In 1451, peasants set fire to the aristocratic residences around Kōfukuji Temple, and the flames spread to the grounds of Gangōji, destroying a large section of the complex.

The century and a half that followed was characterized by widespread turmoil and civil war, but society had largely stabilized by the turn of the seventeenth century. In

1602, Gangōji was granted an official license (*shuin*) from the newly established Tokugawa shogunate, giving the temple exemption from taxation. Gangōji continued to prosper as visitors came to see its Kannon-dō Hall and massive five-story pagoda. Then, in 1859, those structures were destroyed by a second large fire. The shogunate also began to unravel around this time, and it finally collapsed in 1868.

#### Rebuilding after the Meiji Restoration

The emperor was reinstated in 1868 amid a wave of anti-foreign sentiment. Though Buddhism had been practiced in Japan for centuries, it was rejected as a foreign religion. Countless temples, statues, and other Buddhist objects were destroyed or left to rot. By 1873, what the fires had not destroyed of Gangōji stood empty and abandoned.

However, in 1943 the temple was saved by a monk named Tsujimura Taien (1919–1978), who undertook the project of restoring the dilapidated temple buildings. By this point, Gangōji's origins were not commonly known, and Tsujimura did not realize that he was rebuilding the oldest temple in Japan. Tsujimura was ultimately able to secure funding from the national government, which recognized the important cultural heritage represented by Gangōji.

Many hundreds of thousands of valuable historical artifacts were uncovered during the repairs. The **Gangōji Institute for Research of Cultural Property** was formed to study and conserve the newly discovered artifacts, along with Gangōji itself. Thanks to the efforts of Tsujimura Taien and many others, the legacy of the historic temple that once stood in Asuka still continues today.