

The Honshōji Edition, The Illustrated Biography of Shōtoku Taishi

Shōtoku Taishi Eden

9 Panels ● Late Kamakura Period (late 13th to early 14th century)



Prince Shōtoku and the Illustrated Biography of Shōtoku Taishi (Shōtoku Taishi Eden)

Prince Shōtoku (574–622) was born as the eldest son of Emperor Yōmei and Queen-Consort Anahobe no Hashihito. At the age of 22, when his aunt Empress Suiko ascended the throne, Prince Shōtoku was appointed Crown Prince and served as regent, governing the state on her behalf. Devoted to the ideals of Buddhism, Prince Shōtoku created the “Seventeen-Article Constitution,” in an attempt to build a state centered on the emperor and guided by Buddhist principles.

Prince Shōtoku’s life, modeled after the Buddha Shakyamuni, has been passed down as a narrative full of miracles and mystery. The stories about his life were eventually painted and became known as the *Illustrated Biography of Shōtoku Taishi* (*Shōtoku Taishi Eden*). During the Nara period (710–794), a gallery depicting Prince Shōtoku’s life was established at Shitennōji temple in Osaka, the same temple that Shōtoku had founded. This gallery, called the “Picture Hall” (Edō), inspired the construction of another similar looking hall at Hōryūji temple in Nara. Inside this Hōryūji hall, the illustrated biography was depicted on sliding screen panels. The paintings, now housed in the Tokyo National Museum, are the oldest surviving examples of a Shōtoku Taishi illustrated biography.

By the Kamakura period, the illustrated biographies of Shōtoku Taishi evolved into large hanging scroll paintings that were portable and widely disseminated. These scrolls were often displayed in a Taishi Hall, a hall dedicated to Prince Shōtoku, and used for storytelling by means of picture explication (*etoki*). Over 50 sets of medieval hanging scroll versions of the *Illustrated Biography of Shōtoku Taishi* still exist today. At Shitennōji, scripts were created for these storytelling performances, including a preserved book titled *Shōbōrinzō* (“The Treasury of the True Dharma Wheel”).

The tradition of *etoki* storytelling continues today, most notably during the annual Taishiden-e celebration held every summer at the Taishi Hall of Zuisenji, a branch temple in Inami, Toyama Prefecture.

Honshōji and the Illustrated Biography of Shōtoku Taishi (Shōtoku Taishi Eden)

Honshōji, located in Anjō City, Aichi Prefecture, is a temple of the True Pure Land Buddhist tradition (Jōdo Shinshū), founded by the monk Shinran (1173–1262). Jōdo Shinshū is also known as the Ikkō sect. During the 15th and 16th centuries, Honshōji became famous for being a significant regional stronghold during the Ikkō uprisings (*ikkō-ikki*), where followers of the Ikkō movement united and took up arms to resist the rule of the Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu.

Honshōji was founded in the late Kamakura period (late 12th to early 13th century) by Kyōen, a Pure Land saint and disciple of Shinran, who devoted his life to chanting the name of Amida Buddha (*nenbutsu*). In its Taishi hall, Honshōji enshrines Prince Shōtoku as the principal deity and houses nine panels of the *Honshōji Illustrated Biography of Shōtoku Taishi*, five panels of the *Zenkōji Illustrated Biography*, and seven panels of the *Hōnen Shōnin Illustrated Biography*.

Although the Taishi hall no longer exists, these illustrated biographies are regarded as monumental masterpieces of exceptional quality. They have been officially designated as Important Cultural Properties of Japan.

The nine panels of the *Illustrated Biography of Shōtoku Taishi* from Honshōji share the same composition as other examples now housed separately in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (five panels) and the Nakanoshima Koetsu Museum in Japan (three panels). Unfortunately, the seventh panel has been lost. The fact that Honshōji preserves the complete set of nine panels intact makes its set exceptionally valuable.

A closer examination of Honshōji’s monumental *Illustrated Biography of Shōtoku Taishi* reveals that the fifth panel prominently features the temple complex of Shitennōji, serving as the focal point of the entire set. Within the illustration, a narrow, elongated gallery reminiscent of the Picture Hall is depicted. This detail highlights the connection between this illustrated biography and the tradition of depicting the Shitennōji Picture Hall within the Shōtoku Taishi Illustrated Biography.

Panel 5



6 7

Panel 4



4 5

Panel 3



3

Panel 2



3

Panel 1



1 2 3

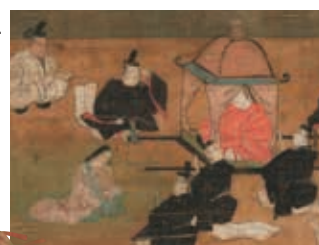
Yoshisuke and the empress were brought before the judgment of the King of Hell, Enma. At that moment, the Bodhisattva Kannon appeared, acting as a messenger of the Amida icon from Zenkōji. Through Kannon’s divine intervention, both Yoshisuke and the empress were revived and returned to the world of the living.



6 The Love Story of Prince Shōtoku and the Bride Who Plucked Dropwort

Prince Shōtoku came across a filial daughter gathering dropwort in order to tend to her ailing parents. Deeply moved by her devotion, he asked for her hand in marriage.

The story of Prince Shōtoku and the bride who plucked dropwort, along with the tales of Somachattrā and his daughter Princess Nyoze, and Honda Yoshimitsu and his son Yoshisuke, became beloved narratives highlighting the enduring bonds of love and gratitude between parents and children, as well as between spouses.



7 The Birth of Zenkōji Temple

Yoshimitsu, now a provincial governor, oversaw the establishment of Zenkōji. Shakyamuni Buddha manifested atop the roof of Zenkōji, providing his blessings and marking the beginning of Zenkōji worship in Japan. Prince Shōtoku, who once conversed with the Amida of Zenkōji by the sea in Naniwa, offered prayers, extended his protection, and celebrated the temple’s founding.



Prince Shōtoku, grieving deeply, prayed to the guardian deities of Buddhism known as the Four Heavenly Kings. With their divine providence, Shōtoku defeated Mononobe no Moriya in battle. When Prince Shōtoku went to retrieve the Amida statue, the icon disclosed that it would remain in the sea at Naniwa for the time being.



4 Journey to Shinano Province

Honda Yoshimitsu traveled from Shinano Province (present-day Nagano Prefecture) to the capital. As he passed by the sea at Naniwa, the Amida statue leapt onto his back. Yoshimitsu was then revealed to be the reincarnation of Somachattrā. During the journey, Yoshimitsu carried the Amida statue on his back by day, while at night, the statue carried him. Together, they made the long journey back to Yoshimitsu’s distant hometown in Shinano Province. Once home, Yoshimitsu and his wife enshrined the image in their house and devoted themselves to its worship.



5 The Miracles of the Zenkōji Amida!

One day, Honda Yoshimitsu’s son, Yoshisuke, suddenly passed away. While making his way through the depths of hell on a path toward salvation and revival, Yoshisuke encountered Empress Kōgyoku, who was being dragged away by demons. Deeply moved by her suffering, he earnestly pleaded for her life.



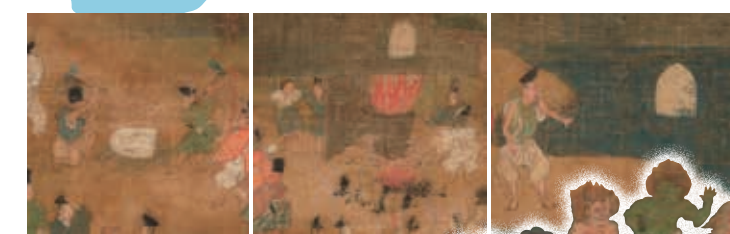
2 The Manifestation of Amida: The Birth of the Amida Icon!

Somachattrā repented and expressed his wish to create a statue of Amida to save the people, seeking permission from Shakyamuni. Shakyamuni’s disciple, Maudgalyayana (In Japanese, Mokuren), journeyed to the Dragon King’s kingdom at sea, and retrieved sacred gold dust originating from the Jambunadi river. The statue of Amida was crafted from this gold under Shakyamuni’s watchful gaze. Bathed in the radiance of Amida, the statue was imbued with life, marking the birth of the living image of Amida.



3 From India, Through the Korean Peninsula, to Japan

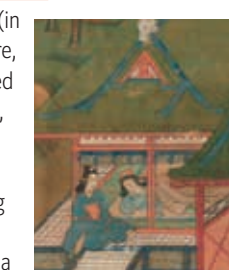
The Amida statue, declaring its intention to save humanity, traveled from India through the Korean Peninsula and arrived in Japan, becoming the first Buddhist icon in the country. However, the Mononobe clan, who opposed Buddhism, sought to destroy the statue. Their men struck the statue, set it ablaze, and cast it into the sea at Naniwa Bay.



The Illustrated Biography of the Zenkōji Buddha (*Zenkōji Nyorai Eden*)

1 The Amida Buddha of Zenkōji appears!

There was a wealthy man in India called Somachattrā (in Japanese, Gakkai). Due to Somachattrā’s miserly nature, a severe illness spread throughout the land. His beloved daughter, Princess Nyoze, also fell ill, and no physician, no matter how skilled, could cure her. Somachattrā visited the Buddha Shakyamuni, who was delivering a sermon at Vulture Peak. Upon seeking Shakyamuni’s teachings, Amida Buddha appeared in the human world. The great radiance emitted by Amida dispelled the illness from the land, saving Princess Nyoze as well.



Princess Nyoze



Vulture Peak



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The Zenkōji Buddha Icon and the Illustrated Biography of the Zenkōji Buddha

The central figure of the *Illustrated Biography of the Zenkōji Buddha* is the principal deity of Zenkōji Temple in Nagano Prefecture, known as Zenkōji Buddha. Buddhism, which originated in India, traveled through China and the Korean Peninsula before reaching Japan, where it was propagated by Prince Shōtoku. Within the historical context of Buddhism’s arrival in Japan, the icon of Zenkōji is revered as the first Buddha to have been introduced to the country. It has been widely worshipped throughout Japan since the Heian period. The “Illustrated Biography of the Zenkōji Buddha” forms the foundation of faith in the Zenkōji Buddha icon, vividly depicting its origins and mythology as a sweeping historical narrative.

Long ago, in the land of India, when Shakyamuni Buddha was preaching his teachings, a severe illness spread across the country due to Somachattrā’s (in Japanese, Gakkai) miserly nature. As a result, Princess Nyoze, the daughter of Somachattrā, also fell ill. At this time, Shakyamuni invited Amida Buddha to intervene. Amida Buddha is a compassionate Buddha who vowed to save all living beings and for that purpose he established the Western Pure Land. It is believed that anyone who chants *Namu Amida Butsu* (the chant known as *nenbutsu*), can be reborn in the Pure Land and be saved. Through the great salvific light of Amida, both Princess Nyoze and the people of the country were saved from the grievous illness.

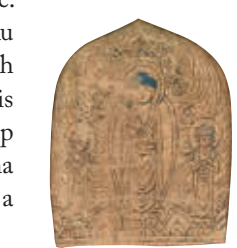
Filled with joy, Somachattrā wished for a statue of Amida to be created. This statue journeyed from India to the Korean Peninsula and eventually to Japan. Later, it was transported by Honda

Yoshimitsu—revealed to be the reincarnation of Somachattrā—to Shinano Province (present-day Nagano Prefecture). There, Zenkōji Temple was established, and the statue became known as Zenkōji Buddha. Interestingly, the name of Yoshimitsu (善光), pronounced as “Zenkō,” inspired the naming of Zenkōji Temple.

The Zenkōji Buddha statue is characterized by its visual depiction of Amida Buddha at the center, flanked by Kannon Bodhisattva on the right and Seishi Bodhisattva on the left, all of whom are depicted within a great salvific light. This configuration is referred to as *ikkō sanzon* (“One Light, Three Deities”).

During the Kamakura period, Zenkōji worship became a widespread phenomenon, attracting devotion from powerful men such as shoguns and women alike. Statues of Zenkōji Buddha were enshrined across the country, and Zenkōji Buddha illustrated narratives (*eden*) were also created. Many of these illustrated works were transmitted alongside the biographies of Prince Shōtoku.

The Illustrated Biography of the Zenkōji Buddha at Honshōji Temple is particularly notable. Its third panel depicts Prince Shōtoku defeating Mononobe no Moriya, along with other episodes involving the Prince. This intertwining of Prince Shōtoku worship with the worship of the Zenkōji Buddha icon illustrates their interconnectedness, a fascinating feature of the scrolls.



The Zenkōji Buddha statue

