

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO KENCHŌ-JI

History



Rankei Doryū

Kenchō-ji is the first ranked of the five great Zen temples of Kamakura, and is the oldest Zen training monastery of Japan. It was constructed by the order of the Emperor Go-Fukusa during the regency of Hōjō Tokiyori (1227-63). Work was completed in the fifth year of the Kenchō Era (1253), from which the name is taken.

The founder of Kenchō-ji was Rankei Doryū (Lan-hsi Tao-lung, 1213-78), a Chinese Zen master of the Sung Dynasty. He left China in 1246 to teach Zen in Japan, spending several years in Kyushu and Kyoto before coming to Kamakura to found Kenchō-ji. After his death the memorial title “Daikaku Zenji” (Teacher of Great Realization) was conferred upon him by the Emperor Gouda. This was the first time in Japanese history that such a title was given to a priest of the Zen sect.

Something of the nature of Rankei Doryū’s teaching can be seen in the following quotation from his “Recorded Sayings” :

If you have lost your true self, all phenomena bring you nothing but annoyance.
If you discover your essence of mind, you can follow nothing but true path.

Hōjō Toriyori, the fifth Kamakura Regent, was the principal patron of Kenchō-ji during its early years.

His support was spiritual as well as financial: as a devoted follower of Rankei Doryū and his successor Gottan Funei, he practiced Zen for many years and approached the state of master himself.



Hōjō Toriyori

Buildings

Kenchō-ji originally comprised seven main buildings and 49 subtemples, but most of these were destroyed in a series of fires during the 14th and 15th centuries. In the Tokugawa Era, however, the Zen master Takuan (1573-1645) succeeded, with aid from the Shogunate, in restoring Kenchō-ji to much of its former splendor.



At present the Kenchō-ji complex contains about 10 subtemples and the following main buildings.

✚ Sōmon (General Gate):

This gate originally stood at the Hanju Sanmai-in Temple in Kyoto, famous as the storage place for the Imperial family tablets.



✚ Sanmon (Main Gate, see picture above):

The present Main Gate was built in 1754 by Bansetsu, the chief priest of Kenchō-ji at the time. He was aided in this project by donations from the people of the Kanto (Eastern) region of Japan. Legend has it that a badger ("Tanuki" in Japanese) helped the cause by transforming himself into a monk, in order to repay the kindness he had been shown by the priests of Kenchō-ji. Thus even now the Main Gate is called "Tanuki Mon" (Badger's Gate).



✚ Bonshō (Temple Bell):

This bell, cast in 1255 and bearing an inscription by the Founder, Rankei Doryū, has been designated a National Treasure by the government of Japan.

✚ Junipers:

These trees, designated as National Treasures, were planted over 750 years ago from seed the founder brought from China.



✚ Butsuden (Buddha Hall) and Karamon (Chinese Gate): These structures, both Important Cultural properties, were originally mausoleum buildings belonging to the Shogunate, and were located at the Zōjō-ji temple in Tokyo. They were moved piece by piece to their present location in 1647. The large Buddhist image inside the Butsuden represents Jizō Bosatsu (Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva)



✚ Hattō (Dharma Hall):
All major public ceremonies are performed in this building, which dates from 1814.
It is the largest wooden Buddhist structure in Eastern Japan.

The painting on the ceiling called “Unryū-zu” was displayed to celebrate the 750th anniversary of Kenchō-ji.



✚ Hōjō (Main Hall):
This building, like the Sōmon, was moved to Kenchō-ji from its original location at the Hanju Sanmai-in Temple in Kyoto. It was first used as the chief priest’s residence, but is now used in the performance of religious services for the believers of Kenchō-ji. The image enshrined here is that of Shaka Nyorai (Shakyamuni Buddha). The Hōjō is often called Ryūō-den (Dragon King Hall).



✚ Garden:
Located behind the Hōjō is a large garden designed by Daikaku Zenji. The pond in this garden is known as the “Sanpeki-ike”.



✚ Hansō-bō:
This is the protective shrine of Kenchō-ji. It was originally located at the Hoko-ji Temple in Shizuoka, but was brought here by request of the Zen master Ozora Kando in the year 1890.

✚ Monastery (strictly closed to the public):
The Monastery, where monks receive intensive training in Zen meditation, consists of the Zendō (Meditation Hall), Kaisandō (Founder’s Hall), and the monastery administrative quarters.
See the aerial photos on the slides of the [events webpage](#).

Above abstract is reproduced from the free leaflet available at the admission ticket office.
When you visit Kenchō-ji, please read the leaflet’s full guidelines to make your visit a pleasant one.