



PHOTOS KAORU MIKI

Honmonji in Ikegami

Mecca for Lotus Sect Buddhists

Late September 1282. A frail and ailing Buddhist monk is crossing the Musashino Plain when he becomes too ill to continue. His companions take him to the nearby home of one of his followers, Munenaka Ikegami, the local *samurai*. The monk is Nichiren, founder of the Lotus Sect of Buddhism.

Over the next three weeks, in spite of rest and care, Nichiren's condition continues to deteriorate. Propped against a pillar in Ikegami's home, he preaches to those who come daily to see him. But he is dying and he knows it. On October 13, 1282, reciting the mantra he introduced, *namu myoho renge kyo*, he passes to Nirvana. According to legend, a cherry tree in the courtyard outside the house bloomed in mourning.

Fast forward to 2008. Ikegami, a prosperous farming community pre-dating Edo, has become a suburb of Tokyo, just 18 minutes from Gotanda on the Tokyu Ikegami Line. It's a pleasant neighborhood that has retained its village feel, as well as its history and strong connection to Lotus Sect Buddhism. The main sights to take in are a plum garden, the site of Nichiren's death, and the most important Lotus Sect temple in the country.

To access the sights in that order, begin your

visit from Nishi Magome Station on the Toei Asakusa Line. Leave from the south exit and walk south. After about 600m, turn left at a traffic light labeled "Honmonji." Take the first right and you'll see the entrance to Ikegami Baien (池上梅園) on the left. Open from 9:00 to 16:30, admission is ¥100. The garden has over 370 plum trees and over 800 azalea bushes. There are also three teahouses, one of which overlooks a tranquil pond.

As you leave the garden, turn left and then left again. After 150m, you'll find a lane to the left leading to a side entrance of Daibo Hongyoji (大坊本行寺), a temple built on the site of Ikegami's house, where Nichiren died. Just inside the gate is a fenced-off cherry tree said to be *the* tree that bloomed when Nichiren died, and which still blooms every October. To the far left is a green-roofed house called *Rinju no ma* (the place of death). Step inside and you can see the pillar, wrapped in brocade, against which Nichiren leaned as he delivered his last sermon. From the rear of the house you can relax and enjoy the pond and garden.

Leave the temple grounds from the main gate (not the side gate through which you came in), turn left and proceed up the stone steps of the

hill. On the left you'll see a red stupa known as the Honmonji Treasure Tower, built on the site of Nichiren's cremation. The current structure was built in 1830 and is currently being restored.

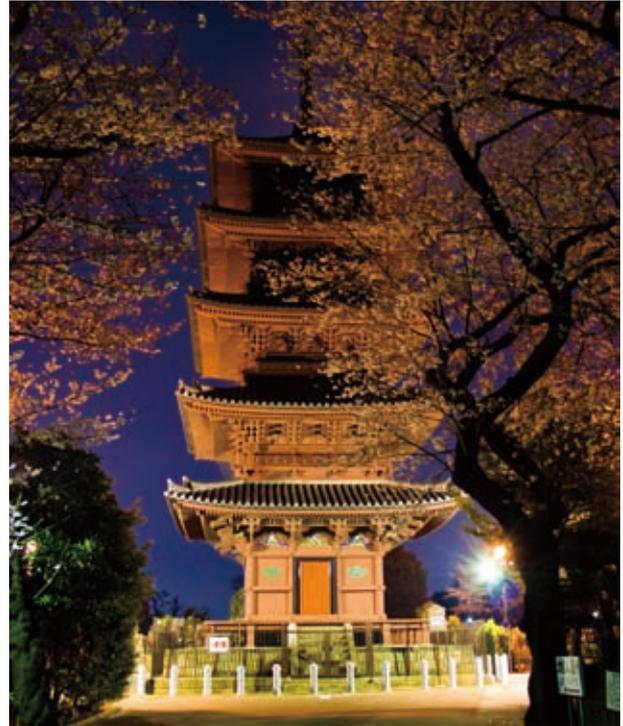
At the top of the stairs, cross the road to the back entrance of Ikegami Honmonji (池上本門寺), a large complex of temples covering 21ha of land. Regarded as the main temple of the Lotus Sect, it was founded by Nichiren just before his death in 1282. In spite of the complex's long history, most of the buildings were constructed after World War II—the site was badly damaged during the March and April 1945 fire bombings.

Ahead, on the right, you will see the back of the main temple building. Turn right and walk toward the front of the structure. As you approach, you'll see a building on the right housing a rotating library/prayer wheel called the *kyozo*. Built in 1784, this is one of only three structures to have survived the fire bombings.

The gigantic main temple building is surprisingly serene. Having been rebuilt in 1964, it is also somewhat sterile. The central courtyard sits between the main temple building and the Niomon—gate of the guardian kings. The bell tower is on the right, while, to the left, down a lane through the cemetery, is the 29.4m pagoda. This jewel, built in 1608, is the oldest pagoda in the Tokyo area. Of special note are the carvings of the 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac, on the eaves of the lowest level—three on each side. Continue through the cemetery to the right from the pagoda for about 50m, to a walkway leading to the roof of the Ota Kumin Kaikan, a public hall that hugs the side of the hill. From this rooftop you can enjoy expansive views across the valley. If you're lucky, you even can see Mt. Fuji.

Return to the cemetery and take the first left. You'll soon find yourself at the top of a flight of 96 stone steps, the main approach to Ikegami Honmonji. The gate at the bottom of these stairs is the third surviving pre-war structure.

Leaving the gate, walk straight ahead, then cross the canal, and turn right at the lights and dogleg to the left onto Honmonji-dori, the street



leading to Ikegami Station. Like many temple approaches, this street is lined with shops and restaurants, many of which sell handmade treats that have some connection to the life of the temple. Take a little time to explore, and you'll find something special to commemorate your visit to the Mecca of Lotus Sect Buddhism.

O-eshiki

From October 11 to 13, more than 350,000 followers of the Lotus Sect gather in an annual pilgrimage to honor their founder, climaxing in the spectacular Mando parade of 10,000 lanterns, from 19:00 to midnight on October 12.

Proceeding down Ikegami-dori from opposite directions, the parade joins at Shin Sando, before heading to the temple. Lanterns atop tall poles are festooned with streamers of flowers looking like weeping branches of cherry blossoms. Drums, bells and whistles can be heard throughout the temple grounds.

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