Myohoji Temple

Myohoji was the first head temple (*honzan*) of the Nichiren school of Buddhism built in the Shin'etsu region (present-day Niigata and Nagano Prefectures). It is located on the slope of a low mountain that used to be the site of a fourteenth-century castle in Washima, a rich agricultural area of Nagaoka. Nichiren Buddhism has multiple *honzan* temples across Japan, and as one of them, Myohoji is an important pilgrimage destination for the school's followers. The temple is surrounded by nature and is popular for seasonal flower-viewing, autumn colors, and moss-covered scenery.

History

The influential monk Nichiren (1222–1282) began to preach an interpretation of Buddhism focusing on the Lotus Sutra in 1253. Over time, he gained a large following and had many disciples, who continued to spread his teachings after his death. Myohoji was founded in 1306 by order of Kazama Nobuaki (d. 1354), a lord from the Shin'etsu region who was reportedly healed from a sickness by Nissho (1221–1323), a direct disciple of Nichiren. Kazama became Nissho's patron, and to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Nichiren's death, he sponsored the founding of the temple that would become Myohoji. It was initially constructed in Kamakura, the seat of the shogun's government, but after Nissho expressed regret over the lack of a high-ranking temple to spread Nichiren's teachings in the north, Myohoji was moved to present-day Nagaoka in 1323.

Most of the temple was reduced to ashes in 1868 during the Boshin War (1868–1869), which was waged between the forces of the new government established under Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) and the supporters of the Tokugawa shogunate. Since then, Myohoji has been rebuilt on a smaller scale and now welcomes Nichiren followers and other visitors from around the country and abroad.

Temple Grounds

Myohoji is known as the "temple where the flowers bloom." In spring, the rare *yukiwariso* primrose appears on the mountain slopes, and weeping cherry trees blossom near the Nitenmon Gate. Summer brings blue hydrangeas and delicate lotus flowers, and when autumn comes, tree leaves change to warm shades of red and yellow. For most of the year, the grounds are carpeted with lush green moss.

In the Hondo (Main Hall), the mandala originally created by Nichiren, which is regarded as the principal object of worship, is represented by a group of Buddhist sculptures and objects. A pagoda bearing the sacred words *namu myoho renge kyo* ("glory to the Lotus Sutra") is flanked by the statues of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, and Taho, the Buddha of Abundant Treasures. Each Buddha is accompanied by two bodhisattvas and two guardian deities of the cardinal directions. At the front of the formation is a brightly painted statue of Nichiren. For a guided visit to the Hondo, please inquire at the temple office. Note that tours are provided in Japanese and only when volunteers or temple staff are available.

To the right of the Hondo is the small Kaisando (Founder's Hall), where daily memorial services are held in honor of Kazama Nobuaki. Next to the Kaisando is the Senbutsudo (Hall of a Thousand Buddhas), a former sutra repository that now enshrines the spirits of the victims of the Boshin War. On the doors of the earthen building are well-preserved plaster reliefs of a dragon and a traveling monk. At the end of a stone path covered with moss is Shichimengu Shrine, which was built in 1693. According to legend, as Nichiren was traveling to his place of exile on Sado Island, he came across a village that was tormented by a malevolent spirit. Using the power of the holy sutras, Nichiren changed the spirit into a guardian called Shichimen, who took the form of a beautiful maiden and a dragon. Now, Shichimen is worshipped as a protector deity of Nichiren Buddhists.

The red Nitenmon Gate, built in 1682, the black Shikyakumon Gate, built in 1677, and Shichimengu Shrine are the only structures at Myohoji that predate the Boshin War. Both gates are designated Tangible Cultural Properties by the city of Nagaoka.