

Zenkoji Temple's hallowed "Gokaicho" ceremony, an important Buddhist rite, is held in front of the temple's main hall on May 9. The Principal image in all its splendor was made public for the first time in six years.



# Historic Statue on Display

Nestled in the heart of Nagano, famous as the main venue of the 1998 winter Olympics, is one of Japan's best-known Buddhist temples, Zenkoji Temple. This year, this temple in central Japan put out for public viewing its standing Buddha statue, which is a replica of the temple's hidden main Amitabha image. This event, called Gokaicho, is held every six years. This year's Gokaicho event began April 5 and ran through May 31.

During the 57 days of this special event, about 6.5 million people from Japan and abroad visited the temple. On May 9, 25 priests from the Tendai school of Buddhism in colorful clerical garments lined up and performed an important memorial service at the garden in front of the temple's main hall.

At around 1,400 years old, Zenkoji Temple, one of the oldest Buddhist temples in Japan, was established before Buddhism in Japan fragmented into various sects. So, its principal image, the

Amitabha Tathagata statue, is believed to provide peace and safety to any devotee regardless of their religious affiliation and is popular among a wide range of people.

The principal image is enshrined in the temple's main hall, which is designated as a national treasure. The Amitabha statue, which is believed to have come from India in 552 A.D., is a "hibutsu" (secret Buddha), or a hidden Buddha statue, that can never be shown to anyone.

Zenkoji Temple offers the standing Buddha statue in place of the hidden principal image for public viewing during the Gokaicho event. For the viewing, a large wooden pillar is erected in

front of the main hall and linked with the standing Buddha statue via a cord. It is widely said that if a visitor touches the pillar, it offers benefits akin to those of the hidden image and that touching it brings happiness in the world after death.



*The principal image in all its splendor, made public for the first time in six years.*

*Photo Zenkoji Temple*