

Niomon Gate

Visitors passing through the Niomon Gate endure the unflinching glare of fearsome Nio guardians positioned on either side. Naraen is on the right, mouth open as if to utter *a*, and Misshaku is on the left, lips pursed as if pronouncing *un*. These two syllables are the Japanese pronunciation of the first and last letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, and together symbolize birth and death of all things, among other things. Statues of Enma, the King of Hell, and nine judges stand inside the gate, as if to judge all who pass through.

The Niomon Gate is the halfway point to the top of the Yamadera temple complex. It was rebuilt in 1848 using zelkova wood and is one of the temple's newer structures. The Nio statues are thought to be the work of the disciples of Unkei (1150–1223), one of the most distinguished sculptors of Buddhist statuary of his time.