

## Shitennoji Temple

(target: 500–750 ww, actual: 760 )

Shitennoji is the oldest state-sponsored Buddhist temple in Japan, having been founded in 593 by Prince Shotoku, the revered early champion of Buddhism. The temple complex has been rebuilt several times over the centuries, enduring as a spiritual refuge for the people of Osaka.

Most of the current structures date from after World War II, recreating the original designs as closely as possible based on archaeological research. The complex also includes several buildings that have stood for centuries and are now Important Cultural Properties.

### *The Central Precinct*

The heart of the temple is the cloistered Central Precinct, in which the buildings are arranged symmetrically on a south-north axis. This arrangement makes for maximum impact when viewed from the Southern Gate, the main entrance to the complex. From south to north, the Central Precinct opens via the Inner Gate, also known as the Gate of the Guardian Kings for the enormous statues on either side of the entrance. Inside is the five-storied pagoda, which stands 39 meters tall, topped by a 12-meter finial called a *sorin*. Behind that is the Kondo (main hall), and at the far end of the precinct is the Kodo (lecture hall).

The Kondo contains the temple's principal object of devotion: a statue of Prince Shotoku as Kannon (Avalokiteshvara, bodhisattva of compassion). It is accompanied by statues of the Four Celestial Kings (Shitenno) to whom the temple is dedicated. A mural along the walls illustrates the life of the historical Buddha, from his auspicious birth through enlightenment and final entry into Nirvana.

The Kodo, where Prince Shotoku himself is said to have lectured on the Lotus Sutra, contains a statue of the Eleven-Headed Kannon and a seated Amida Buddha six meters high. The Kodo's walls are adorned with a mural depicting the journey of the monk Xuanzang (Genjo), who traveled to India to bring the Buddhist canon to China. The art and statuary of both the Kondo and the Kodo were created in the twentieth century by leading practitioners of traditional styles.

Note: Photography is not permitted inside any of the temple's buildings.

### *A History Preserved in Structures*

In addition to the imposing Central Precinct, dozens of smaller structures in the temple complex illuminate its long history. The oldest is the stone torii outside the West Gate, an Important Cultural Property erected by order of the emperor in 1294. In the thirteenth century, it was possible to stand at the West Gate and watch the sun set over Osaka Bay, a sight that evidently evoked thoughts of Amida Buddha's paradise far to the west among the growing ranks of believers in Pure Land Buddhism at the time. The bronze plaque on the crossbar calls this torii "the eastern gate of paradise."

Just north of the Central Precinct is the Rokujido, another Important Cultural Property, built in 1623. It overlooks a stone stage built in the early seventeenth century and still used every April 22 for performances of *gagaku*, an ancient tradition of orchestral music and dance.

To the east of the Central Precinct is the Shoryoin (also called the Taishiden, or "Prince's Hall"), where worshipers pray to Prince Shotoku for success in academic and other endeavors, and the Treasure Hall, which contains works of art connected to Prince Shotoku and his sponsorship of Buddhism. Between these two structures is the "Cat Gate," where a carved cat keeps watch for mice who might gnaw at scriptures, and not far away is the Banshodo, originally built for the carpenters (*bansho*) who constructed the temple. On its distinctive banners are the characters of the traditional prayer "Namu Amida Butsu" ("I take refuge in Amida Buddha"), written with the outlines of carpenters' tools.

### *Garden of the Pure Land Paradise*

Northeast of the Central Precinct stands the Gochikoin ("Temple to the Light of the Five Wisdom Tathagatas"), another Important Cultural Property. The current Gochikoin was built in 1623, replacing an earlier structure built in 1187 for retired emperor Go-Shirakawa, as recorded in the *Tale of the Heike*.

Next to the Gochikoin is the entrance to the Gokuraku Jodo no Niwa, or "Garden of the Pure Land Paradise." This garden was created in 1933 according to a plan designed by tea master Kizu Sosen III (1862–1939) based on the parable of a narrow path to

salvation between the “two rivers” of anger and greed. It was opened to the public following a renovation in 2003. The garden is indeed a refreshing green oasis, with lotus-filled ponds and tea pavilions offering refreshments. At the southwest corner is the Yuya Hojo, another Important Cultural Property that originally served as living and bathing quarters for monks and was most recently rebuilt in 1623.