

The History of Yakuoji Temple

Yakuoji Temple was founded in 741 by a Buddhist priest named Gyoki (668–749). According to stories that have been handed down, he went to Tokushima at the request of Emperor Shomu (701–756), a devout Buddhist. Both Gyoki and Emperor Shomu diligently worked to spread Buddhism throughout the country.

According to legend, the Buddhist priest Kukai (774–835; known posthumously as Kobo Daishi), who founded the Shingon school of Buddhism, visited Yakuoji Temple in 815 after receiving an imperial order to revive it. Like Gyoki, Kukai is considered one of the most influential Buddhist priests in Japanese history. While staying at Yakuoji, he reportedly carved a wooden statue of a seated Yakushi Nyorai, also known as the Medicine Buddha or the Buddha of Healing.

In Japanese culture, there is a belief that 42 is a very unlucky age for men. It is said that Kukai, who was 42 at the time of his visit, created the statue to protect people from this and other types of misfortune.

Yakuoji Temple was formally recognized as a temple belonging to the Shingon school of Buddhism in 815. Numerous emperors, attesting to its national importance, are reported to have prayed for spiritual purification here.

Yakuoji is the 23rd of the 88 temples along the Shikoku Pilgrimage. This circular route is one of the country's most revered and popular pilgrimages; it is also the oldest, having been established more than 1,200 years ago. Yakuoji is the last of the temples on the pilgrimage route within Tokushima Prefecture.

A fire destroyed much of the temple in 1188. According to legend, Kukai's carving of Yakushi Nyorai, which is the temple's principal image, escaped the fire by miraculously flying away while emitting light and took refuge in another temple on a distant mountain.

It is said that, after Yakuoji Temple was rebuilt and a new statue of Yakushi Nyorai had been dedicated, the original statue, which again had been emitting light, flew back to the temple and positioned itself next to the new statue. It faced backward, however, which earned it the moniker of Backward-facing Yakushi Nyorai. This valuable ancient sculpture is not on public display, but the faithful can offer prayers while standing behind a door to the room that contains it.

Over time, new structures were created on the temple grounds, and other sacred Buddhist artworks and relics were added to its collection. Many of these items are associated with health, purification, and warding off bad luck. Today, pilgrims continue to visit to experience the ancient customs practiced here.

Among the notable sites at Yakuoji Temple are stairs that one climbs to prevent bad luck at specific ages thought to be unlucky; a 20-meter-high pagoda built with a distinctive design rarely encountered in other parts of Japan; a sacred spring that bubbles up on the grounds and is believed to be effective against lung ailments and other diseases when drunk; and a scenic peony garden.

Surrounded by woods, the temple is a place of great serenity. Points of high elevation on the grounds afford a sweeping view of the local seaside community.

Niomon Gate

The main gate to Yakuoji Temple is flanked by a pair of wooden statues of two fierce, armed guardian figures known as Nio, hence the gate's name, *niomon*. The figure on the right side of the gate, as you face the temple, has its mouth open, and the figure on the left has its mouth closed.

The *nio* figures are protectors of both the temple and Buddhism. They also represent the beginning and ending of life: the open mouth represents utterance of the sound “ah” in the Sanskrit language, while the closed mouth depicts the sound “un.” Respectively, these are thought to be the first and last sounds a person makes: “ah” at birth, and “un” at death.

Both guardian deities hold an ancient swordlike weapon called a *vajra*. Their well-defined, muscular bodies and protruding veins are said to indicate the exertion of power. The long ribbon around their bodies is a *ten'ne*, an item of clothing that heavenly beings are believed to wear.

The nio figures are designated a Tangible Cultural Property by the town of Minami.

Stone Pillar in Front of Niomon Gate

A stone pillar stands in front of the Niomon Gate, which serves as Yakuoji Temple's entrance. Carved into the pillar is a list of ancient rules about food and drink on the temple grounds. Among the prohibited items were chives, leeks, garlic, onion, and *rakkyo* (a type of scallion). These items were considered strong stimulants that interfered with the ascetic practices necessary to reach spiritual goals. Alcohol and meat were also prohibited.

Mortar and Pestle

At the top of the 33 stone steps of the Onna Yakuzaka (Women's Hill of Misfortune) are a stone mortar, a wooden pestle, a large metal incense burner, and wooden boxes of incense sticks (*senko*). Using these items is believed to bestow good health and ward off evil and bad luck if visitors follow the recommended process.

After making a donation, place a few incense sticks in the mortar. Using the large wooden pestle, pound the incense once for each year of your life while chanting the mantra of Yakushi Norai, a deity of medicine and healing also known as the Medicine Buddha. The mantra, *on korokoro sendari matogi sowaka*, is believed to promote healing and relieve suffering. Finally, pinch the crushed incense with your fingers and place it into the incense burner.

Large Incense Burner

At the top of the 33 stone steps of the Onna Yakuzaka (Women's Hill of Misfortune) are a stone mortar, a wooden pestle, a large metal incense burner (*jokoro*), and wooden boxes of incense sticks (*senko*). The *jokoro* is reported to have been made in 1959 and donated to the temple by a former parishioner. Temple visitors light incense sticks and stand them in the burner, praying as the incense wafts into the air. It is commonly believed that incense smoke contains healing powers, so people use their hands to draw the smoke toward any afflicted parts of their body.

Main Hall

The Main Hall (Hondo) is located near the highest point on the grounds of Yakuoji Temple. The front is decorated with intricate carvings of mythical creatures, including dragons. Visitors ring the bell at the entrance once or twice before praying by pulling the rope, which is twisted with five colors: yellow, white, red, black, and blue. The colors are said to represent earth, water, fire, wind, and space, all elements that are essential to the teachings of the Shingon school of Buddhism.

Yakuoji Temple has experienced fires several times in its long history, and one blaze in 1188 destroyed the Main Hall. According to local legend, a sculpture of Yakushi Nyorai, a buddha associated with medicine and good fortune, escaped the fire by flying away. After Yakuoji Temple was rebuilt and a new statue consecrated, it is said the first statue flew back and positioned itself next to the newer one, but facing backward. It is now called the Backward-facing Yakushi Nyorai. The legendary sculpture is not displayed to the public, but visitors can pray to it while standing behind a door nearby.

The Main Hall was last rebuilt in 1908. Once inside, people may write their prayers or wishes on votive tablets (*ema*). These are inscribed with the kanji character for misfortune, pronounced *yaku*. It is said that breaking off the part of the tablet with this inscription wards off misfortune.

Many Buddhist practices related to spiritual purification, the expulsion of bad luck, and the realization of personal wishes take place daily within the Main Hall.

Rear Hall

The Rear Hall (Kodo) sits at the end of a narrow path that runs along the side of the Main Hall (Hondo). Along the path are a small Shinto shrine and a fresh mountain-water spring called Hai Daishi, which is said to have a powerful curative effect, especially for lung ailments.

Inside the shrine is a small statue of Kukai (774–835; known posthumously as Kobo Daishi), the founder of the Shingon school of Buddhism. A series of stone lanterns bear the names of people and companies that have made donations to the temple, as well as their wishes, which include family safety and prosperity. Past the shrine, the path turns right, leading to the Rear Hall's closed doors. Behind the doors sit two legendary statues that are the principal images of Yakuoji Temple.

According to a local legend, a statue of Yakushi Nyorai, the buddha of medicine and good fortune, escaped the fire that threatened to destroy the temple in 1188 by flying away. After Yakuoji was rebuilt and a new statue consecrated, the first statue flew back and positioned itself next to the newer one, facing backward. It is called the Backward-facing Yakushi Nyorai. Although this legendary sculpture is not open to public view, visitors can pray to it while standing behind a door nearby.

Daishido Hall

This temple building was erected in 1820 and is distinguished by a square pyramidal roof characteristic of the *hogyo-zukuri* architectural style. The tiled roof, measuring around 7.3 square meters, has four sides and no central ridge, as the hip rafters come together at the top to create a pointed peak.

In the center of the hall is a treasured statue of Kukai (774–835; posthumously known as Kobo Daishi) that dates from 1550. Kukai was an influential priest and the founder of the Shingon school of Buddhism. The hall is named after him.

In addition to the main statue of Kukai, the hall holds statues of the eight patriarchs of Shingon Buddhism, all depicted seated. Shingon Buddhism developed from an esoteric Buddhist tradition that began in India. The eight patriarchs are the prominent figures who taught this esoteric branch of Buddhism.

The statues are about 90 centimeters tall and are flanked by statues of the deities Jikokuten and Bishamonten that were carved in 1724. Jikokuten is responsible for protecting the safety of the country, while Bishamonten bestows good fortune on believers.

In 2008, Daishido Hall was dismantled and renovated. Pilgrims on the 88-temple pilgrimage, which circles Shikoku, sometimes stand in front of Daishido Hall and chant mantras to the eight patriarchs.

Jizodo Hall

Jizo Hall has a tile-covered gabled roof. Within the hall are statues of several bodhisattvas (beings who are on the path to becoming Buddhas but choose to remain in this world to help others instead of entering nirvana). Among the statues is a 106-centimeter-tall seated statue of the bodhisattva Jizo. Jizo is reputed to ease the suffering and shorten the sentences of those in the Buddhist hells; answer prayers for health, success, and fertility; help and protect children; and lead the faithful into paradise.

The hall also houses standing statues of the bodhisattvas Kannon and Maitreya, as well as of Fudo Myo-o, also known as the Immovable Wisdom King and the Fire God. Kannon is the bodhisattva of compassion, while Maitreya is the Buddha of the Future and is said will arrive on earth to save humanity. Fudo Myo-o has a fierce appearance but is a protector and guide.

Suigu Pagoda

The Suigu Pagoda is 1.6 meters high and is surrounded by a stone wall. The ground around the pagoda is paved with flat granite stones. Some pilgrims and followers of Buddhism walk around the pagoda while reciting a mantra.

Suigu no Kane (Wishing Bell)

Many temple bells are only permitted to be rung by authorized staff, but the Suigu no Kane bell can be struck by anyone. Striking this bronze-plated bell with the wooden mallet on site is said to attract good luck and dispel bad luck. The bell should be struck once for each year of the person's life. It is recommended that visitors pray for good fortune and make a wish while striking the bell.

Jurojin (Deity of Longevity)

Japanese mythology includes tales about a group of seven deities who travel together and are referred to as the Seven Gods of Fortune. They are often depicted in sculpture, painting, and, more recently, animation.

Jurojin is one of these seven deities. Often called the Deity of Longevity, he is associated not only with long life but also with good health, wisdom, wealth, and protection from evil. Jurojin is represented as an older man with a walking stick. It is thought that the beliefs connected with Jurojin originated in China and have evolved in the context of Japanese culture.

Binzuru Statue

Binzuru Sonja is an arhat, a being in Buddhism who has gained insight into the true nature of existence, achieved spiritual enlightenment, and conquered worldly desires. An arhat is free from desire and does not need to go through further stages of reincarnation on their way to nirvana. Stories recount that before Binzuru attained spiritual salvation, he was one of the Buddha's most talented disciples. However, he was arrogant and too fond of alcohol.

Buddhist practitioners are discouraged from drinking alcohol, but according to myths, Binzuru had been an avid drinker and decided to continue drinking while studying Buddhism. His body is said to have turned bright red due to his drinking, and statues of Binzuru are often red. The Buddha told Binzuru not to enter the main hall (*hondo*) of the temple where he was studying, as punishment for both showing off and drinking. Because of this, Binzuru statues are often found outside the main halls of temples.

Binzuru is said to have regretted his actions, studying with greater dedication and devoting himself to saving people. According to some stories, his body turned red not from drinking but as a reflection of his vitality. He became an arhat as a result of his sincere efforts to follow the rules of Buddhism, overcoming his wish to drink and other worldly desires and selflessly helping others.

Individuals with injuries or illnesses typically touch those parts of the Binzuru statue that correspond to the location of their own afflictions, as doing so is said to promote healing.

The Six Kannon Bodhisattvas

This collection of six statues represents various manifestations of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion. A bodhisattva is a being on the path to becoming a Buddha, but who delays entrance into nirvana to help others.

The six stone statues depict Fukukenjaku Kannon, Sho Kannon, Nyoirin Kannon, Juichimen Kannon, Bato Kannon, and Senju Kannon.

Fukukenjaku Kannon bestows blessings to aid recovery from illness, promote fertility, bring prosperity in business, and ensure the safety of the home.

Sho Kannon is said to be able to appear in many different guises to help people.

Nyoirin Kannon holds a wish-granting jewel and a dharma wheel. This wheel is a symbol of Buddhism said to have the power to eliminate worldly desires.

Juichimen Kannon has eleven faces, each with a different expression, and is believed to promote health, success, and positive relationships.

Bato Kannon, a bodhisattva with the head of a horse, is believed to consume desires and misfortunes just as a horse eats grass. Bato Kannon bestows safety on the road, protects livestock, and helps people defeat worldly desires.

Senju Kannon is depicted with a thousand arms. Each one has the power to save people from suffering while also bestowing a wide range of benefits to humankind.

Gyoran Kannon

Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, is a Buddhist deity who appears in many forms. This statue is called the Fish-Basket (Gyoran) Kannon and shows a woman holding a basket with fish. It is based on a legend from China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), in which a deity in the form of a beautiful maiden appears and tells people Buddhist teachings while selling fish from a bamboo basket. While Kannon figures are commonly represented in Buddhist art from China, Korea, and Japan, statues depicting the deity holding a basket of fish are rare.

The Osaka City Central Wholesale Market donated the statue to Yakuoji Temple, and representatives of the market make annual offerings to the shrine to thank the deity for successful business. They also pray for bountiful future catches and for the safety of the fishing fleet. Local fishermen often visit and pray to the Gyoran Kannon for the same reasons.

Chinjudō Hall

This building enshrines Hakusan Gongen, a deity who is worshipped chiefly at Hakusan Shrine in Fukui Prefecture. Hakusan Shrine has deep ties to Mt. Haku, one of Japan's three great sacred peaks and an important center for practitioners of Shugendo, a syncretic form of mountain asceticism.

The building is situated in a small shrine flanked by ancient trees, near the highest point on the grounds of Yakuoji Temple. A rope of twisted rice straw, called a *shimenawa*, hangs from the two trees at the entrance. It indicates the boundary between the secular and the sacred worlds.

Hai Daishi (Sacred Healing Water)

Water with traces of radium bubbles up at this spring behind Yakuoji Temple's Main Hall (Hondo). A stone statue of Kukai (774–835; posthumously known as Kobo Daishi), the founder of the Shingon school of Buddhism, is housed in a small shrine above the spring. The potable water of the spring is believed to help cure many ailments, in particular ailments of the lungs.

According to a temple priest, the water is sacred, and many people visited during the Covid-19 pandemic to drink it. Amulets that provide protection against lung ailments are available in the temple shop.

Juodo Hall

The Ten Kings of Hell, represented by stone statues, are enshrined in Yakuoji Temple's Juodo Hall. According to ancient teachings of the Shingon school of Buddhism, each person is judged after death by these ten kings, deities who decide which realm of the afterlife the deceased must enter.

The Shingon school also teaches that good deeds and offerings made to temples during one's life can help a person escape being sentenced to a hellish afterlife. Conversely, a life filled with evil deeds leads a person to be sentenced to suffer in hell. These beliefs originated in China and spread to Japan during the Heian period (794–1185), when Shingon was gaining popularity.

According to the myths, the ten kings hold court at the entrance to the underworld. All the kings, individually and following a fixed schedule, consider the good and bad actions of the deceased before death.

One king judges the deceased from the seventh day after death until the 49th day. Another king examines the deeds of each dead person on the 100th day. This process is said to happen again at the end of the first year after death. The evaluation concludes at the end of the second year, with the final king's examination.

In the end, a person who has led an exemplary life may enter a paradise called the Pure Land, while others may be reborn, and those with evil pasts are sentenced to suffer the torments of various realms of hell.

Yugito Pagoda

The Yugito Pagoda is a prominent landmark and an important physical representation of Shingon Buddhist philosophy. The 29-meter-tall pagoda is circular at the bottom and shaped like a pyramid at the top. It is said that Kukai (774–835; posthumously known as Kobo Daishi), the founder of the Shingon school of Buddhism, brought the design from China more than a thousand years ago.

The pagoda was built in 1963 to commemorate two major anniversaries: the 1,150th year since Kukai established the 88 pilgrimage sites of Shikoku, marked in 1964, and the 1,150th year since the founding of Koya-san, the principal temple of Shingon Buddhism, observed in 1965.

According to Yakuoji Temple documents, the pagoda is a physical symbol of Yugi-kyo, an important sutra of Shingon Buddhism. It states that the world is composed of elements that are opposed to one another, but when two opposing elements combine, harmony is possible. The five pillars standing on the pagoda's roof are symbols of the harmony of heaven and earth.

Kaidan Meguri (Path of Darkness)

Kaidan Meguri is a practice carried out in a basement chamber of Yakuoji Temple's Yugito Pagoda. Some say the experience is a way to understand rebirth or reincarnation and to purify oneself. It involves walking down a path in complete darkness so that one loses all sense of direction.

Visitors are advised to touch the wall to guide them as they proceed. Eventually, a dim light appears and gets stronger as one moves along. Near the end of the Kaidan Meguri, the sculpture of Yakushi Nyorai, a deity of medicine and healing (also called the Medicine Buddha), appears with hand extended.

Beyond the dark chamber is an exhibition area with displays on Buddhist history, philosophy, and art. The doors to the pagoda are often locked; visitors should first ask at the temple's front office for permission to enter.

Exhibition Room

The Yugito Pagoda includes an exhibition section where ancient cultural objects connected to the history of the Shingon school of Buddhism are on display. The exhibition includes centuries-old images depicting the suffering of those condemned to various realms of hell.

One scroll on display depicts the life of Kukai (774–835; known posthumously as Kobo Daishi), the founder of the Shingon school. He reportedly visited Yakuoji in 815. Other significant items include the Mandala of the Two Worlds, which is said to be a visual representation of Shingon Buddhist teachings.

Votive tablets, works of calligraphy, and paintings illustrate various aspects of Buddhism. There is also the mold used in the casting of the temple's prominent sculpture of Gyoran Kannon (a manifestation of the bodhisattva of compassion). Visitors should note that the doors of Yugito Pagoda are often locked, so it is advisable to first ask at the temple's front office for permission to enter.

The Camphor Trees at Yakuoji Temple

Two large trees stand in front of the Main Hall (Hondo) of Yakuoji Temple. Called Okusu, which means “big camphor trees,” they are estimated to be between 500 and 700 years old. Both are about 29 meters tall, with circumferences of 5.5 meters and 5.9 meters, respectively. They are designated Natural Monuments.

Historic documents of the town indicate the two camphor trees were planted centuries ago when the stone retaining wall in front of the Main Hall was built and the land was filled in to create the approach to the temple. The compound is set against the forest of the surrounding hills.

Stairs of Misfortune

Stone staircases rise along Yakuoji Temple's “hills of misfortune.” It is commonly believed that certain ages for men and women are inauspicious. Thirty-three is considered the unlucky age for women. For men, the unluckiest age is 42. Both men and women have to be particularly careful at the age of 60.

According to local stories, ascending the Yakuoji Temple stairs, called Yakuzaka, can ward off the bad luck that accompanies these ages. For women, there are the 33 stone steps of the Onna-Yakuzaka (Women's Hill of Misfortune); for men, the 42 stone steps of the Otoko-Yakuzaka (Men's Hill of Misfortune); and for seniors, the steps of the Kanreki-Yakuzaka (60th-birthday Hill of Misfortune).

It is advised that, in addition to walking up the stairs, visitors should follow the custom of leaving a coin on each step and chant the following mantra: *On korokoro sendari matogi sowaka*. This means that one is asking Yakushi Nyorai, a deity of medicine and healing (also called the Medicine Buddha), to expel the demons that bring on ailments and bad luck. Builders of the stairs reportedly buried pebbles inscribed with characters from a Buddhist sutra beneath each level of the stairs. Even if your age is currently not an unlucky one, it is believed that climbing these stairs promotes health and good luck.

Shoro-do Bell

It is customary to ring this bell once after entering the temple grounds, but not on the way out of the grounds. Temple staff ring the bell every day at 6 o'clock in the morning and at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Long ago, this is how townspeople knew the time.

Yakuoji Temple observes the New Year's Eve tradition of Joya no Kane, the ceremonial ringing of the temple bell 108 times. At Yakuoji, as at many temples across the country, the ritual begins at 11:45 p.m. on December 31, when a person designated by the temple rings the bell once. After that, the first 107 people who have lined up to participate may each ring the bell once.