



Okunoin: The Area Sacred to Kōbō Daishi

● ● ● Who is Kōbō Daishi Kūkai? ● ● ●



Kōbō Daishi Kūkai (弘法大師空海, 774-835) was a Japanese Buddhist monk and the founder of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism (真言密教) in Japan. He is famous as a great Buddhist thinker, writer, and practitioner, but is also well-known for his charitable works for the good of society and the enrichment of the people. He wrote many books on Shingon Buddhism, was one of the three most noted calligraphers of his day, and is also known for his literary talents. He composed a dictionary, and is said to have invented the kana writing system of Japanese. He built the first school for non-aristocratic children in Japan, and was also versed in civil engineering.

Kōbō Daishi's birth name was Saeki no Mao (佐伯真魚). After he ordained as a Buddhist monk he was called Kūkai. He was posthumously granted the honorific title Kōbō Daishi by the Emperor. He is often affectionately called O-Daishi-sama in Japan.

Kōbō Daishi was the son of a regional aristocratic family in Shikoku, and after showing talent in his early years had the opportunity to study the Confucian classics and other traditional subjects at the national university, on a track leading

to eventual appointment as a government official. However, before graduating he became convinced that Buddhism was the only way to bring true happiness to the people, and resolved to leave the university to become a wandering ascetic in the mountains of Japan.

In his early thirties Kōbō Daishi went to China as a student monk from 804 to 806, and there he encountered the famous Master Huiguo (惠果和尚) at the Qinglong monastery (青龍寺) in the capital of Chang'an (modern Xi'an). Huiguo gave Kūkai the full transmission of the authentic teachings of Esoteric Buddhism that had been brought to China from India. On his deathbed, Huiguo instructed Kūkai to return to Japan and spread those teachings widely there, and so Kūkai returned to Japan sooner than anticipated.

In 815 Kūkai was granted the area of Kōyasan (高野山) in modern Wakayama Prefecture by the Emperor to use for the construction of a monastery. His monastery is still flourishing there 1,200 years later. Kūkai also served as the abbot of Tō-ji temple in Kyoto and Tōdai-ji temple in Nara.

● ● ● Okunoin and Kōbō Daishi's eternal meditation ● ● ●

It is believed that Kōbō Daishi never actually died, and instead entered a kind of eternal meditation (入定留身) in 835. He had vowed that until the world came to an end he would never stop working for the liberation of all beings from suffering. It is believed that he is still continuously praying for the good of the world even today at Okunoin.

Starting from the late Heian period, over 200,000 grave markers and stone monuments have been built in the vicinity of Kōbō Daishi's mausoleum and along the path leading to it by his devotees, including Buddhist monks, medieval warriors and lords, and ordinary people alike. Okunoin is revered as a site sacred to Japanese Buddhism, and many people of all religious denominations make pilgrimages to it even today.



● ● ● *Gorintō* and the teachings of Shingon Buddhism ● ● ●

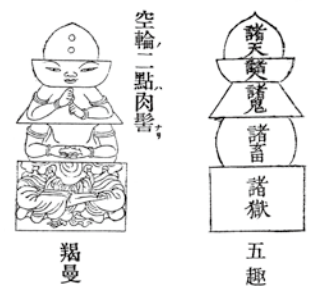


Many of the grave markers seen at Okunoin have a five-layered shape. This is called a gorintō (五輪塔) or a five-elements stūpa, and the five stones placed on top of each other represent the five elements that make up the physical world in Buddhism. From below, the stones are made in the shapes of a cube, sphere, pyramid, half-sphere, and what is called a jewel-shape. These shapes represent in that order the elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space. On each of the shapes a Sanskrit letter is carved representing that element, in sequence from below a-va-ra-ha-kha.

Kūkai wrote that the phenomenal world we know arises through the combination of these five material elements with the addition of consciousness. Consciousness is not represented in the five-elements stūpa because it is not physical. Consciousness transforms into the wisdom of the Buddhas according to Buddhism. These six together make up the uni-

verse itself, which is thoroughly imbued with the wisdom of the Buddhas. All things in the world are thus in essence deeply integrated with the

wisdom of the Buddhas, although this is difficult to actually experience without training. This integration of the wisdom of the Buddhas, the consciousness of ordinary beings, and also all of the phenomenal world is represented by the central Buddha



of Shingon Buddhism, Mahāvairocana Buddha (大日如来). Giving this teaching a concrete form as a grave marker indicates that the deceased have returned to the universal nature of Mahāvairocana.

The Dai-Garan: The Maṇḍala World of Shingon Buddhism



● ● ● *What is the Garan?* ● ● ●

The word Garan (伽藍) is derived from the Sanskrit word *saṅghārāma*, originally meaning a forested place where Buddhist monks gather to train. The Dai-Garan (大伽藍, the Great Garan) of Kōyasan is where Kōbō Daishi first began construction of his monastery at Kōyasan for teaching Shingon Buddhism. Many of the important deities of Shingon Buddhism are enshrined in the halls at the Dai-Garan, where to this day the monks of Kōyasan train, conduct rituals, hold traditional lectures, and engage in doctrinal debates.

● ● ● Legends on the founding of Kōyasan ● ● ●



The pine tree in the center of the Dai-Garan is called the Sanko-no-Matsu, or the “pine tree of the three-pointed vajra” (三鈷の松). After Kōbō Daishi completed his study of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism in China, legend has it that just before he left China he prayed that he might be shown the

ideal place to build a monastery for teaching. Then he threw a three-pointed vajra (a ritual implement of Esoteric Buddhism) into the air. It is said that the vajra rode on a cloud and disappeared into the sky going east toward Japan.

Later in Japan, Kōbō Daishi wandered through the mountains in search of a place to build his monastery. He is said to have encountered a tall hunter with a white dog and a black dog. The two dogs led Kōbō Daishi to Kōyasan where he discovered the vajra he had thrown from China lodged in a pine tree. He then knew that Kōyasan was the place to build his monastery. The hunter is supposed to have been the local god Kariba Myōjin, so it is said that Kōbō Daishi found Kōyasan through divine favor. Later, Kōbō Daishi enshrined the local protector goddess Niutsuhime (丹生都比売) and her divine son Kariba Myōjin (狩場明神) at a shrine on the western edge of the Dai-Garan before building his monastery at Kōyasan.

● ● ● The Daitō: A Three-dimensional Maṇḍala ● ● ●

A *maṇḍala* (曼荼羅) is an iconographic or visual representation of the teachings of Shingon Buddhism and the ideal world of the Buddhas. The word *maṇḍala* in Sanskrit literally means “that which possesses the essence.” The interior of the Great Stūpa (Daitō, 大塔) of the Dai-Garan is a three-dimensional *maṇḍala* with statues of the Five Buddhas (五仏), with Mahāvairocana Buddha in the center. They are surrounded by paintings of the Sixteen Bodhisattvas (十六大菩薩) on the pillars. In addition, images of the Eight Patriarchs (八大祖師) of Shingon Buddhism, including Kōbō Daishi as the eighth patriarch along with the great Indian and Chinese masters who preceded him, are painted on the interior corners of the Daitō.



● ● ● Who is Mahāvairocana Buddha? ● ● ●

Mahāvairocana Buddha is the cosmic Buddha at the center of the *maṇḍalas* of Shingon Buddhism, and represents the universality and immutability of the wisdom of the Buddhas, and also their boundless compassion. There are many other Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and so on in the *maṇḍalas*, who are all manifestations of particular aspects of the totality of Mahāvairocana’s wisdom. Since Shingon Buddhism teaches that all beings inherently possess the same awakening as the Buddhas, beings are all also, in essence, manifestations of Mahāvairocana. There are statues of Mahāvairocana Buddha at the center of the three-dimensional *maṇḍalas* inside the Great Stūpa and the Western Stūpa (Saitō, 西塔) in the Dai-Garan.

● ● ● What does Shingon Esoteric Buddhism teach? ● ● ●



Shingon Esoteric Buddhism is a form of Tantric or Vajrayāna Buddhism (密教) that was brought to Japan via China from India. Shingon Buddhism is related to Tibetan Buddhism because both are derived from similar Indian sources. The two share many similarities, but also differences.

The core teaching of Shingon Buddhism is that the awakening of the Buddhas is inherently present in all beings but covered over by delusions and unwholesome thoughts, making that difficult to know. Shingon Buddhism teaches that through proper training one can uncover that inherent awakening, and so attain Buddhahood during one's present lifetime. Awakening is thus the profound realization that the Buddha, oneself, and all beings are essentially and fundamentally identical. Awakening is realized through the

practice of compassion, and the ultimate purpose of pursuing awakening is to become fully able engage in compassionate activities to aid and liberate other beings.

Shingon Buddhist practice makes use of what is called the Three Mysteries (三密) practice in order to realize our inherent Buddhahood. The Three Mysteries are the perfected activities of the body, speech, and mind of the Buddhas. These are practiced by holding the hands in the gesture (mudrā) of the Buddha for the body, repeating their words (mantra) for speech, and meditating on their realized state for mind. These three methods are practiced together in order to realize that we are fundamentally Buddhas ourselves. The Japanese translation of the Indian word mantra is shingon, showing the importance of mantra in Shingon Buddhism, along with the practices for body and mind.

● ● ● What does Esoteric mean? ● ● ●

The word "esoteric" is used in Shingon Buddhism to indicate two teachings. First, that the Buddhas preach by adjusting their teachings according to the ability of their audiences to comprehend, and so reserve some teachings until beings are ready for them. In this case, the Buddha wisely holds back teachings temporarily until the listener is ready for them. The second is that by refusing to recognize the truth of inherent awakening, in a sense we conceal the truth from ourselves. The second meaning is the most important in Shingon Esoteric Buddhism, and is what the word esoteric

primarily means in that context. Esoteric here does not mean a willful withholding of teachings to a select few. The teachings of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism are available to anyone, but require careful sequential preparation through several stages. The word “esoteric” is used to emphasize the need to train ourselves to realize what was there all along but was hidden to us by our own ignorance.



Kongōbu-ji Temple: the Head Temple of Kōyasan Shingon-shū

● ● ● About Kongōbu-ji temple ● ● ●



Originally the name for the entirety of the monastic complex at Kōyasan was Kongōbu-ji temple (金剛峯寺). Kongōbu-ji is named after some words in the title of a Buddhist text, and means Vajra Peak. The individual temples of

Kōyasan are all sub-temples of Kongōbu-ji. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, each religious organization was required to have a single governing head temple. At the time, there were two large adjacent temples, Kōzan-ji and Seigan-ji temples. They were combined and renamed Kongōbu-ji temple. Today, Kongōbu-ji refers to that combined temple.



● ● ● The Head Temple of Kōyasan Shingon-shū Buddhism ● ● ●



Kongōbu-ji is now the head temple of the Kōyasan Shingon-shū sect (高野山真言宗の総本山) of Buddhism teaching Shingon Buddhism as taught by Kōbō Daishi. Kōyasan Shingon-shū has about 4,000 member temples in Japan, and about twenty affiliated temples in North and South America. The donations received by Kōyasan

Shingon-shū are used today for social welfare programs, foster parent support, disaster assistance, the maintenance of the head temple, the support of Kōyasan University, Kōyasan High School, and other educational institutions and religious training facilities, and for the environmental conservation of the forests of Kōyasan.

● ● ● About Kōyasan ● ● ●

Kōbō Daishi was granted the region of Kōyasan by Emperor Saga in 815 to use for building a monastery. Before that, the area of Kōyasan had been used by mountain ascetics for religious training. The central flat valley of Kōyasan is auspiciously surrounded by eight hills like the eight petals of a lotus, a flower sacred to Buddhism. Also because of the streams flowing down into the valley from those surrounding hills there was no shortage of water at Kōyasan, and given its remoteness from the distractions of the capital, Kōbō Daishi recognized it as an ideal place to build his monastery.

After receiving permission to use the land from the Japanese Court, the first thing Kōbō Daishi did was to ritually invite the local goddess Niutsuhime



and her divine son Kariba Myōjin to reside at Kōyasan, while explaining his intention to build a Buddhist monastery there with their permission. After that he began construction. The buildings of the Dai-Garan were added one by one with considerable difficulty, but it was not completed during Kōbō Daishi's lifetime.

After Kōbō Daishi entered eternal meditation in 835, people increasingly began to make pilgrimages to Kōyasan. Through their generous donations, the temples of Kōyasan grew in size and number. Although Kōyasan was deserted on several occasions during its early history due to destruction by fires, it rapidly developed into an important Buddhist center in Japan.

Other Points of Interest

● ● ● Kōyasan Reihōkan Museum ● ● ●



Kōyasan Reihōkan Museum (高野山靈宝館) is an art museum for the preservation and display of the art treasures of Kongōbu-ji temple and its sub-temples. It holds 21 National Treasures and 143 Important Cultural Properties, and has a collection of over 50,000 items. When Kōbō Daishi returned from China, he brought with him many *maṇḍalas*, Buddhist texts, paintings, and ritual implements. Some of these can be seen today at the Reihōkan Museum, along with many important later works of Buddhist art.

● ● ● Nyonindō Hall ● ● ●



At the time of the founding of Kōyasan, Kōbō Daishi envisioned it as a monastery for men. Until 1872 entry into Kōyasan was restricted to men only. Women were not permitted inside the precincts of Kōyasan to avoid distractions to the monks. Instead, seven temple buildings called Nyonindō (Women's Halls, 女人堂) were built around the outer circumference of Kōyasan so that women could also make pilgrimages there. The path encircling Kōyasan and joining those Nyonindō was called the Women's Path (女人道), and can still be walked today. Only one of the seven original halls survives today.

● ● ● Tokugawa Mausoleum ● ● ●



During the 265 years of the Edo period, Japan was ruled by the Tokugawa Shoguns. They had two mausoleums at Kōyasan, one of which was destroyed but the other survives. Called the Tokugawa-ke Reidai (徳川家霊台), it includes mausolea dedicated to the first shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu and his son and the second shogun Tokugawa Hidetada. The Tokugawa family were historically generous donors to Kōyasan, and the ornate richness of these mausolea testify to their unequalled political power at the time.

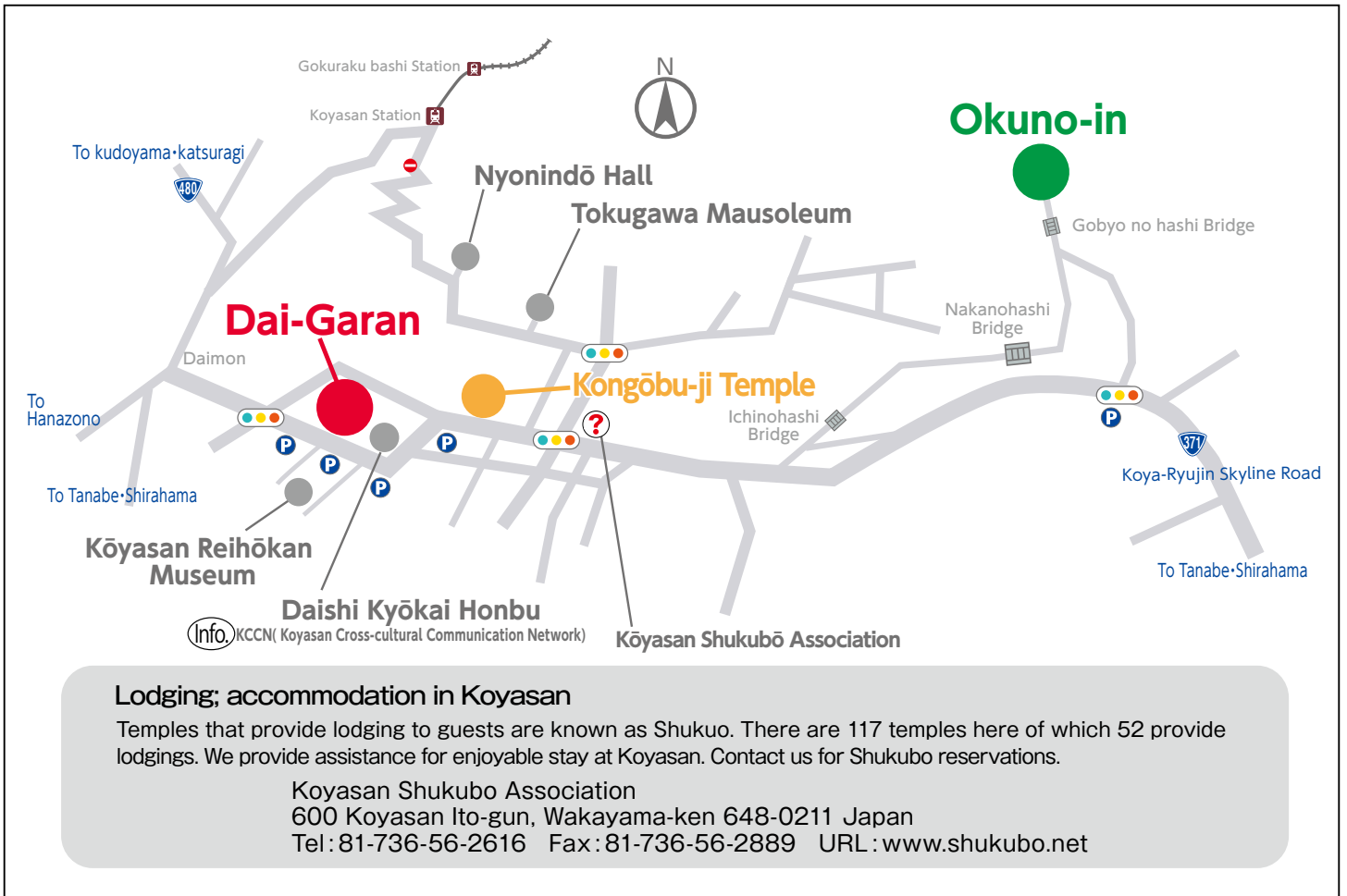
● ● ● Daishi Kyōkai Honbu ● ● ●



Kōbō Daishi's teachings and positive way of life have inspired many people to become his followers. The main office at Kōyasan for disseminating the teachings of Kōbō Daishi and related arts to these followers around Japan is the Daishi Kyōkai Honbu (大師教会本部). There anyone can receive the ten Buddhist lay precepts (*jukai*, 受戒) that help one to lead a good and responsible life. The precepts ceremony takes about thirty minutes, and is given seven times every day to any interested person.



KOYASAN MAP



Kongōbu-ji Temple, Head Temple of Kōyasan Shingon-shū Buddhism 高野山真言宗 総本山金剛峯寺

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