**Otokunidera Temple**

Otokunidera Temple in the city of Nagaokakyo is best known for its colorful peonies. It enshrines several noteworthy statues, including an unusual principal object of worship and a guardian deity Bishamonten portrayed with an uncharacteristic expression. Otokunidera has a long history and was connected to several important events that took place before and after the founding of Kyoto. The temple belongs to the Shingon school of Buddhism.

*The Peony Temple*

About a thousand large, fragrant peonies grow on the grounds of Otokunidera. The first flowers were donated in 1940 by the head Shingon temple, Hasedera in Nara Prefecture, to help revitalize Otokunidera after a typhoon. Now, the path from the front gate is lined with peonies, and more flowerbeds are laid out throughout the grounds and in front of the Hondo (Main Hall). The peonies bloom in shades of pink, purple, yellow, and white and are at their peak in April.

*Early History*

The origins of Otokunidera are traced to a temple reportedly founded in the area by Prince Shotoku (574–622), who promoted the spread of Buddhism in Japan. In 784, the capital was moved from Heijokyo (present-day Nara) to Nagaokakyo, and Emperor Kanmu (737–806) substantially expanded the temple.

The following year, Fujiwara no Tanetsugu (737–785), a courtier in charge of building the new capital, was assassinated. An investigation implicated Prince Sawara (750?–785), the emperor’s younger brother, who had close ties to factions that opposed the move to Nagaokakyo. The prince was kept under arrest in Otokunidera and was later sentenced to exile, but mysteriously died on the way. After that, draught, famine, deaths in the imperial family, and other disasters wreaked havoc on Nagaokakyo. The misfortunes were attributed to the vengeful spirit of Prince Sawara. In 794, a mere decade after Nagaokakyo became the seat of power, the capital was moved to Heiankyo (now Kyoto).

*Kukai and Saicho, Two Great Buddhist Teachers*

The influential monk Kukai (Kobo Daishi, 774–835), the founder of the Shingon school, was appointed head of Otokunidera in 811. According to temple legend, when Kukai was carving a wooden statue of the great bodhisattva Hachiman, the deity appeared to him as an elderly man and they completed the sculpture together. Hachiman carved the body, modeling it on Kukai, while Kukai carved the head, modeling it on Hachiman. The unusual statue, called Hachiman Kobo Gattai Daishi, is now the temple’s principal object of worship and is only shown to the public once every 33 years. In 812, Otokunidera served as the meeting place for Kukai and Saicho (Dengyo Daishi, 767–822), the founder of Tendai Buddhism in Japan. During this exchange, Kukai bestowed certain secret teachings and initiations on Saicho, whose goal was to achieve an even deeper understanding of esoteric Buddhism.

*Temple Grounds*

The main approach leads to the hall dedicated to Higiri Jizo, a bodhisattva believed to grant wishes to worshippers who set a period of time and dutifully visit each day to pray. Along the way is a stone stupa with rows of small Jizo statues dedicated by parishioners. A memorial pagoda for Prince Sawara and a 13-story stone pagoda can be found nearby. The Hondo enshrining the Hachiman Kobo Gattai Daishi statue is located toward the back of the precincts, and a sculpture of Fudo Myo-o, the Immovable Wisdom King, stands guard outside. The Bishamondo Hall houses the statue of “Melancholic Bishamonten,” a rare portrayal of the typically fierce deity with a somber expression. Chinju Hachiman Shrine in the southwest corner of the grounds is dedicated to Hachiman, the protector of the temple.