

## Encounters with Jizō-san in an aging Japan

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### Preamble

Most cultural anthropologists, even those who have detailed and structured methodological strategies, will engage in what is called “convenience-based sampling” during fieldwork research. At its best, this method simply entails engaging with the variety of individuals who might cross your path as you go about your everyday affairs and conduct research. It involves an openness towards those so-called “chance encounters” that may not directly relate to the topic of study outlined in your formal research proposal, and it reminds you never to leave home without a notebook, or a camera. Sometimes a casual chat with a stranger at a café can yield just as much insight as that semi-structured interview at the religious service you are studying. Even if, like me, you are studying the lives of older adults, it’s always wise to talk with the often convenient sample of neighborhood children as well.

One outcome of convenience-based sampling and perhaps of long-term ethnographic fieldwork in general is that it will almost inevitably draw out the eager self-appointed informant as well. At times such informants can be inimitable resources, providing an in-depth look at one individual’s life in his or her social and cultural context. At other times, however, the self-appointed informant seems to show up far too often, stealing the show from others who are perhaps more directly related to the research project at hand. During my research in Kyoto, Japan, from 2005 to 2007, this self-appointed informant happened to be a bodhisattva named Jizō (Sanskrit *Kṣitigarbha*); I would see him everywhere I went, carved into thousands of stone monuments placed on every city block, standing stoically in temples and cemeteries no matter how remote, or with his Mona Lisa smile in the middle of a busy downtown shopping arcade.

How could Jizō, a figure I had known primarily as a guardian of children and travelers, be directly related to my studies on aging and memorializing ancestors? If there is a relationship, what does this say about the way Buddhism shapes people’s understandings of the generational life cycle?

In this chapter, I describe an improvised ritual centered on a carved stone image of Jizō and led by two older adults. Both the ritual and the Jizō image

itself illustrate the fluid boundary between public and private, the sacred and the everyday, and formal and informal religious practice. It also gives yet another pertinent example of how personal relationships, if nurtured over long-term fieldwork, can yield unexpected and sometimes profound insight.

## Narrative

I had come to Japan in 2005 as a visiting researcher at Kyoto University to study aging and memorializing ancestors in contemporary urban Japan. Although I was aware that Buddhism has an important role in Japanese society through performing funerals and memorials for the dead, and that it had also had deep historical and symbolic influence on cultural attitudes towards death and the life cycle, I was cautious about presuming that my informants would identify their own beliefs and practices as essentially “Buddhist” in nature. In some of my initial interviews I found that when I explained my research to people using terms like “Buddhism” or “religion” it would generate confusion rather than elaboration: “Oh, I’m not an expert on Buddhism,” or “Maybe you should talk to some Buddhist monks about that? People like me don’t really know about religion” were common responses.

I quickly learned to adjust my language to talk about specific events or practices and to gently prompt further elaboration when a topic regarding Buddhism came up. This technique seemed to work well, since what I was interested in was how average people framed their religious beliefs in ways that might even be thought to contradict conventional Buddhist doctrine, or that drew on alternate understandings of spirituality gathered from other religions, folk traditions, or even popular media. Talking about offerings made at graves or memorials performed at the home altar often led to invitations to observe or participate in these activities, and over the course of 18 months I gradually became more immersed in a world full of spirits and buddhas, deities, and ghosts.

What I saw as more standard representations of Buddhist figures like Jizō Bodhisattva seemed far too entrenched in the kind of formalized understandings that I wanted to avoid, and as a result, I was generally satisfied to relegate his frequent appearances to the general landscape of Buddhist iconography along with the others like Kannon-sama (Sanskrit *Avalokiteśvara*) or Shaka-sama (Sanskrit *Śākyamuni*).

This is not to say that I was ready to dismiss Jizō’s importance entirely. Like other buddhas and bodhisattvas, Jizō’s power to intercede for those suffering in all six realms of existence and his role as a source of aid in this-worldly affairs were widely revered. Moreover, the abundance of Jizō images tended to localize and personalize his power, almost like a tutelary deity. The most common representations of Jizō were as a simple tonsured monk, either seated or standing and holding a mendicant’s staff – a sharp contrast to other popular Buddhist figures like the fierce Fudō-Myō, who holds a sword and is surrounded by flames. The intimacy felt towards Jizō was often expressed in offerings of handmade hats and



Figure 9.1 Votive statues of Jizo Bodhisattva at a temple in Kyoto

bibs, sometimes bearing the name of a soul in need. In my research, however, “O-Jizō-san,” as he was usually referred to by Kyotoites, rarely came up as a topic of conversation, and for the most part, I was happy to let him be the focus of someone else’s study.

In September of 2007, I returned to Kyoto after more than a year’s absence to conduct follow-up research. At the time my wife, Robin, was pregnant with our first child. Robin had accompanied me during my initial research period, but at that time we were still in our first years of marriage, a status that was regularly acknowledged by our friends as “shinkon,” or “newlyweds” (with all of the expectations of dreamy idealism and romance that went along with it). Most of the older adults I spoke with had met their spouses through formal family introductions and arranged meetings (*omiai*), with the resulting pattern of courtship, compromise, and contract. Being a young, newly married American, I sometimes felt my confidence drain as I tried to relate to my informants’ experiences, and I did my best to avoid falling into the scripted role of grandchild. Now, I thought, things might be different, and I was excited to spread the news.

Knowing that our expectant parenthood would signal at the very least a new kind of legitimacy as adults, we dashed off as many postcard announcements as we could in the weeks before we arrived in Kyoto. As a result, our reunions in Japan were more than mere follow-up research, but also occasions for celebration.

In several instances Robin was given small red brocaded protective amulets purchased from Shinto shrines promising a safe and easy childbirth. She also received frequent admonitions to keep her swelling belly warm, and to be careful doing anything strenuous or requiring balance, like riding a bicycle or walking down stairs. At first these comments seemed exaggerated, or even invasive, but as time went by, we felt that they were perhaps simply a way of voicing concern; they were signs of attention, but not genuine worry.

One of our last visits was to a woman I will call Nishida-san, who at 87 still worked whenever she could for her small family silk-weaving business in Kyoto's Nishijin neighborhood. Because of her age and physical frailty, I hadn't expected that Nishida-san would become one of my most generous informants, sitting for nearly 50 hours of interviews over the course of our year together. Not only this, but Nishida-san also participated in numerous parish activities, such as regular meetings of the local Women's Buddhist Association, and had served for 30 years as a member of her neighborhood social welfare association, caring for older adults and helping to arrange funeral ceremonies for those who died unexpectedly.

Nishida-san, who had met Robin only once during our previous stay, beamed when she saw her again. She immediately noticed that Robin was pregnant, and asked her how far along she was. When Robin replied "six months," Nishida-san looked surprised, "You don't look six months! Maybe it is because you're taller? Usually women get a lot bigger than that!" she said, pointing at her own stomach and giggling. We all settled down in the middle room of the house, and after some tea and light conversation, I began the interview.

Soon we were again talking about familiar topics of growing old and caring for the dead. Nishida-san's sister-in-law had passed away only a couple of weeks prior, the result of advanced age and diabetes, which made her prone to fainting spells. One day, as she sat under the warmth of a *kotatsu* (a covered table with a recess underneath containing a heating device), her feet slid down too close to the heating coils, burning them severely and resulting in the amputation of her leg at the knee. Although the procedure itself was successful, she died a few weeks later. Without pausing in her story, Nishida-san continued, "I thought, how should we send her off? There is the 49 days memorial, right? I thought she'd be so lonely, since she didn't have anyone to do that for her."

Since there were no descendants available to perform the expected funerary or memorial rituals, Nishida-san took it upon herself to see that these things were properly attended to. After I had finished jotting down the story in my notepad, I looked up to find Nishida-san smiling and leaning forward, staring directly into my eyes.

So I petitioned Jizō-san. There's a person in the neighborhood who has a Jizō [shrine] in the back of his house, so I prayed there and offered chants. I can't do it here (gestures to her family altar), since our family names are different. Jizō-san is the guardian Bodhisattva of children, but I thought, well this should be good enough!

There he was again. Although I had frequently seen Jizō statues in cemeteries, often in groups of six to represent his power to help beings in all six realms of existence, I'd never thought of him accompanying old and frail spirits crossing into the other world. I was more familiar with another popular genre of art known as Raigō that depicts Amida Buddha and his entourage floating down to the deceased on wisps of clouds to take the spirit to the brilliantly luminous Pure Land.

When I ask why she prays to Jizō-san, Nishida-san responds quite matter-of-factly, "The other world is a dark place. Don't you think it would be hard to walk with only one leg? So I pray for Jizō-san to guide her."

In Nishida-san's mind, Jizō seemed to be a kind of guide for lost or abandoned old people. I imagined Jizō almost as kind of bibbed Boy Scout, leading old women safely across the dark street, one hand gently lending support and the other carrying a grocery bag. It was hard for me to get this image out of my head.

After our conversation, I thanked Nishida-san and told her that Robin and I needed to be leaving soon. Before we could stand, however, she stopped us saying, "Well then, why don't we at least make a short visit to Jizō? It's very close to here! We can go [make offerings] before Jizō for your child!" I answered, "We would love that! Would that be alright?", remembering that it is never a good idea to decline an invitation during time in the field. "Oh of course it is! If you have a little time, we can go quickly and pray for your baby's health. Just let me go get my purse!" replied Nishida-san as she carefully stepped down from the room and onto the cold stone floor of the kitchen corridor.

I explain what is happening to Robin, who has been patiently listening during the interview, trying to piece together the occasional Japanese that she recognizes, and Nishida-san fetched her things. We packed up our own belongings and Nishida-san returned, and slipped on a pair of soft tan shoes shorter than the length of my hand. She quickly drank a glass of water and then, grabbing her cane, led us out the front entrance into the street.

Although I had attended many religious ceremonies during my time in Japan, this was the first time that I had ever been taken so spontaneously to one. It was especially unusual for me, since it was in honor of my wife and our unborn child. The thought of this aroused feelings of expectation which merged with the adventure of the ceremony we were about to perform. It also struck me as strange that we were going to the same Jizō shrine where Nishida-san told me she had been conducting memorial services for her deceased sister-in-law. What about the standard pollution taboos? What about the fact that Jizō is also commonly associated with stillborn, miscarried, or aborted fetuses? As we hurried out, there was little time to consider the specifics, and, as so often in any fieldwork, we just let ourselves go along with the flow of things.

Robin and I unlocked our bicycles parked in front of the house and walked them beside us. Nishida-san walked ahead of us, looking very much like any other older Japanese woman bent over her cane, not much taller than a child. She led



Figure 9.2 A typical roadside Jizō shrine (left of the vending machine)

us to the small shopping arcade around the corner, and then stopped to greet her neighbors in a small converted open-front house selling women's clothing. As she stepped inside Robin and I waited in front, not sure if we should follow or if this was only a side-trip on the way to the Jizō shrine. I had expected the shrine to be one of the frequently seen structures tucked between vending machines along public streets or on a quiet corner surrounded by houses. Nishida-san soon motioned excitedly for us to come inside, and as we wove through the racks of sweaters and blouses, we awkwardly exchanged greetings with the shopkeepers. Nishida-san led us through a door at the rear of the shop and into the home of the owners. The inner room was dimly lit and lined with several wooden cabinets and shelves. On one wall I noticed two elaborate and brightly colored hanging scrolls depicting various Buddhist figures associated with the esoteric sects of Buddhism, such as the Buddha Dainichi (Sanskrit *Mahavairocana*). This surprised me, since Nishida-san's family belong to the Pure Land (Jōdo) sect, which is known for its more austere images of Amida Buddha.

Still unsure of where we were or what to expect, we followed Nishida-san through another door and into the courtyard, where two rough and weathered bas-relief statues of Jizō had been placed in a small alcove. In front of them was a wooden table with a stand for flowers, candles, and a small pot for burning

incense. It seemed as though the whole house had been built to accommodate these statues, which, in comparison, seem ancient. When I first spotted the statues I remembered a visit I made a few days earlier to a nearby temple dedicated to Enma-Daiō, the fearsome red-faced bureaucrat sometimes referred to as the “King of Hell,” who judges the deeds of the dead and delivers their sentences. Because of their shared prominence in hell, Jizō has long been associated with Enma Daiō, so it was not surprising that in the rear of this temple there was a large pool in which hundreds of Jizō statues gathered from the area had been placed. Perhaps the two Jizōs of this house were once abandoned in the area as well, I thought. Given the abundance of these images, dating back centuries perhaps, how many other houses in the city might have similar shrines?

Just as we were brought to the alcove, a door in the courtyard opened and a man came out of the bathroom greeting us enthusiastically, still buttoning his trousers. He too was older, perhaps in his seventies, and wore thick plastic-framed glasses. I gathered that Nishida-san had already spoken with this man while we were waiting in front, and he had decided to quickly use the toilet before we began. After brief introductions he appeared eager to begin the ceremony, and ushered us in front of the two statues. Nishida-san sat behind us in a chair.



Figure 9.3 Stone bas-relief carvings of Jizō at the entrance of a Buddhist temple in Kyoto

The man retrieved a lighter from his pocket and lit the candles. Then, handing me the lighter and three sticks of incense, he instructed me to light them and place them at the altar. As I did this, I knelt in front of the Jizōs, reflexively placing my hands together in the respectful gesture of *gassho* when I was done. When I finished, Robin too was given incense and directed to follow the same procedure. She followed my example, gently stabbing the incense in the burner, and putting her hands together with her eyes closed. Nishida-san leaned forward and gently rubbed Robin's back in encouragement.

After a short pause, we all sat upright again as the courtyard began to fill with the aroma of the incense. The man leading the ceremony stood in front of us beside the altar where he made a short dedication in honor of us and the spirit of our child, stating our names and our reasons for coming to Jizō. He then produced a thin accordion-fold sūtra book and began to chant the Heart Sūtra. The "Heart Sūtra" or "Great Heart of Perfect Wisdom Sūtra" is one of the most popular and widely distributed Buddhist sūtras in Japan, extolling the philosophy of non-attachment as the means to liberation from suffering. I had heard this sūtra and recited it myself on countless previous occasions, as it is used in all of the major Japanese Buddhist sects. The previous month, for example, as I traveled a portion of the 88-temple Shikoku pilgrimage route, I had chanted with other pilgrims at each stop, many of which, I was reminded later, were devoted to Jizō or had an area for dedicating votive statues of him somewhere on the grounds. I joined softly from what I could remember, my hands pressed together again. As the man read, Robin knelt directly in front of the statues with her head down, and Nishida-san continued to gently rub her back.

The sūtra took only a couple of minutes to chant, and although he did not rush it, it seemed to be over quickly. When the last syllable trailed off, I bowed once more and the ceremony was finished. When I looked over to Robin, I noticed that she was flushed with tears. We helped her to stand and Nishida-san touched her comfortingly and consolingly. As she led Robin out of the house I trailed behind them, thanking the man repeatedly in my most polite Japanese. Behind me I could hear Robin still crying and Nishida-san gently reassuring her. As I approached the threshold between the house and the shop, the man who conducted the ceremony brought the sūtra book over to me, telling me to take it along. I protested out of courtesy, but I was cut off by an intense and direct look as he said, "It is not for me, it's because Jizō-san told me to give this to you." Once he saw that I'd understood, he continued, saying, "This [the book] is a deity (*kami*), and you should take it with you and place it under her pillow when she gives birth." He went to one of the many drawers and found a square of plain white paper which he folded around the book in an angular fashion I'd seen used to wrap gifts at department stores. When he handed it to me, he told me, "Your boy is going to be healthy and strong." I took the small package with both hands, bowing, bewildered and grateful.

When I left the shop, I saw that Nishida-san was standing close to Robin with one hand on her arm. She spoke in a hush, so I only caught part of what

she was saying, but from what I did hear, I gathered that Nishida-san was telling Robin about the child she herself had lost. Nishida-san told me this story on one of our first meetings, about how she had a difficult birth that rendered her comatose for nearly a month, and how the child, who had initially survived, subsequently died in the hospital months later. At that time it was considered inappropriate for parents to attend their child's funeral, since it was considered inauspicious for a child to precede their parents in death. A small lacquered memorial tablet was created for the child and placed on the home altar for remembrance and offerings to placate the spirit. Near the end of World War II, Nishida-san gave birth to two boys, and the grief and survivor guilt over the first child began to mend. Nishida-san never mentioned participating in any *mizuko-kuyō* ceremonies or other special rituals for the spirits of deceased children, but the memory seemed to strongly affect her sensitivity to others and feelings about the sanctity of life.

I reached my arm around Robin's shoulders, and thanked Nishida-san for arranging the ceremony. Nishida-san told us, "I know how difficult it is to have a baby, and I want your baby to be safe and healthy." Robin's face was wet with tears, but she managed to smile and nod, even if she could only understand half what was being said. Satisfied with this, Nishida-san then turned to me, taking my wrist with her small hand. Her back half-turned to Robin, she lowered her voice slightly, saying, "Be sure to take care of her." I told her that I'd do my best and thanked her again. As we mounted our bicycles to leave, she called out, "Come back and visit again while I'm still alive!" We waved goodbye to her until we had turned the corner and were out of sight.

## Discussion

Like most Kyotoites, Nishida-san refers to Jizō Bodhisattva as "Jizō-san" or "O-Jizō-san," the honorific addition of "O" and "-san" indicating a level of both respect and intimacy accorded to other public figures like pilgrims (Ohenro-san), policemen (Omawari-san), or even others' children (Oko-san). In the Japanese cultural context, this honorific has the effect of inclusion rather than separation; it is as if to say "I respect you as one of us." In the case of Jizō, this inclusion makes his power available at any time and for any number of purposes, be they directed towards care of the dead or those yet to be born. While the spirits of the ancestors are similar in this respect, they are typically believed to be able to exert influence only on their family, hence Nishida-san's reluctance to conduct final rites for her sister-in-law at her own family's home altar, despite the fact that a representation of Amida Buddha was enshrined there as well. This also helps to explain why it might be an appropriate place for the ceremony for our child. Still, the association of Jizō with dead children made me wonder. Was it possible to separate Jizō's efficacy in death and his guardianship of children? To see them, perhaps, as distinct points in the life cycle that only rarely overlap? If this is the case, what role might older adults have?

In Kyoto, a Jizō shrine is erected in each *chō* unit, usually resembling a small wooden house atop a stone pedestal in which a statue is kept. Each shrine is cared for by the members of the block unit, whether a residential area or a business district, and has no official administrative relationship with a Buddhist temple. These local altars are the center of the festival of Jizō-bon, which follows the more widespread August holiday of Obon, during which the spirits of the dead are said to return to the world of the living to enjoy their family's company and partake of offerings.

The Jizō-bon festival is believed to have originated in Kyoto and then spread to other parts of Japan. During the festival, the local Jizō shrine is decorated and presented with offerings, and neighborhood children enjoy gifts of candy and games. When I asked older Kyotoites to tell me about the most enjoyable moments in their childhood, several recalled Jizō-bon – not only eating sweets and playing with their friends, but also having the chance to fully participate in a religious ritual. If you grew up in Kyoto, Jizō-san would likely be the first Buddhist figure that you would learn to care for and depend upon, to merge the Buddhist concept of compassion with the cultural concept of *amae*, or “passive dependence.”

It is this distinctly Japanese sense of dependence that links children to older adults under the care of Jizō, and it is this inter-generational narrative of the life cycle that made the ceremony described above not only logical, but also emotionally powerful. In popular Japanese belief, the spirits of children come from the same “other world” (*ano yo*) that spirits return to after death. Neither journey, however, is easily made without assistance, and just as it would be arduous for an old, one-legged woman to go into the other world alone, newborns also need protection and assurance as they enter this world. At both ends of the life course, then, comfort can be found in dependence, whether it is in the form of mourning or blessing.

Folk-tales about the miracles of Jizō underline the narrative of his simple and selfless dedication, especially towards older adults. Only a few weeks before the ceremony with Nishida-san, when I accompanied a friend to a pharmacy, I noticed among the magazines a dog-eared children's book about Jizō and the hats (*Kasa Jizō*). In the story, a poor but hard-working elderly couple make hats to sell in town, but the husband has bad luck selling them and so on his way home through the snow, he places the unsold hats on several Jizō statues. The next morning is New Year's Day, and the old couple wake to find that an enormous bag of rice has appeared at their door. Other such tales abound, such as those where Jizō secretly cuts and piles wood for an old woman (*Kotsumi Jizō*) or shovels snow for an old man (*Yukikaki Jizō*). And although images of Jizō surrounded by children are much more prevalent, in recent years his compassion for those at the other end of life is evidenced by the appearance of “anti-senility” Jizōs with older people kneeling at his feet.

Despite my familiarity with Jizō, I had overlooked not only the parallels of *amae* and dependence at the ends of the life course, but I had underestimated the power of the inter-generational cycle. The fact that Nishida-san and the man

leading the ceremony were older adults allowed us as participants to take on a passive-dependent role, to relieve ourselves of some of the burden of asserting our autonomy and accept the benevolence of the bodhisattva. More than ever I was grateful that Robin was there with me, because it was in her emotions that I understood this. While I was busy committing the ceremony and everything said to memory in order to write up my fieldnotes later, I had distanced myself from fully entering the ritual.

Later, as I asked Robin about her experience, she told me that although she didn't have a clear explanation of why she began to cry during the ceremony, she did think that the reading of the Heart Sūtra had something to do with it. When I asked what she meant, she told me that when she taught English at a Buddhist kindergarten during our first stay in Kyoto, all of the students would be led in a recitation of the Heart Sūtra every morning. Hearing that familiar chant cut through an otherwise incomprehensible situation; with the mysterious Jizō statues in front of her veiled in incense and Nishida-san gently rubbing her back, there was an overwhelming sense that everything had come together.

Things do come together in sometimes unexpected ways during fieldwork, whether it is in a chance meeting with an informant or a spontaneous ceremony at a hidden Buddhist shrine. After nearly two years of immersion I was finally beginning to feel as if I had enough information to understand connections, contexts, and nuance that had escaped my attention before, and suddenly the taken-for-granted landscape of everyday Buddhism materialized in sūtras and statues, in mourning and blessing. In the fullness of this, the generational life cycle began to make a little more sense.

Four months after the ceremony, almost to the day, our son was born at a small birth center in San Diego. It was dawn by the time he finally arrived, safe and screaming, into our world; weeks of tense anticipation dissolved into the glow of new parenthood. As I unzipped the labor bag we had brought along looking for fresh clothes, I noticed the small sūtra booklet we'd received in Kyoto, still swaddled in its paper wrapping. It hadn't made it under the pillow, but I felt relieved to see that it was at least there in the room. When we returned home later that morning, I set the booklet next to a statue of the Buddha, placed my hands together, and thanked Jizō-san and Nishida-san once again.

## Readings

While much has been written on the role of Jizō Bodhisattva in *mizuko-kuyō* ceremonies (in particular William R. LaFleur's *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994]), there are few book-length treatments of Jizō available in English. A nice general introduction to understanding Jizō Bodhisattva and his history, symbols, and place in Japanese Buddhism is Jan Chozen Bays' *Jizō Bodhisattva: Guardian of Children, Travelers, and Other Voyagers* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003). More on the role of Buddhist and other religious practices for older Japanese adults can be found in

John W. Traphagan's *The Practice of Concern: Ritual, Well-Being, and Aging in Rural Japan* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2004). An excellent analysis of personalization in the worship of Jizō and other Japanese religious figures appears throughout Ian Reader and George J. Tanabe, Jr.,'s *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998).

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