



Jizô (地蔵) bodhisattva

Jizô' belief is alive and well in Japan. The numerous representations of this small deity along roads and near temples and cemeteries testify to such popularity, but for those who seldom walk countryside roads, a short trip to Kôganji temple in Sugamo, North of Tokyo¹ will be convincing enough. There gather the devotees of the "Arai Kannon" statue², which they water (arai) gently before rubbing the part corresponding to their illness or pain, hoping for a cure. But the real celebrity of the area, although more discreet, is the bodhisattva who gave the name to the street leading to the temple, Jizô himself.

The cult of Jizô bodhisattva³ came to Japan from China. Jizô (地蔵) literally means "womb of the earth" and is believed to be originally a form of the Indian Earth Goddess Prithvi. In China, the Dizang (Jizô) is associated with a deity assisting mortals during their last moment before death and the Daijô Daishû Jûringyô⁴ states that Jizô can take on different forms, that he can travel to the World of the Dead to rescue sinners, and that he is especially popular among common people. In Tang China, Jizô was closely associated with family and ancestors but, in Japan, he is more associated with youth and children and often appears in dreams as a boy or a young handsome priest.



Polychrome wooden sculpture of Jizô bodhisattva. Japan, 16th c.

¹ On the Yamanote-line.

² Sei Kanzeon Bosatsu (聖観世音菩薩).

³ 菩薩 (bosatsu) in Japanese. There is many definition of bodhisattva, but basically it is someone on the path of becoming Buddha who renounces full Buddhahood to help sentient beings in the process of achieving Buddhahood.

⁴ 大乘大集十輪經 ("The ten Kings sutra") The Chinese monk Genjô-sanzô translated that text in Chinese in the 7th century and it will come to Japan during Nara period.

According to legend, the first statue of Jizô was brought to Japan during the reign of emperor Shômu (724-49) to the Nara temple of Tachibanadera, before being moved to Hôryûji. That corresponds with the fact that, during the Nara period, sutras about Jizô were regularly copied by Japanese monks, and also matches records indicating that a statue of Jizô with a date of 747 stood in the lecture hall of Tôdaiji at that time⁵. In his earliest known depiction during the Heian period, Jizô is represented as a standing shaved monk, holding a jeweled ball (*hojû*) in his left hand, with his right hand palm turned outward. Later versions, from the Kamakura period onwards, often show him holding a Buddhist priest's staff (*shakujô*) in his right hand. It was during the Heian period that belief in Jizô permeated all levels of society and chronicles of miraculous tales about him began to be compiled. Most of the tales are stories of people meeting him during their life, experiencing miracles such as recovering from sickness, finding lost objects, becoming fertile, being revived from death or saved from the realms of Hell with Jizô's help.



Polychrome wooden sculpture of Emma-ô, king of Hell. Japan, 17th c.

During the Kamakura period, Jizô was believed to exist in the six realms of existence⁶ under six different names, one for each realm where he appeared. As a traveler of the six realms, he is often identified with Emma-ô, the guardian king of Hell, sometimes taking on his appearance in order to save fallen sinners. In the famous tale "*How Moritaka of Kamo came back to life*", Jizô appears as a young boy in Hell to plead with Emma-ô for the release of Moritaka from the realm⁷. For his faculty to enter the shape of several divinities and for his merciful ability to save even the greatest sinners, images of Jizô became immensely popular during the Kamakura period.

The alleged miraculous powers possessed by Jizô inspired a genre of chronicles known as *Jizô setsuwa*. The oldest of these is the *Jizô bosatsu reigenki*, compiled by Jitsuei of

Miidera⁸ during the 11th century. Most of the others, however, were collected during the Edo period⁹.

The famous *Togenuki Jizô* tales related to the Kôganji temple takes place at the beginning of the 18th century and belong to a set of twenty-one miracles compiled a century later (1822) by Hissai, a Zen monk from Kyoto, in the *Enmei Jizôson inkô riyakuki* (延命地藏尊印行利益記, Record of the benefits in printing images of the life-prolonging Jizô).

The miracles in question gave the name of Jizô countrywide fame.

⁵ Recorded in the *Tôdaiji yoroku* (Chronicles of Tôdaiji, 1134).

⁶ The 6 realms are the realm of Hell, the realm of Hungry spirits, the realm of Animals, the realm of Constant war, the realm of Humans and the realm of Gods.

⁷ *Jizô Bosatsu Reigenki* (地蔵菩薩靈驗記, II.9). Jizô as a savior will also take the form of other Buddha like Dainichi Nyorai (大日如來, the cosmic Buddha), Amida (阿弥陀) the Buddha of the Pure Land, doctrine of the Jôdo (浄土) sect that flourished from Heian, Bodhisattvas like Kannon or Fudô, or Japanese deities (*kami*) like Atago Myôjin (愛宕明神), Kasuga Daimyôjin (春日大明神) or Tateyama Gongen (立山権現).

⁸ 地蔵菩薩靈驗記 compiled by 三井寺の実睿.

⁹ Like *Jizô bosatsu rijôki* (地蔵菩薩利生記, 1688) and *Jizô bosatsu riyakushû* (地蔵菩薩利益集, 1691) compiled by Myôdô Jôe (浄慧), *Kôshakushû* (講釈集, 1693 by Hitsumu) or the previously cited *Enmei Jizôson inkô riyakuki* (延命印行利益記, 1822 by Hissai).

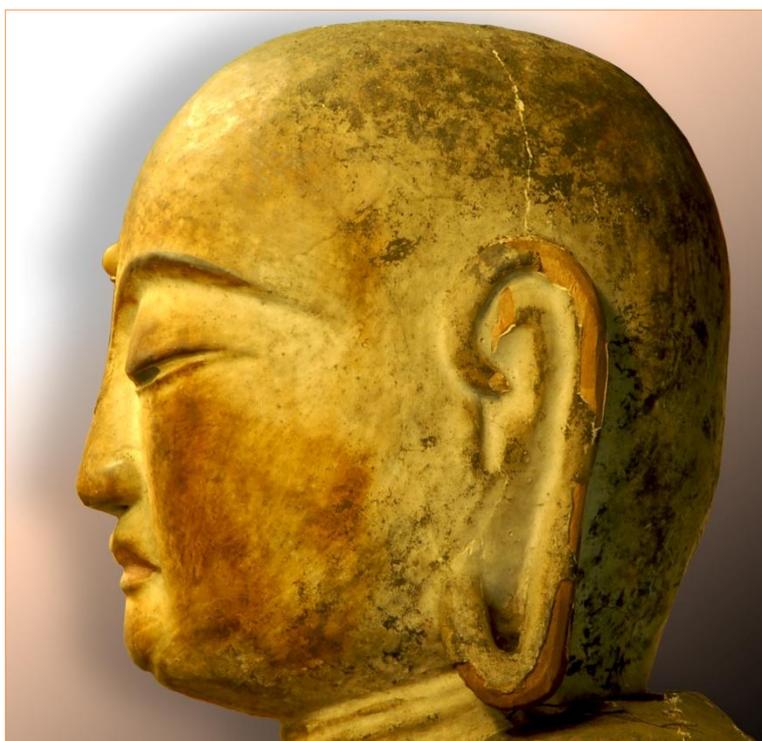
They started with a female member of the Tatsuke family living in the Koishikawa district (now in Bunkyo-ku), who became ill in the fifth month of Shôtoku (1714). By the seventh month no cure had been found and it looked as if the end was near. Then, her husband had a dream in which a monk *“wearing a black robe and a saffron-colour surplice”* appeared. The monk told him *“Carve an image of me measuring one sun by three bu¹⁰, and float it in the river”*. At that point the husband woke up, and found by his pillow a little wooden block on which was carved an image of Jizô, and *“since [it] was exactly like what I had seen in the dream, I put it on an ink pad and proceeded to make talisman prints. With each print I made, I intoned the Jizô mantra. When I had made ten thousand, I went to the Ryôgoku bridge¹¹ and faced south.”* There the devoted husband released the ten thousand talismans into the river while praying for the recovery of his spouse.

As it happened, the Hasegawa family of the Fujiwara lineage into which the Tatsuke spouse had been born, had been stricken by a vengeful curse, and all the women of that branch died before reaching the age of twenty-five. When her faithful husband returned in the middle of the night from the Sumida river, his wife was awake and she told him she had the following strange dream: *“A man appeared who seemed to be around twenty-four or five; his forehead wasn’t shaved, and his hair was tied at the top of his head. He wore an indigo knee-length robe. (...) He stood there slightly forward. Out of nowhere, a monk wearing a saffron-dyed surplice appeared. Telling the man to leave immediately, he dragged him out from under the mosquito net. In the next room he struck the man with his staff, and I saw the man crash into the sliding door before disappearing. This wondrous dream was surely about the Jizô bodhisattvas getting rid of the angry, vengeful spirit.”*

After that night’s events, the sick wife started to recover, and lived a long life thereafter. A while later, the faithful husband narrated the miracle to a monk named Saijun and handed to him one of the paper talismans he had printed.

There start the second miracle, the one that will make the Kôganji temple in Sugamo famous until today. It all started with a broken needle...

A maid of the Mori household living in Edo had accidentally swallowed a piece of a broken needle she had placed in her mouth while sewing. The fragment got stuck in her throat then *“worked itself down to her stomach, which caused a tremendous amount of pain”*. Numerous medicines and talismans were tried, but nothing worked. Then the Saijun monk, who still carried the Jizô image, visited the Mori household. He handed the maid the talisman and told her to consume it with some water¹². Shortly later, the maid vomited and the printed piece of paper came out, with the *“four-bu long¹³ broken needle stuck in the talisman”*. From that miraculous tale came the name of



Polychrome wooden sculpture of Jizô bodhisattva (detail). Japan, 16th c.

¹⁰ Approximately 3 x 1 cm.

¹¹ 両国橋 the oldest of the three main bridges that crossed the Sumida river. Built in 1659 it is just above the confluence with the Kanda river.

¹² The practice of ingesting curative talisman is not so common in Japan, but is recorded in different places. It seems to continue nowadays at the Kôganji temple.

¹³ About 1,5 cm.

Toge-nuki (とげぬき splinter removal) Jizô. Later, in 1729, the Tatsuke family donated the wood-block used to print the Jizô image to the Kôganji temple, and the area became known as the famous Togenuki Jizô site.

After the tales of Togenuki Jizô spread, wooden blocks for printing Jizô talismans appeared at other temples and this resulted in the spread of a Jizô faith-healing cult through Japan, along with the ritual of scattering paper talismans into waterways.

In his writings, the monk Hissai precisely explained the method, benefit and reason for printing ten thousand talismans of Jizô and releasing them into water. The idea was for fishes and other sea creatures that did not ordinarily have any contact with Buddhism to become intimate with the Buddha through Jizô melting into the water. Saving other beings, especially those who could not ordinarily come into contact with Buddhism, was thought to bring merit to the persons performing or praying for the ritual, and reminded them that human beings are just part of a vast cosmos.

From the Edo period, statues of Jizô appeared in every temple, represented alone or in a set of six (*roku Jizô*) standing next to each other. Also, as Jizô is supposed to guide people in the real world as well as in the other, sculptures were often placed at crossroads to help the travelers choose the correct path. As he is particularly associated with youth and children in Japanese tales, Jizô is most often represented with a smooth round young face and a hairless head. Due to that link with youth, he has always been particularly popular among women for easing childbirth or protecting newborns. Jizô-kô meetings were held every month on the 24th during the Kamakura period and were attended by more women than men. Young women prayed for successful conception, an easy childbirth and healthy children, while the elderly prayed for deliverance after death. Today, in some parts of Japan, Jizô-kô are still held, and Jizô Ennichi rituals are enacted at various temples, among them the Kôganji temple, in Sugamo.

Nowadays Jizô is mostly popular as a Bodhisattva protecting children, especially deceased babies and young children who died before their parents and wander as lost souls. There is a myth in Japan that dead children gather near a river called Sanzu, and they pile up stones to build symbolic stupas in remembrance of their parents, or to help them cross to the other shore of the river, with the help of Jizô. In another legend the Datsueba (奪衣婆 or 脱衣婆, old Hag of hell) intervenes. She awaits sinners on the shores of the river Sanzu in order to strip them and hang their clothes on a tree whose branches are tilting over the river like a scale to weigh their sins. The virtuous can cross the river Sanzu by a bridge, but sinners have to swim and many drown. Children who come to the river Sanzu have not fulfilled their filial duties,



Polychrome wooden sculpture of Datsueba. Japan, 16th c.

which is why they have to build piles of pebbles along the riverbed during the days as a tentative to honor their parents, while demons (*oni*) destroy them at night... Fortunately in that legend, Jizô appears and saves the children from the *onis*. Because of that story, there are many places in Japan designated as *Sai no Kawara*¹⁴, near beach or rivers, where hundreds of Jizô little statues are erected, many covered with red children cloths of bibs, but also with children toys and stones piled everywhere. These are usually the contributions of parents praying for a deceased child, or wishing to thank Jizô for saving a loved one.



Jizô alley on the heights of Itsukushima (Miyajima) island. 2009

¹⁴ 賽の河, "the shore with dices", the dices referring to the little stones piled on top of each other by mourning parents or simple believers.