

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto

Photo by Masayoshi Masuda



Gardens in Kodaiji Temple

Cherry trees are in full bloom at the beginning of April around Higashiyama (eastern mountain) area including Kodaiji Temple (Zen temple) in Kyoto. Even at night, areas with illuminated cherry trees are crowded with people enjoying the blossoms.

In the autumn of 1993, a night event was held at Kodaiji Temple for the 1,200th anniversary of the transfer of the national capital to Kyoto. A new art, the illuminated garden, was introduced in this temple for the first time in Kyoto. To express ideas of Buddhism while using artificial light as a new technology was very challenging for everyone concerned with Kodaiji Temple. The Japanese landscape gardener who exclusively works for this temple said that he had to create the illuminated gardens while trying to maintain the natural beauty of the gardens. He was inspired by illuminated gardens from natural moonlight in a bamboo thicket. This event was held for only one night. It was very popular.

Since the spring of the following year (1994), the gardens have been regularly illuminated in events, especially in spring and autumn. There were a lot of monks who had a conservative approach to doing new things. However, most of them were influenced by this achievement in Kodaiji Temple. Historically, new works of art have been assimilated into Buddhist art. So probably, Japanese monks are also open to new ideas related to art. Nowadays, you can see illuminated cherry blossoms at many places around Kyoto.

How Kodaiji Temple Was Established

In 1605, this temple was founded by Kitanomandokoro (1548 - 1624), commonly called Nene. She was a widow of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537 - 1598) to pray for her husband's soul.

Nene married him for love. Unfortunately, they didn't have any children, and he took concubines. She looked after a lot of other people's children so that they were her husband's followers.

On the other hand, one of his concubines, Yododono (1569 - 1615), commonly called Chacha, had a boy as an heir. It is said that there was bad blood between Nene and Chacha. After he passed away, Nene left her residence, Osaka Castle. She advised her followers to take Tokugawa's side for the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600. Tokugawa Iyasu (1542 - 1616) won the battle and established Edo Shogunate in 1603. Therefore, Tokugawa Iyasu supported this temple's foundation for Nene.

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