

○ Sengakuji

Sengakuji is a famous and popular Buddhist temple known throughout Japan.

There are numerous Buddhist lineages and Sengakuji belongs to the “Soto” Zen school. Soto Zen has two large main temples, Eiheiji on the northwest coast and Sojiji near Tokyo. Zen Master Dogen introduced the Soto lineage to Japan and founded Eiheiji. Master Dogen's main written work, “Shobogenzo”, expresses his understanding of Buddhist practice and doctrine. Currently there are many translations available.

Buddhist teachings inform that all of us can actually live as Buddha by acting sincerely and being guided by all-embracing wisdom and deep compassion. Master Dogen taught that Zazen (Buddhist meditation), when practiced beyond discriminating consciousness, is the very present realization of Buddha. He widely recommended Zazen and it was his firm belief and cherished wish that this practice could form the base of an authentic “Way” or means of salvation.

Sengakuji was built by Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first Shogun of Edo era, in 1612 near Edo Castle as an establishment of Dogen's tradition. However, after only 30 years, it was devastated by fire and this led to a reconstruction at the present site.

Sengakuji is now regarded as a temple closely related to the Ako Gishi, but it was in fact one of the three principle temples of Edo (old Tokyo) and known in its own right as a prestigious Buddhist institution. Many dedicated monks gathered from all over Japan (it was said that numbers sometimes reached 200) to deepen their practice and study.

To this day this tradition continues. Numbers are considerably less, but young training monks still practice here whilst studying Buddhism at university.

○ The Ako Incident

Perhaps the most famous story of avenger in Japanese history is the Ako Incident which took place between 1701-1703.

Asano Takuminokami, Feudal Lord of Ako, was appointed by the shogunate to entertain the imperial envoys visiting Edo from Kyoto. He was to seek directions from his official advisor, Kira Kozukenosuke. But Kira disliked Asano and treated him with malice and disgraced his honor as a samurai.

Unable to tolerate Kira's insult anymore, Asano drew his sword on him in the Edo Castle at what is known as “The Pine Gallery (Corridor) Incident”. Asano managed to cut Kira on his forehead and shoulder but failed to kill him.

It was strictly forbidden to draw one's sword within the Edo castle at that time and Asano was immediately arrested. There was also a law termed “equal punishment for quarrels” which punished both samurais involved in a fight so both Asano and Kira were expected to be punished. However, while Kira received no punishment, Asano was sentenced to death by seppuku (hara-kiri) in a garden of another lord's residence on the very same day without proper investigation. Seppuku outside in a garden was for a felon and inappropriate for someone of Asano's standing. Further, the Asano estate was confiscated and his family line was dethroned from the lordship.

The loyal retainers of Lord of Ako, better known as Ako Gishi, were indignant of this judgment and pleaded for an amendment of the order and the reinstatement of the Asano house. But their requests were dismissed.

Almost two years after the fateful incident, 47 samurais of Ako assembled under the former chief retainer, Oishi Kuranosuke, to avenge their lord's death and the injustice imposed by the shogunate. On December 14th, 1702, they attacked and killed Kira at his residence. They then marched to Sengakuji to present Kira's head to Asano's grave and reported their accomplishment to their late lord.

The Gishi turned themselves in to the shogunate right away and were sentenced to seppuku the following year on February 4th.

The avenger of the Ako Gishi has been made into various plays and is now commonly called “Chu-shin-gura” (The Story of the Loyal Retainers). It is a popular tale and one that still touches the Japanese heart even after 300 years. The chivalry of the loyal retainers and the themes of “Gi” (justice) and “Chu” (loyalty) are still highly esteemed by the Japanese.

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① Middle (or Second) Gate

The Middle Gate was reconstructed in the late Edo era under the 35th abbot in 1836.

The script above the gate “萬松山” (Banshouzan) written by a Chinese monk is Sengakuji's mountain name and means “mountain of many pines”.

② Bronze statue of Oishi Kuranosuke

The leader of the Ako Gishi or 47 loyal retainers who led the attack on Kira's residence. The statue was built in 1921. He holds a roll listing the names of the loyal retainers.

③ Main (or Third) Gate

Rebuilt in 1832 under the 34th abbot. On the upper floor, there are 16 statues of “Arakan”(Arahats) or Buddhist saints. A bronze dragon can be seen on the ceiling of the ground floor.

④ Hondo (Main hall of the temple)

The original building was destroyed in the WW II. The present construction was built 8 years later.

The main statue is that of "Shakamuni"(Śākya-muni) Buddha (the historical Buddha). Also represented are statues of Master Dogen and Master Keizan, the two principal “patriarchs” of the Soto Zen sect and "Marishi-ten"(Marīci), the protecting god of Oishi Kuranosuke.

It is here in the main hall of Sengakuji that the abbot and training monks regularly practice Zazen (Buddhist meditation), recite sutras and officiate ceremonies.

The characters above the central door “獅子吼” (Shishi-ku) means “lion's roar” and refer to the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha which were said to have been uttered with the force and courage of a lion.

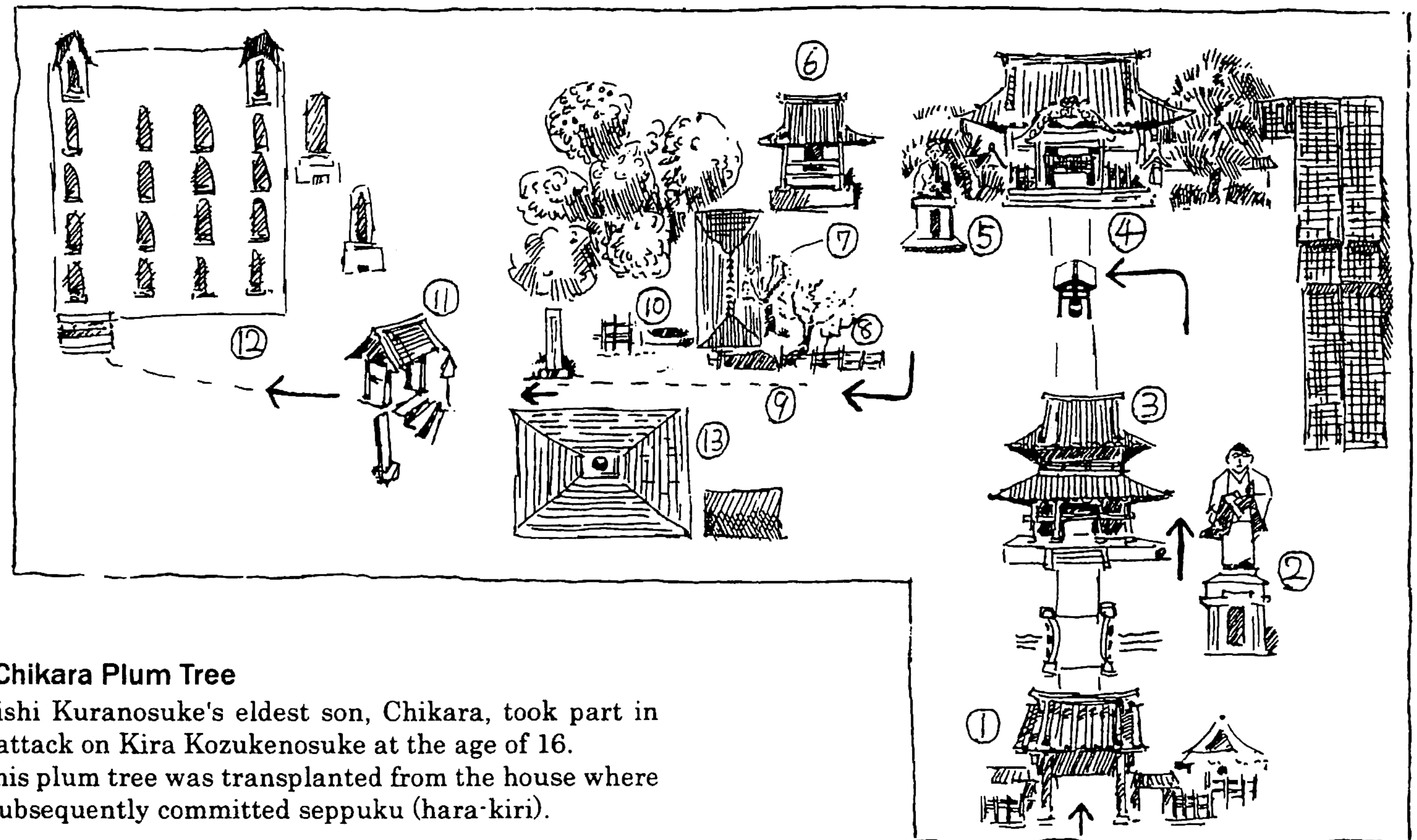
⑤ Statue of the late Sawaki Kodo Roshi

Late Sawaki Kodo Roshi is one of the leading and most influential Zen masters of the 20th century.

He dedicated his life to the propagation and revitalization of Zazen as an authentic and fundamental Buddhist practice.

⑥ Bonsho (bell)

Constructed in 1913 under the 41st abbot. The bell sounds during morning Zazen and in the evening when the gate is closed.



⑦ Chikara Plum Tree

Oishi Kuranosuke's eldest son, Chikara, took part in the attack on Kira Kozukenosuke at the age of 16.

This plum tree was transplanted from the house where he subsequently committed seppuku (hara-kiri).

⑧ Yochi Plum Tree

The nun who took care of the graves of Ako Gishi received this tree from the wife of Asano Takuminokami.

⑨ Chizome (blood stained) Plum Tree and Stone

Story has it that when Asano Takuminokami committed seppuku in the garden of Tamura's residence, his blood gushed out staining this tree and stone.

⑩ Kubi-Arai Well

After the retainers accomplished their avenger by killing Kira, they marched to Sengakuji to report to their lord's grave. When they arrived, they first washed Kira's decapitated head (kubi) at this well and then laid it in front of their lord's grave and announced their success.

⑪ Gate to Ako Gishi's Graves

This gate was originally at Asano's residence but was relocated to the present location during the Meiji era.

⑫ Ako Gishi's Graves

The graveyard of the Ako Gishi. They were buried here after their seppuku on February 4th, 1703.

47 samurais participated in the attack, including the leader Oishi, to avenge their lord Asano Takuminokami's death. However, after the attack, Terasaka Kichiemon was dispatched by Oishi to report on the raid and was subsequently exempted from execution. 46 graves are of those sentenced to seppuku.

There are two memorial graves: that of Terasaka and Kayano Sanpei. Kayano strongly desired to take part in the avenger but committed seppuku before the attack due to strong opposition from his family.

The gravesite is 300 years old.

⑬ Ako Gishi's Memorial Hall

The hall is the latest addition to the temple, built on the 300th commemoration of the Ako Gishi's avenger. There is a collection of artifacts and historical records on display. There is also a video presentation. (English version of the video is available. If you'd like to view it, please contact the staff.)