

World Peace Pagoda

The World Peace Pagoda overlooks the Kanmon Strait from high on Mt. Kojō, in northern Moji. The 45-meter-tall structure is the only official Myanmar temple in Japan.

Built in 1958, the pagoda is said to have been envisioned by Ichihara Mizumaro (b. 1917), a former soldier who had been deployed to Myanmar (then Burma) during World War II (1939–1945). Having seen the untold death and suffering of the war firsthand, Ichihara wanted to construct a Theravada Buddhist pagoda in Japan to honor the casualties of the war and promote world peace.

The Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982), one of Myanmar’s preeminent Buddhist monks, arrived in Japan in 1957. He brought with him a young devotee who was later known as the Venerable U Khe Min Da (1922–2011). On learning about Ichihara’s vision, the young monk volunteered to remain in Japan to support the project.

Memorial to the Fallen of World War II

During World War II, around two million Japanese soldiers were deployed to the Pacific theater through Moji Port, and some 200,000 took part in the Burma Campaign (1942–1945). When those soldiers shipped out, they must have known they might never come back. Japanese casualties in Burma numbered in the 100,000s, and at least 180,000 Japanese citizens died there and were never returned to their homeland. For those fortunate enough to come home, Moji assumed profound significance as a symbol of loss, survival, and the tragedy of war.

The Burmese civilian population also suffered terrible casualties. Although exact numbers are difficult to determine, it is clear they far eclipsed the losses of the occupying Japanese. When the war finally came to a close, the trauma of such great violence weighed heavily on the two nations. The creation of this pagoda, just 13 years after hostilities had ended, was a small step toward establishing mutual goodwill.

In September 1958, the pagoda was built by local carpenters under the direction of a Myanmar architect. The construction costs totaled 40 million yen, which was split between the Buddha Sāsana Council of Burma and donations from the local Moji community.

At least three Theravada monks from Myanmar reside at the pagoda at any one time. Operational funds are covered by a modest entrance fee and by donations from former soldiers and families of the victims of war. Unfortunately, the pagoda does not receive the support it once did, and it is kept up mostly through the goodwill and charity of Moji residents.

The Pagoda Interior

The pagoda follows a typical Burmese design. The Buddha statue at the center of the altar is a Theravada representation of Gautama Siddhārtha (Japanese: *Shaka Nyorai*), the historical Buddha. To its left stand 50 mortuary tablets (*ihai*) for fallen soldiers. A simple rock from a beach in Myanmar is a solemn reminder that many grieving families were never reunited with the remains of their loved ones. A memorial service is held each year in autumn.