

Statue of Kōbō Daishi Kūkai, Father of Shingon Buddhism (13th century)

This statue depicts the monk Kūkai (774–835), a pivotal figure in the development of Japanese Buddhism. Kūkai is credited with numerous contributions to Japanese culture, including creation of the Shingon sect of Esoteric Buddhism. In 921, Emperor Daigo (885–930) posthumously awarded him the title “Kōbō Daishi,” meaning literally, “Great Master Who Spread Buddhist Teaching.” After his death, Kūkai was venerated as a subject of worship, and many tales describe his peerless wisdom, undaunted will, and supernatural abilities. According to some beliefs, he remains alive, in a state of deep meditation, sequestered in a grotto at the Shingon Headquarters on Mt. Kōya.

The statue is thought to have been made in 1284, to mark the 450th anniversary of Kūkai’s passing from the world. It depicts Kūkai wearing a monk’s stole. In his right hand, he holds a vajra (*kongōsho*), a pronged implement used in Esoteric Buddhist rituals. In his left hand, Kūkai holds a set of Buddhist prayer beads (*juzu*).

Interestingly, the statue was found to contain several objects from the fourteenth century. It is believed that these items were inserted when the statue was repaired many decades after its creation. The objects include a copy of the Kannon Sutra and a document bearing the names of those who funded the statue’s repair.

Kūkai traveled and studied both within Japan and abroad, including at Gangōji. It is recorded that each day as Kūkai sat in his quarters, a deity named Kasuga Myōjin appeared in the chamber riding a deer. Drawn by Kūkai’s eminence, the deity came to protect the mandalas and relics stored at the temple. The room that Kūkai occupied is now part of the westernmost section of the **Zenshitsu**. It is referred to as the Yōgō no Ma, or “Room Where a Deity Descended.”