

Daihonzan Sojiji Soin Temple

Sojiji Soin Temple is a working monastery, and one of the two head temples of Soto Zen Buddhism in Japan. The Soto Zen school was founded by Dogen (1200–1253) after he returned from travels to China where he studied Zen under leading monks. He emphasized the value of zazen, or seated meditation, which is still an important part of Soto Zen practice. In 1246, he established Eiheiiji Temple in Fukui Prefecture as the first Soto Zen temple.

Sojiji Temple was established in 1321 by Keizan (1268–1325), an important figure in the popularization of Soto Zen. He had studied at Eiheiiji Temple, taking the tonsure at age 13. Keizan turned Sojiji Temple into a major center for Soto Zen teaching and practice, expanding its reach to more than 16,000 sub-temples around Japan. After a fire in the nineteenth century, the head temple was transferred to Yokohama in Kanagawa Prefecture, and the original Sojiji Temple in Wajima became Sojiji Soin (lit., “Sojiji Ancestor Temple”).

The center of temple life

The dharma hall (*daisodo*) is the venue for morning and evening prayers and sermons. It is the largest building in the complex, at around 545 meters square. In contrast to the utilitarian appearance of the monastery and spaces for zazen, the Dharma Hall features gilded decoration, Wajima lacquer, and elaborate carvings, designed to convey the importance of the teachings of Buddhism. A carved transom (*ranma*) across the front of the hall tells the life story of temple founder Keizan.

The hall is connected to the monastery by a long cloister, which runs along one side of the temple’s inner garden. As the priests walk back and forth to prayers and meditation, they take care to bow towards the mausoleum (*dentoin*) of Keizan on the far side of the garden, to show respect to the founder. The mausoleum dates from 1822 and was one of the few buildings to survive the fire of 1898.

A revolving library

The sutra repository (*kyodo*) dates from the eighteenth century. It survived the devastating fire that ravaged most of the temple complex in 1898. The sutras are written on scrolls and stored in the central octagonal pillar (*rinzo*), which can revolve on its central axis. Within it are stored 344 scriptures, and it is said that

turning the *rinzo* offers the same benefit as reading all of them. In front of the *rinzo* is a statue of Fudaishi (490–560), a Chinese Buddhist priest who is credited with the invention of the revolving shelving for sutras.

Experiencing temple life

Sojiji Soin Temple currently has six trainees and five monks who are responsible for its daily management. Visitors are welcome to experience a one-hour long zazen meditation session for a small fee or, with advance reservations, stay overnight to experience temple life including vegetarian cuisine (*shojin ryori*), morning prayers, and zazen meditation.

Daihonzan Sojiji Soin Temple is open daily from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.