Kashozan Mirokuji Temple

Kashozan Mirokuji is a large temple complex set on Mt. Kasho, around 16 kilometers north of central Numata. The Soto Zen temple's unostentatious structures stand amid a dense forest interspersed with giant cryptomeria trees.

A stirring past

Kashozan Mirokuji was established in 848 as the guardian temple of Kozuke Province (present-day Gunma Prefecture). According to legend, the widely traveled Buddhist priest Ennin (794–864), who founded the temple, was inspired in his work by Mahakasyapa, a disciple of the historical Buddha. Mahakasyapa is known as Maha Kasho in Japanese, and Ennin thus named the mountain Kasho.

Acting on behalf of the court-appointed governor of Kozuke, Ennin founded Kashozan Mirokuji as a temple of Tendai, the school of Buddhism favored by the court at the time. The temple was converted to Soto Zen in the fifteenth century by a priest named Tenson, who figures prominently in local lore.

Tenson is believed to have meditated on top of Oshodai, a 60-meter-tall rock formation that towers over the temple grounds. He was assisted by a disciple named Chuho, whose superhuman abilities are said to have included climbing impossibly steep cliffs and never needing rest during his work expanding Kashozan Mirokuji and preaching Buddhism to the local people. According to the story, immediately after Tenson's death, Chuho revealed himself to be an incarnation of Maha Kasho. He then promised to relieve the suffering of all those who pray at Kashozan Mirokuji and bring them joy. He then ascended to heaven, leaving behind only a long-nosed mask.

Guardians of the grounds

The legend of Chuho inspired the belief that he was a *tengu*, a part-bird mythical being. *Tengu* are considered to be powerful guardians of remote mountains and forests and are typically depicted with wings and either a long nose or a beak. At Kashozan Mirokuji, two *tengu* statues—one with a protruding nose, the other resembling a crow—stand guard in the temple's Chuhodo Hall, where Chuho is enshrined as a guardian deity. The ornate inner sanctum of this hall is located at the top of a steep multi-level altar. It is opened for viewing once every decade.

Today, Kashozan Mirokuji can be reached by car, but in the past, worshipers were asked to respect the sacred grounds by leaving their horses outside the precincts and continuing to the temple on foot. Devotees are said to have dismounted by the ancient and hollow cryptomeria tree that stands just out of sight from the temple buildings. This *umakakure* ("horse-hiding") tree can be reached via steps from the parking lot.