

Kokokuji Temple

Kokokuji Temple played an important role in the history of Zen Buddhism in Japan and is famous as the birthplace of soy sauce and Kinzanji miso. The temple was founded in 1227 to pray for the repose of the spirit of Minamoto no Sanetomo (1192–1219), the third shogun of the Kamakura shogunate (1185–1333). Its halls contain important Buddhist statuary and other cultural assets, and its grounds are planted with cedars, maples, azaleas, and cherry trees.

Visiting the temple

The entrance to the temple complex is from the south via the Daimon gate. From there, a stone path leads to a second gate, passing through forested grounds, ponds, and a group of miniature stone pagodas and other stone monuments. The Sanmon gate is the entrance to the temple's main sanctuary and is directly opposite the Main Hall (Hatto).

The Main Hall

The Main Hall is the spiritual heart of the Kokokuji temple complex. It is dedicated to Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha. On the ceiling, a painting of a dragon guards the hall.

The Founder's Hall

A corridor leads from the back of the Main Hall to the Meditation Hall (Zazendo) and on to the Founder's Hall (Kaizando). The Founder's Hall is built over the burial site of Shinchō Kakushin (1207–1298), a celebrated Zen master who served as head monk at Kokokuji. Kakushin played a key role in propagating Zen Buddhism in Japan. He was posthumously granted the title Hotto Enmyō Kokushi (lit. "perfectly awakened national teacher of the Dharma lamp") by Emperor Godaigo (r. 1318–1339).

Kakushin's legacy

Kakushin became head monk after returning to Japan following six years of training under Wumen Huikai (1183–1260) in China. Wumen wrote *The Gateless Gate*, a compilation of teachings that became central to Japanese Zen Buddhism. Kakushin brought back these and other teachings along with shakuhachi music scores from

China. He introduced the shakuhachi bamboo flute as a means of meditation and established the cultural practices followed by *komuso*, or “clerics of emptiness.” *Komuso* were traditionally monks and mendicant monks, many of whom undertook pilgrimages wearing reed-woven headgear that covered the face and head like an upturned basket and played the shakuhachi. The unique headgear symbolized the absence of ego, and they played the shakuhachi to attain and summon others to enlightenment.

Kakushin introduced fermentation techniques from China to make Kinzanji miso. This coarsely textured miso is a fermented mixture of vegetables, rice, soybeans, and barley, eaten as a side dish or as a topping for rice. Through the introduction of Kinzanji miso, Kakushin is additionally credited as the father of Japanese soy sauce. Liquid accumulates in the bottom of the barrel during the fermentation process of the miso. It is said that after savoring the richly flavored liquid, Kakushin was so impressed with its taste that he decided to extract some. This paved the way for soy sauce production in Japan.

Exploring further

Visitors can view the exteriors of the Main Hall (Hatto), Meditation Hall (Zazendo), and Founder’s Hall (Kaizendo) on a walk around the temple grounds. The halls are usually closed to the public, but it is possible to look inside the Main Hall through the slatted panels of the main door. The path around the grounds passes the Tengu Hall (Tengudo), which anyone may enter. As illustrated by the large mask displayed inside the hall, *tengu* are bird-like goblins from traditional folk tales and literature. Legend holds that an all-powerful *tengu* rebuilt Kokokuji in one night after a devastating fire, and that creature is worshipped at the temple.

The origins of the temple and its development

Kokokuji was founded as Saihoji Temple and initially belonged to the esoteric Shingon school of Buddhism. In 1258, when Kakushin became head monk, he changed the temple’s affiliation to the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism and re-established it as Kokokuji. The transformation occurred during a transitional period in Japanese history, marked by the transfer of political authority from the emperor in Kyoto to a new ruling class of samurai warriors based in Kamakura. This era was also one of rapid diversification of Japanese Buddhism. Zen was relatively new to Japan

and it flourished under the Kamakura shogunate. Kakushin developed Kokokuji into one of the country's leading Zen temples and played a key role in propagating the faith nationwide. At Kokokuji's height in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it was the head of a network of 143 Zen temples, with 43 subtemples on the grounds of the main temple complex.