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Jizō, Healing Rituals, and Women in Japan

The bodhisattva Jizō in Japan has long been associated with a stone figure of a child monk, wearing a red bib and standing on the roadside in the quaint landscape of rural Japan. Assumed to have originated as Kṣitigarbha in India, this bodhisattva has been worshipped as the protector of children and travelers, but more importantly, as the savior par excellence in the underworld, especially by women in Japan. This article explores how women have played a key role in popularizing Jizō worship in various forms. The main assertion is that women are the reason why Jizō worship as a whole has sustained its popularity throughout Japanese religious history, prompting new movements such as *mizuko kuyō*—a major gendered practice that not only heals but also empowers women.

KEYWORDS: Jizō—savior—ritual—*mizuko kuyō*—women—healing—empowerment

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ON TOP OF the hill near where I lived as a small child in Kobe, Japan, stands Tatsueji 立江寺 temple with its many stone figures.¹ As a child, I knew that they were called “O Jizō san” お地藏さん but knew nothing of what they represented. They looked like child monks, invariably wearing red bibs with peaceful smiles. When I returned to Japan a few years ago, I went to visit the temple again and saw a flyer advertising the temple as the place for women to pray for a safe and easy childbirth.² I wondered at that time what women and childbirth had to do with these numerous stone figures of childlike monks with red bibs affectionately called “O Jizō san.”

In this article, I consider this association of Jizō with women in ritual context. Specifically, I focus on a ritual often used to heal and empower women in Buddhist temples in Japan. The terms “healing” and “empowering” in this context signify effecting the restoration of a sense of well-being which may have been temporarily diminished during childbirth, or enhancing a sense of well-being and wholeness. My claim is this: Jizō is particularly popular among women; and the popularity is largely due to women having played a special role in both creating and popularizing the unique ritual forms involving Jizō, and in executing many of these rituals in Japan.

To support this claim, I first examine the historical origin of Jizō worship as a gendered practice. While providing this background, I also assess how women have worked out their own religiosity within the Confucian-oriented social and religious systems. Furthermore, drawing on my own experience as a Japanese woman and a chaplain working with women in need of healing, I posit that it is women’s religiosity that has largely contributed to creating and promoting Jizō worship in Japan.

After the historical overview, I investigate the development of Jizō rituals involving women and children, while paying close attention to the role of women practitioners in the propagation of Jizō worship and ritual practice. I then focus

1. The photographs in this article of Jizōs in and around this temple were taken with permission by the author of this article.

2. The temple in Kōbe is affiliated with the Daikakuji 大覚寺 School of the Shingon tradition. There is another temple with the same name in Shikoku, the island where Kūkai purportedly attained enlightenment. The one in Shikoku is affiliated with the Kōyasan School within the same Shingon tradition. Its homepage also advertizes the following, held at the temple upon request: “prayer services for easy/safe childbirths” (*anzan kigan* 安産祈願); “memorial service for dead fetuses” (*mizuko kuyō* 水子供養); and “memorial services for the deceased family members” (*eidai kuyō* 永代供養). The first two terms will be explained later in the article.



FIGURES 1 and 2. The stairs leading up to the temple grounds are accompanied by numerous small stone statues of Jizō with red bibs. Some have inscriptions of names of children on them.



FIGURES 3 (above) and 4 (right). Inside the temple grounds on top of the hill are also Jizō figures of varying sizes. Photos taken by the author in November 2012 with the temple's permission.



on one specific Jizō ritual, namely *mizuko kuyō*, as a paragon of the contemporary Jizō rituals that not only serve as a means of healing but also of empowerment. In this analysis, I refer to the conceptual framework I am developing on the subject of women and healing. The framework is based on an interactive “process model” that attempts to map out the core concepts within the Japanese traditions and customs that have shaped the religiosity of Japanese women. While it is still nascent in its development, the model is helpful in understanding the full-bodied nature of ritual, especially as it pertains to women. I then conclude the article with an observation of how this Jizō ritual has been introduced outside of Japan and has become part of the effective healing process for women around the world.

Historical Overview of Jizō Worship

TERMS AND TEXTUAL EVIDENCE OF JIZŌ

Before tracing the provenances of Jizō worship and ritual, it may be helpful to clarify some terms used in this article. Although the term often carries a negative connotation, I may at times refer to the system of practice and belief related to Jizō as a “cult” because of its spontaneous, nonsectarian origination, and interdenominational existence. To distinguish between “sect” and “cult,” I concur with Catherine Bell that “groups that arise spontaneously using new or imported ideas” can be referred to as “cults,” while those that develop through a schism from a larger institution are usually called “sects” (BELL 1997, 205).³ Unlike sects, cults do not grow out of opposition to established religious groups; rather, they tend to emerge independently. Furthermore, ritual aspects of cults can be idiosyncratic and accommodating to individual needs, allowing for syntheses across various denominations. As I will discuss later, the organic emergence of Jizō ritual practices that transcend denominational boundaries seems to fit well with these characteristics of a cult.

Second, the name “Jizō *bosatsu*” 地藏菩薩 is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese *Dizāng pusa*. This bodhisattva is widely accepted as having originated as Kṣitigarbha, a minor bodhisattva that appears in Indian literature, but NG (2007) questions this assumption based on her investigation of historical evidence of Kṣitigarbha. Refuting the claim of pre-Chinese origin, she demonstrates through historical-textual analysis that the Chinese canon contains the earliest evidence, dating from around the sixth century CE.⁴ Furthermore, the

3. For the description and classification of the terms, Bell refers to the works by STARK and BAINBRIDGE (1985, 25–30).

4. The earliest record of Dizāng worship in China is attributed to the work of prominent vinaya master Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), contained in the *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (Continued biographies of eminent monks, 645–665). Among the numerous Chinese scriptures to

same evidence shows that an independent cult of Kṣitigarbha never developed in India (JONES 2005). While mandalas do include Kṣitigarbha, for example, no separate images of him have been discovered. In Central Asia, however, the bodhisattva appeared to have been more prominent, as his images independent of other bodhisattvas have been discovered in caves at Dunhuang. In Tibet, the bodhisattva is referred to as *Sahi snying po* and has long been revered as one of the “eight great bodhisattvas,”⁵ often portrayed in mandalas as an object of devotion in the Vajrayāna tradition (JONES 2005). The portrayals of the bodhisattva, however, and the manner of devotions to him in the esoteric tradition in Tibet are quite different from those seen in China and Japan. Hence, from the time the bodhisattva was first introduced to China around 400 CE and reached Japan in approximately 850 CE, he had gone through significant changes as an object of worship.

The details of historical-textual analysis would require a separate article. For the purpose of tracing Jizō’s origin here, it suffices to note that even if this bodhisattva did have some Indian or Central Asian antecedents, the deity has evolved significantly and independently of Kṣitigarbha of the Indian and Central Asian sociocultural history. In other words, the East Asian Jizō (Dizāng) bodhisattva is indigenous to East Asia, defined and shaped by the East Asian sociocultural and religious milieu.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF JIZŌ WORSHIP AND ITS CONNECTION WITH WOMEN

For Jizō worship in Japan, Chinese materials are unequivocally the main source as the teachings of all mainline Japanese Buddhist traditions were primarily transmitted from China. While the image and the role of Jizō continued to evolve specifically to Japanese culture, the trajectory of Jizō’s portrayal as the savior par excellence and the “lord of the underworld” essentially began in China. The spread of the image was propelled by an increasing interest in the hell realm among Buddhists around the seventh century onward (RUCH 2002). The interest was in turn fueled by the concept of the Dharma decline (*mappō* 末法) which is propounded in the *Scripture of the Ten Wheels*. This concept of *mappō* affected women negatively with regard to their salvation.

which NG refers (2007, 235–37), the two most thoroughly analyzed are the *Da fangguang shilun jing* 大方廣十輪經 (Scripture of the ten wheels, sixth century) and the *Xumizang fen* 須彌藏分 (Section on the Sumeru treasury) from *Da fangdeng daji jing* 大方等大集經 (The great extended compendium of scriptures, sixth century). These frequently cited texts are early evidence of Dizāng in China. They are often purported to have been translated in the Northern Liang; however, the historical-textual evidence points instead to their non-Indian (Chinese) provenance.

5. In Japan, during the Heian period (794–1185), he was worshipped as one of “five deities” along with Amitābha in the Pure Land tradition (GLASSMAN 2012).

The text promulgated the belief that at the time of *mappō* (in which people already lived), it was nearly impossible to attain Buddhahood except by the power of the Amitābha Buddha. For women polluted by the blood of menstruation, the damnation was pronounced, and there was absolutely no hope of salvation for them, unless Jizō himself went down to hell to rescue them. With the help of this text, then, the worship of the bodhisattva spread throughout China in the seventh century, and throughout Japan in the ninth century, along with his image as “the Buddhist savior of the damned” (NG 2007, 22).

The prevalent focus on the hell realms and soteriology of the Dharma decline among the Buddhists was due, at least in part, to sociopolitical unrest and instability. During the period when the decline of Buddhism was first promulgated in China, and the Three Stages Sect (Jp. *Sankai kyō*; Ch. *Sanjie jiao* 三階教) emerged strong among several other movements, the country was politically divided north and south (NATTIER 1991). In addition to the sociopolitical arena, the country was also religiously divided. Thus, the sociopolitical-religious conditions of seventh-to-eighth-century China appeared to have been conducive to the spread of the teachings of the dharma decline and Jizō worship.

However, the spread of Jizō worship in China was not solely due to the activities of the Three Stages Sect. While the sect may have had a strong influence in propagating the dharma decline, the dissemination of Jizō worship was in concurrence with the growing cults of stupa building and image-making (NG 2007). The Jizō cult, as begun in China, is thus better located in the devotional milieu of medieval China. As the Jizō cult spread as an important devotional practice in China, it blended with other popular and prominent devotional cults such as Amitābha (Jp. *Amida*; Ch. *Amituo*) and Avalokiteśvara (Jp. *Kannon*; Ch. *Guan-yin*). Eventually, Jizō merged with Yama Raja (Jp. *Enma*; Ch. *Yanmo* 閻魔) and was rendered “King of Hell,” thus projecting his image as sovereign.

When the cult reached Japan, the bodhisattva manifested as Jizō was further “assimilated to local gods of boundaries, fertility, and sexuality” (GLASSMAN 2012, 6). Much of Jizō’s popularity in Japan can be attributed to this integration of the bodhisattva with local gods and devotional practices that accommodated the needs of common people, especially women. Here, I underscore the role of women (mothers or prospective mothers) in strengthening the popularity. The reason is that some of the gods were stone fertility gods and their related indigenous folklores were assimilated into the miracle tales of Jizō. I posit that this assimilation further reified his image as the protector of children and the patron bodhisattva of the unborn in Japan.

This fusion of Buddhist deities with the local Shinto gods is called *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹 in Japan. Shinto gods (*suijaku* 垂迹)⁶ were considered the

6. The Shinto gods that participate in the Buddhist rituals vary according to the regions.

“manifestations of the absolute and eternal Buddha” (*honji* 本地) and are worshipped along with the bodhisattvas and the Buddhas as the “protectors” of the weak (WELTER 2003, 124; BODIFORD 2003, 261). Though often associated with Kasuga Daimyōjin 春日大明神, Jizō was also considered to be the *suijaku* of other local deities. Hence, as a powerful protector whose power is fused with that of the local gods, Jizō bodhisattva gained much prominence and popularity among the common and marginalized—often comprised of women—in tumultuous medieval Japan (twelfth and thirteenth centuries).

The adaptability of the Jizō cult also allowed Ritsu, Pure Land, Tendai, Shingon, and Zen practitioners to promote it further from the thirteenth century onward, transcending the sectarian boundaries and offering a common object of devotion. Jizō thus gradually became a multidimensional bodhisattva, standing as a mediator in the gap between this world and the next, and between sects, religious schools, and social classes. While the medieval Jizō (twelfth century) was portrayed as a powerful deity, as time passed, the image was almost deliberately downscaled to that of a friendly and approachable little novice monk with whom anyone could feel at ease. Furthermore, through the vicissitudes of local adaptations and time, Jizō came to be associated with multifarious rituals including rainmaking, pacification for the victims of natural disasters and the war dead, the protection of women in childbirth, and even mediation for the unconnected dead (*muen botoke* 無縁仏).

As a testimony to Jizō’s multivalency, the numerous shrines and temples dedicated to the bodhisattva in various capacities—including “easy and safe birth” (*anzan* 安産), “long life” (*enmei* 延命), “guidance” (*indō* 引導), and so on—fill the religious landscape of Japan across varied traditions. Due to this powerful, yet compassionate and multifaceted characteristic, Jizō surpassed any other bodhisattvas in popularity, especially among women, who were the more marginalized part of society and suffered greatly during the sociopolitical instability of twelfth and thirteenth century Japan (SMITH 2013). Hence, among women in medieval Japan, all the way up to post-World War II, the popularity of Jizō worship was unequalled.

TEXTUAL EVIDENCE OF JIZŌ AND ITS CONNECTION WITH WOMEN

In addition to the socio-historical evidence, the close association of women with Jizō in Japan can be traced back to the “Sutra of Jizō’s Original Vow” (*Jizō bosatsu hongan kyō* 地藏菩薩本願經),⁷ widely accepted as the best-known Jizō scripture. This sutra tells of two past lives of Jizō in which the bodhisattva is portrayed as a filial Brahmin daughter who saves her mother from the hell realm. In the first

7. The title is also often translated as the “Scripture on the Past Vows of Dizāng Bodhisattva.”

of these lives, Jizō is a Brahmin daughter born during the period of “semblance dharma” (*zōhō* 像法) and supplicates before an image of the Buddha to save her mother (see the Appendix). In the second, Jizō is again reborn as a Brahmin daughter named Bright Eyes (*Kōmoku* 光目) in the age of a Buddha called Pure Lotus Eye and again saves her mother through devotional activities.

The sutra thus introduced a female savior with whom women could more readily identify and to whom they could aspire. According to the Confucian social hierarchy that governed Chinese society, the damned mother had to depend on male offspring for her rescue from hell; however, this sutra deliberately shifted the responsibility for the mother’s salvation from the son to the daughter (COLE 1998). While it is impossible to know what prompted this shift in the text, it speaks of the innovative adaptability accorded to the Jizō cult, especially as it pertained to empowering women.

There are also numerous indigenous miracle tales involving Jizō in Japan. In many of them, the object of Jizō’s salvation is a woman. Some echo tales from Chinese texts, while others are endemic to the regional ethos. What is unique to Jizō worship in Japan and yet ubiquitous in Japanese Buddhist temples is the significance of the role of nuns. One example is an influential, high-ranking woman of the Fujiwara line in the early thirteenth century who, as a nun in her eighties, commissioned the nude Jizō image in Denkōji 伝香寺 in Nara and promoted the worship of Jizō infused with the Kasuga god (GLASSMAN 2012). Additionally, from this period forward, some Jizō statues began to appear feminine, having the qualities of a caring mother easing the pain of suffering children (ARAI 1999).

A statue having motherly qualities appears in the story about the daughter of the famous tenth-century samurai Taira no Masakado 平将門, whose legend is recorded in Japanese Buddhist texts and widespread throughout Japan.⁸ In the story, the daughter is disowned by this famous aristocratic samurai, and while fleeing to Enichiji 恵日寺 in Fukushima, she dies. She then descends to the underworld where she meets Jizō bodhisattva, who advocates for her before Enma Daiō 閻魔大王 (King Yama). On account of Jizō’s advocacy, she is restored to life and takes the tonsure, adopting the name Nyozōni 如蔵尼. With slight variations but all linking to Jizō worship, the story was transmitted throughout Kantō (the eastern) and Tōhoku (the northern) areas of Japan, eventually incorporating the promise of *anzan* (“an easy and safe childbirth”) along the way.⁹

Numerous similar legends and folklore involving Jizō worship and women continued to emerge in the Kamakura period onward as the popularity of the

8. The texts that contain the legend include *Genkō shakusho* 元亨釈書, *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集, and *Reigenki* 靈驗記.

9. The provenance of this dimension of Jizō worship is explored in the next section of this article.

Jizō cult spread. By the Edo period, there were countless miracle tales recorded in popular texts involving Jizō and his power and compassion to cure various diseases. Up to about the sixteenth century, healing was mostly associated with the intercessions of the Medicine Buddha (Yakushi Nyōrai 薬師如来); however, with the increasing popularity of Jizō bodhisattva among the commoners and women, healing was added to the already long list of miraculous interventions provided by Jizō (WILLIAMS 2004).

Development of Jizō Rituals

WOMEN PERFORMERS AND CHILDREN IN SAI NO KAWARA

Along with the narratives, the rituals were also produced and performed. In the more recent times of the Tokugawa era, annual Jizō rituals such as Jizō *nagashi* 地藏流し began to take place at a Zen temple in Aichi (ARAI 1999; READER 1991). Nuns of Aichi Senmon Nisōdō 愛知専門尼僧堂 in present-day Nagoya provided this ritual primarily for lay practitioners as part of the ancestor ritual of *obon*. Additionally, in the seventeenth century, nuns at Donke'in 曇華院 in Kyōto began to provide the ritual for the daughters of the imperial line.¹⁰ The nuns also created numerous miniature statues of Jizō housed in small shrines with the help of laypeople, thereby propagating the Jizō cult throughout Kyōto and its vicinity (FISTER 2009). Thus the nuns had a profound influence on Jizō's popularity spreading throughout Japan, which resonates to the present day.

In addition to the convent nuns, street female preachers, mediums, and ritual performers played a great role in the dissemination of the Jizō cult throughout Japan (RUCH 2002). These women were part of the “unconnected” society (*muen sekai* 無縁世界), living in 無縁所—a special place comprised of temples and shrines specifically for the people of *muen* 無縁, who had renounced all connections to their families and ancestral lineages for varied reasons. Many of these women were traveling performers, often accompanied by their male counterparts. Their occupations varied, with some being religious and others secular, including the Kumano *bikuni* 熊野比丘尼 (nuns), *aruki miko* 歩き巫女 (walking priestesses), *shira byōshi* 白拍子 (female court dancers dressed as men in *hakama* and *eboshi*), *utamai* 歌舞 (singer-dancers), *katsurame* 桂女 (female ritual performers with head coverings), *etoki bikuni* 絵解比丘尼 (nuns who told stories using pictures), and so on (RUCH 2002).

The Kumano *bikuni* and *aruki miko* in particular were well known as itinerant female oracles, fortune-tellers, and ritual performers. As such, they were instrumental in the spread of the Jizō cult. Additionally, it was particularly the

10. Donke'in (also pronounced “Donge'in”) is a former Zen convent built some time in the fourteenth century; an annual Jizō *bon matsuri* 地藏盆祭り is still held there in late August.

Kumano *bikuni*, traveling with Kyōto's *hachitadaki* 鉢叩き (bowl-beating) chanters from Wakayama, who popularized the idea of *sai no kawara* 賽の河原—the liminal, riparian place in another realm to which the unconnected (*muen*) are condemned to go. As they helped to create and develop the portrayal of this mystical place, they also contributed to galvanizing the association of dead infants and children with Jizō.

According to the story passed down by these *bikunis*, in *sai no kawara*, the souls of dead children are forced to create stone stupas, piling up small stones day after day, in order to transfer merit to their parents. Every evening, however, demons come and destroy these stupas, while speaking harshly to them. They also try to harm the children, but Jizō intervenes so that they are not harmed. Children, however, are still required to remain in *sai no kawara* and continue rebuilding the stupas. Jizō then speaks tenderly to them and comforts them, as told in *Sai no kawara Jizō wasan* 賽の河原地蔵和讃 of Jōdo shū:

“What are you wailing for? Great is the distance between this place and the world you have left. In this place of desolation you may trust me as your father and mother; day and night you may depend upon me.” So saying, this figure, who is none other than Jizō, picks some of them up, tucking others within the skirt of his robe, and lets still others walk clinging to his staff. Holding them close to his breast, he caresses and comforts them.

(MANABE 1960; SMITH 2013, 292).

The dead children are thus portrayed as paying the consequences of being “unfilial” for having caused insufferable pain to the parents. However, Jizō bodhisattva is present with them as a comforter, a surrogate parent and protector of children, and a mediator between the mother and her child. Jizō is also the bridge between this world and *sai no kawara*, between pain and comfort, and between social rejection and acceptance. Hence, Jizō is most frequently identified to this day with this “children’s limbo” place of *sai no kawara*, which appears to be autochthonous to Japan with no Buddhist scriptural equivalent (SMITH 2013).

One of the most prominent festivals in relation to children in *sai no kawara* is the annual festival of feeding the hungry ghosts called *segakie* 施餓鬼会, performed preceding *obon* (the festival of the dead) in August. The hungry ghosts in this context are the functional equivalent of *muen botoke* (the “unconnected dead”), which refers to those who died without any descendants to venerate them as their ancestors, as well as those who died violently or unjustly. The first recorded evidence of this ritual being observed was around 1410, performed immediately before *obon*, and these two festivals have been celebrated together since (SMITH 2013; READER 1991). Additionally, one prominent feature of this festival was the preaching of Kumano *bikuni* on the *Kumano kanjin jikkai man-*

dara (The Kumano mandala for contemplating the ten worlds within the mind), which depicts a scene of Jizō ministering to the children's ghosts in *sai no kawara* (RUCH 2002).

As for the red bibs commonly seen on the statues of Jizō across Japan, not much research has been done. It is speculated that they reflect the bibs worn by children in some of these depictions of *sai no kawara*. Another speculation suggests that the color red represents a symbolic connection between the blood of death to the blood of regeneration and birth (WATSON 1982). Furthermore, there was a practice known as *kawa segaki* 川施餓鬼 (also known as *arai zarashi* 洗い晒し) for when a woman died in childbirth (HARDACRE 1997). The family would place a red cloth either dyed or stained from the actual blood of the deceased woman in the flowing river and leave it until it was cleansed white. In their mind, this assured that the woman would be saved from punishment in the Blood Pool. The red bibs on Jizō statues may also symbolize this practice. While there is no unequivocal evidence for the provenances of the red adornments on Jizō statues, the connection between Jizō bodhisattva, women, children, and *sai no kawara* is clear.

Contemporary Jizō Ritual

MIZUKO KUYŌ: ORIGIN AND BACKGROUND

While there are various rituals involving Jizō and *sai no kawara* as discussed above, among those that are in practice today, the most well known is *mizuko kuyō*. The term *mizuko* 水子 is written as “water child” in *kanji* and refers to a fetal demise, either due to a natural cause or abortion. While the literal meaning of *kuyō* 供養 is “to supply nourishment,” the term normally refers to a memorial service for the dead. The *mizuko kuyō* ritual is thus a type of service for dead fetuses, designed to offer prayers and apologies, and to alleviate as much as possible the unfathomable pain of child loss. In the case of abortion, it may be viewed as a ceremony for the parent to offer a formal apology to the aborted child, as well as to recognize its life un-lived or cut short. The numerous little stone figures with red bibs with peaceful faces, then, may represent the potentially angry spirits pacified, easing the minds of the mothers wrought with shame, guilt, and pain of loss of a life and what could have been.

As a means of pacifying the spirits of both the dead and the living, the ritual of *mizuko kuyō* seems to fit the category of the “rites of affliction” which “attempt to rectify a state of affairs that has been disturbed or disordered; they heal, exorcise, protect, and purify” (BELL 1997, 115). In other words, it is a heuristic device to help ameliorate the spirits of both the living and the dead. Additionally, as with the form of Jizō bodhisattva venerated, the ritual is quintessentially Japanese and is a relatively new phenomenon. There is no evidence of a direct precedent

in Japanese Buddhism prior to the twentieth century. The exact dating or place of its origination is unknown; however, it is generally accepted among Japanese sociologists that the ritual began to appear in the 1950s and developed into a significant movement by the mid-1960s (SMITH 2013).

The reasons for the emergence of this particular ritual as a new movement and the rise in its popularity are varied and numerous. One feasible explanation is that prior to World War II, a fetus was not recognized as a person, so that a funerary service was not conducted for a dead fetus. This view changed when the rights of children were included in the postwar Japanese Constitution in 1948. Ironically, amidst the drastic political and social changes, abortion was legalized the following year, prompting a surge in the number of abortions after 1949 (LAFLEUR 1992). The rise in the abortion rate may have contributed to the increase in the demand for formalized memorial services for the aborted fetuses.

By the late 1960s, the term *mizuko kuyō* became known as the new practice that focused on the dead infants or fetuses, including the stillborn (*shizan* 死産), miscarried (*ryūzan* 流産), and aborted (*ninshin chūzetsu* 妊娠中絶). Then from the 1970s onward, temples of varied traditions enthusiastically promoted the ceremony to accommodate the perceived need for the memorialization of *mizuko*—a “water child” who was dead, lost, and unseen (LAFLEUR 1992).

Later, the term additionally included any child who died prematurely and disrupted the natural order of things by leaving this world before his or her parents. In a sense, the ritual became a tool to restore the order as a kind of enacted model for how things ought to be (GRIMES 2014, 331). The broadening of the meaning of the term has also allowed the ritual to be more inclusive, serving more mothers experiencing different types of losses and in need of relief from the profound pain those losses inflicted on them. Hence, Jizō worship, particularly as it pertains to *mizuko kuyō*, has maintained its popularity among women and is frequently practiced today.¹¹

11. A typical observable procedural pattern of *mizuko kuyō* has been described as follows:

Typically a woman approaches a Buddhist priest and requests the service. The ceremony is held in the main worship hall of the temple or a special shrine specifically for *mizuko kuyō* (a *mizuko* Jizōdō), where the priest chats sutras, expresses the wish that the *mizuko* will become a Buddha, and prompts the layperson to make offerings of incense, toys, and food.

Often the woman purchases a small, childlike statue of Jizō, dresses it with bibs and knitted hats, and prays to it for forgiveness; in some temples, a memorial plaque (*ihai*), normally used to enshrine ancestors, takes the place of the statue. Alternately, she may place bibs or other objects associated with infancy on a larger temple statue of Mizuko Jizō ..., depicted holding a baby and with children plaintively clutching at his robes.

This latter activity may or may not take place after a full *kuyō* has been performed by a priest, and it represents a more informal, personal approach to *mizuko kuyō* on the part of the laity. Another way in which laypeople ritualize pregnancy losses that is

MIZUKO KUYŌ'S POPULARITY AMONG WOMEN

The enduring popularity of Jizō worship, particularly *mizuko kuyō*, may be largely due to its multifaceted ability to meet the various spiritual and social needs of these women. Among the major concerns that the ritual addresses, besides the pain of loss or the worry for the dead child's soul, is the fear of *tatari* 祟^り or the curse of the dead child. This fear of *mizuko tatari* may, at least in part, stem from the sense of failure to give the child a chance to be born into this world.¹²

According to the proponents of *mizuko kuyō*, there is a heightened sense of urgency to appease the aborted fetuses, as they are believed to live on as ghosts to harm the living. They often promulgate the notion that a *mizuko* resulting from abortion is in a different kind of darkness than a child who died naturally, and that such a child will cause harm and misfortune of various kinds if his or her anger is not appeased through the special apology accorded by *mizuko kuyō* (SMITH 2013; see also LAFLEUR 1992). Critics argue that these proponents are fanning the fear by their active proselytization and commercialization of the ritual. I, however, posit that the demand for *mizuko kuyō* has been popularized for centuries among women and does not require advertisement or proselytization. Hence, the primary purpose of the ritual is for the mothers, not to avoid *tatari* but to formally apologize and make amends, to represent themselves as caring mothers again, and to reestablish family ties with these spirits while comforting them in *sai no kawara*.

The significance of the act of making amends extends not only to the women themselves but also to the whole family. It also means protection for the whole family, especially the siblings of the dead child who are considered more vulnerable to *tatari*. Regarding East Asian perspectives on the collective effects of misdeeds by individuals, David Chappell observes:

Kinship lay at the heart of everything in traditional China. Misfortune arose not only from individual misdeeds, but from wrongs by family members or neighbors or from deceased relatives in distress. Recovery was also collective. Repentance could relieve suffering for any and all relatives in visible and invisible worlds as well as bring about individual transformation and salvation.

(CHAPPELL 2005, 60)

partially outside the aegis of priests is by purchasing votive tablets (*ema*) and writing messages to the spirits or Jizō.

Money may be exchanged at many points in these practices, such as to induce the priest to pray for the *mizuko*, to buy offerings to present to Jizō, or to purchase statues (one per abortion). Many temples post set fees for *mizuko kuyō*, whereas others merely rely on the common Japanese practice of slipping some money to the priest in an envelope.

(WILSON 2009, 7)

12. While the fear of *tatari* may be a significant factor and motivation, it is not the only one. There are other factors which will be discussed in the last section of this article.

As in traditional China, in Japan the significance of “kinship” cannot be overstated, even to this day. In other words, the shame—disguised in the form of *tatari*—of one member of the family affects the honor and well-being of the whole. Hence, both the rise and the enduring popularity of *mizuko kuyō* may lie in the significance of this “collective” recovery and protection in a kinship-oriented society like Japan.

MIZUKO KUYŌ AND WOMEN’S “PERSONHOOD”

In the modern era, both fetal and infant mortality rates have shown a precipitous decline in Japan. According to the Vital Statistics report published by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (2014), the fetal and infant (less than one-year old) mortality rates were 22.9 percent and 7.7 percent respectively in 1950. In comparison, in 2013 the fetal and infant mortality rates were 12.5 percent and 2.1 percent respectively.¹³ This indicates an almost 50 percent drop in the average rate for fetal death, while the average number of infant deaths has decreased much more precipitously. Although the recent rate for infant death is one of the lowest in the world, it is still not zero. Furthermore, the fetal mortality reported in the current statistics includes deaths by abortion.¹⁴ Since there may be unreported cases of abortions, the actual pregnancy losses may be higher than the record. Hence, despite the medical and technological advancements, the unfathomable pain of child loss persists.

The pain of losing a child—regardless of the way it was lost—is not limited to the spiritual kind; it also has profound psycho-social implications, especially for women vis-à-vis their role and status in the family which often worsens their pain. The definitions of what it means to be a Japanese woman have evolved, perhaps in a similar way as the forms and roles of *Jizō* have through the turmoil of Japanese history. Dramatic sociopolitical changes unfolded from the Meiji period onward, and the onslaught of Western industrial modernization, with its emphasis on education, did not exclude women from its impact.

Post-World War II Japan marshaled even more changes in society that affected women, making them take on the role of “workers” (Ooms 1993). In the midst of the drastic outward changes, however, the seemingly immutable undertone that defined women in Japanese society persists. One aspect of these seemingly impregnable social mores is the view of women first as mothers, then

13. The report also provides the actual number of cases of births and deaths during 2013 as follows: live births 1,029,816; infant deaths (less than one year old) 2,185; and fetal deaths 24,102.

14. The graph for the trend in fetal mortality from 1950 to 2013 shows that, on average, about half of all the fetal deaths are due to artificial termination (abortion); see the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (Kōsei rōdō shō 厚生労働省), *Jinkō dōtai chōsa* 人口動態調査 [Vital statistics]; <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/list/dl/81-1a2.pdf> (accessed 26 November 2015).

housewives and workers (USUI 1983). While the social construction of “motherhood” has been reshaped according to the changing times, the maternal role continues to predominate the definition of a woman in Japanese society.

One important aspect of these social changes is the effect on women experiencing abortion or stillborn children. As noted earlier, the impact of the sense of shame and failure is profound not only on the women themselves, but also on their status as a family member and in society as a whole. In other words, the child loss has meant, in essence, diminution of “personhood” for a woman. Especially with abortion, after experiencing the physical and emotional trauma of the surgical procedure, they have to face the inescapable social stigma as well. Attesting to this reality, WILSON (2009, 11) observes, “[T]he atmosphere of the *mizuko kuyō* frequently has a judgmental tone absent from premodern Jizō-related motifs: Jizō in premodern Japan was the caring protector who sprung people from hell and healed their illnesses without comment on possibly karmic causes for their suffering.” Hence, while faith in Jizō bodhisattva continues to provide solace for dejected women, in reality society is less forgiving and compassionate.

RITUALS AND SERVING OTHERS: A WAY OF EMPOWERMENT

In a society rooted in Confucianism, like Japan in the past, people’s worth was often marked by their social rank, which were mainly inherited rather than earned. The social ranking extended within the family system, where women tended to be at the lowest. While the caste system was abolished after World War II and women now appear to be increasingly recognized as equals on the surface, a discriminatory mentality persists in Japanese society. It is also a society that has always been unsympathetic to those on the lower parts of the totem pole. In such an environment, the mutual support and interconnection among “the same kind”—dejected women experiencing the social stigma of losing a child—becomes particularly imperative to survival and healing.

As a way of empowerment, too, interdependence and mutual cooperation are essential. The essence of these two concepts—“interdependence” and “mutual cooperation”—is often captured in the term *otagaisama* お互い様. While it may literally mean “mutually together,” it can be rendered: “in helping others, one is helped; it is in giving that one receives.” In other words, when one seeks to be healed, it is most efficacious if one walks the journey of healing alongside others experiencing similar pain. It points to reflexivity and interrelatedness. Thus, as a heuristic healing method, both providing and receiving Jizō rituals like *mizuko kuyō* create that “interdependent,” “mutual,” and sacred space where a woman who once felt isolated can come to share the pain and sorrow of loss with others who may be experiencing similar agony. Moreover, when she helps others

overcome the fear and shame similar to what she has experienced, she is in turn empowered and able to progress further in her own healing process. I posit that it is through this interactive healing process that women developed and popularized the practices of the Jizō cult.

Women, Healing, and Religiosity—A Conceptual Framework

INTERACTIVE PROCESS MODEL

Joseph MAXWELL (1996, 20) writes: “Process theory ... deals with events and the processes that connect them; it is based on an analysis of the causal processes by which some events influences others.” I submit that it is not only through “the events,” but also through the long-held beliefs and root assumptions that influence these events, which are at the heart of traditions, customs (*fūshū* 風習), and even language. For example, women have traditionally been referred to as “the hidden support underneath the house/relationships” (*en no shita no chikara mochi* 縁の下の力持ち),¹⁵ as they are often unrecognized and unappreciated but are known to be vital in their family role in supporting the household members. Their power “behind the scenes” as mothers and grandmothers inculcating beliefs (*shinkō* 信仰) and traditions in their children also cannot be overstated. In developing and popularizing worship and rituals such as those also pertaining to the Jizō cult, I posit that women’s roles have been crucial as the *en no shita no chikara mochi*. Hence, hardworking but unappreciated women on the fringes of society have been the primary contributors to the worship of Jizō, as they were the ones that needed him most for their own healing process.¹⁶

In theorizing the interactive healing process in both religious and cultural contexts, ARAI (2011, 11–17) offers a “world view compass” as an orienting device toward understanding how a certain group of Japanese women conceive and experience their reality. The group of women studied was twelve mature women who have seriously practiced Zen Buddhism for many years and have incorporated Zen practice into their daily lives. For these women, Arai posits that there are four dimensions at work, depicted as North, South, East, and West.

“North” represents the primary reference points to which an individual looks for guidance and wisdom. They are often abstract concepts such as gods (*kami*), the Buddhas (*hotoke*), emptiness (*mu*, or Tathāgatagarbha), harmony (*wa*), and so forth. “East” refers to the concept of self, including the concept of a soul and a capacity to be reborn in a better realm. The concept of self leads to the basic aims

15. There is a slight play on words here with the term *en*, as it refers to the “porch or veranda” of a traditional Japanese house, but also to “relationships.”

16. The support for this assertion has been provided throughout the current paper, especially in the historical overview of Jizō cult section.

in life, designated as “South,” while these aims in turn direct the activities (located in the “West”) through which women achieve their fundamental aims in life. These four dimensions work interactively and interdependently to form a world view.

Exposition and analysis of Arai’s interactive model is the subject for another article. Instead, I provide an alternative perspective that may enhance her model, especially as it pertains to the two dimensions designated as “North” (primary points of reference) and “South” (aims). Not so much an alternative but a type of enhancement, it is a framework comprised of four concepts: *unmei*, *shimei/yakume*, *matsuri*, and *kuyō*. While still nascent, the framework may help further highlight the significance of Jizō worship for women.

FOUR CONCEPTS

According to this framework, the interactive healing process is influenced by the deeply rooted convictions born of several major concepts that are at the center of Japanese traditions, religiosity, and cultural pathos. This theory may be especially applicable to women upon whom family roles as subservient wives and expectations to produce male heirs have been imposed and into whom these values are inculcated. Out of the several major concepts, my observation is that these four in particular—*unmei*, *shimei/yakume*, *matsuri*, and *kuyō*—have a significant impact on women. The overview of these concepts is provided below, especially as they pertain to Jizō worship.

The first concept, *unmei* 運命, is usually translated as “destiny,” “fate,” or “life’s lot.” Based on the meaning of the characters, however, it may be more accurate to interpret it as “karmic-driven life movements.” The term “fate” tends to signify a fixed, unchangeable condition for life, with a strong tone for predestination. The Japanese term, on the other hand, has the character 運 (*un*), which signifies movement (as in “carrying” something) and hence changeability. One may be born in this life with a certain “fate” and some karmic predispositions from previous lives; however, one is also given the chance to learn in this life what one failed to learn previously, thereby changing one’s predetermined “fate.”

Applying this concept to Jizō worship, women of the past and the present may have felt that it is their karmic lot in life to be born in their “sinful” female bodies or to experience an event as grievous as losing their children. However, they have realized that there is an advocate called Jizō who understands and defends their cause. He is key to changing their destiny, and they have thus taken full advantage of his bodhisattva vows. Hence, in their pursuit of changing the *unmei* of their own as well as their deceased children, women have contributed to the spread of Jizō worship.

The second concept I have named *shimei* 使命 and *yakume* 役目, meaning “mission” and “duty or role to fulfill.” They are placed together as they are

directly interrelated. It is my impression that Japanese people in general, but especially those raised in traditional households, carry a keen sense of their own “appointed duties” and responsibilities in life. These sensibilities are often derived from their strong identity with their roles within their family system, which includes ancestors and deceased family members. Even for those who have not necessarily been raised in a traditional environment like myself, the sense of one’s role and place in the family is almost inevitably felt, most likely due to the deeply ingrained Confucian principles in the psyche of Japanese society as a whole. For this reason, as I mentioned earlier, the impact of thinking that one has “failed” as a mother for aborting or losing a child is significant in the minds of Japanese women. Jizō, again, is one of the major supernatural advocates alongside the other popular bodhisattva Kannon for women experiencing dire straits.

The third concept I postulate as being part of the core that not only couches Japanese traditions but also exerts tremendous influence on the interactive healing process for women is *matsuri* 祭り. As a noun, it is normally translated as “festival.” As a verb, however, it is rendered *matsuru*, and it can be written in other *kanji* characters such as 祀る and 奉る (as well as 祭る), all of which can mean to “worship,” “revere,” “apotheosize,” and “enshrine” in varied contexts. As a concept, then, it reflects people’s fear of, reverence for, and reliance on the supernatural that constantly surrounds them. I posit that from this understanding of the concept comes all the festivals, ceremonies, and rituals unique to each region but ubiquitous in spirit to the whole country through the vicissitudes of its long history. In the case of Jizō worship and *mizuko kuyō*, too, the manners in which they are conducted may differ among the individuals, temples, and regions, but there is a commonality in the spirit in and for which they are performed.

The “spirit” to which I refer here is the spirit of worship driven not only by the fear of *tatari* (curses) or *bachi* 罰 (negative karmic consequences), but also gratitude and love. The primary conditions of the *tatari* and *bachi* are rooted in causing disharmony to the natural order (*wa o kuzusu* 和を崩す). It may also relate to the law of karma (*in’nen* 因縁) as part of the cosmic cycle. As discussed earlier, it is often believed that the aborted fetuses or the children who died prematurely can *tataru* (“curse”) their mothers and other members of the family because of the disruption of natural order and karmic consequences. It is also speculated that it is because of this that a ritual like *mizuko kuyō* is still performed.

However, as powerful as it may be, the fear by itself is not the primary drive behind the perpetuation of the popular ritual. I have observed that it is also by the spirit of gratitude, love, and appreciation (or not taking anything for granted) that the supernatural—including the deceased family members—is worshipped,

revered, apotheosized, and enshrined. In Japanese, there are two terms that connote the term “gratitude”: *kansha* 感謝 and *arigatai* 有難い. The former literally means “a sense of gratitude,” while the latter signifies humility and appreciation for receiving what does not come easily and is never taken for granted. The word for “thank you” in Japanese uses the latter in another adjectival form: *arigatō* (“for something that is hard to come by”). It is in this sense of deep appreciation and humility that women come to the feet of Jizō, not only to ask for his mediation, forgiveness, and salvific power to keep them from hell, but also to entrust their perennial love for their child into his saving hands. Every life is indeed *arigatai* (something that does not come easily and to be deeply appreciated). The sin of a mother who could not protect that precious life of a child is atoned for by the sacrificial power of the bodhisattva, who is to be thanked.

Finally, the fourth concept—*kuyō* 供養—is directly related to the sense of duty, fear, appreciation, and humility all working interdependently. As discussed previously, the term is usually translated as “a memorial service.” However, it carries a much deeper meaning than simply conducting a service in memory of the deceased, as the *kanji* character *yō* 養 signifies “nourishment.” As a verb (*kuyō suru* 供養する), it refers to “caring for and showing respect to the deceased.” The “deceased” here can be both the ancestors and anyone in the family who died recently, including children who may have passed on prematurely due to illnesses or natural disasters, or who never had the chance to be in this world due to fetal demise or abortion. By engaging in *kuyō*, then, people seek to maintain relationships with the deceased family through generations, bridging this world with the other side of the *sanzu no kawa* 三途の川 (the river that separates this world from the afterlife or the heavenly realm). It is considered both an obligation and a privilege for the offspring based on the Confucian tenet deeply ingrained in the Japanese pathos.

In addition, the act of *kuyō* can be a source of strength and healing for some, as it may serve as an act of atonement, a renewal of one’s vow to keep living strong for the sake of the loved ones that are still watching over from the other side, and a reminder that physical deaths do not end spiritual relationships. The ritual of *mizuko kuyō* is thus an enactment of this maternal religiosity and sensibility toward a lost child, made sacred by the perpetual love for the child and profound appreciation for the strong advocacy of Jizō bodhisattva. Hence, it has always been, and will be in the future, in women’s interest to promote and perpetuate the popularity of Jizō worship throughout the country and now the world—for their own healing and empowerment.

As with Arai’s model, these four concepts comprising the framework are interactive and interdependent. One dimension informs the other three. For example, a woman believes that it is her *unmei* (fate/destiny) to be born as a woman with an irremediable female body at a particular time and place, to be

married off to a certain household, and to end up losing a child due to varied causes. However, believing that her *unmei* can be changed or at least moved to a favorable place by the power of the compassionate Jizō bodhisattva, who is the king of the underdog and the savior of the damned, she worships (*matsuru*) him in the non-threatening form of a child and promotes rituals (*matsuri* and *girei* 儀礼) relating to him.

Additionally, the rituals can serve the purpose of *kuyō* for the ancestors, as well as the deceased children and immediate family members. *Kuyō* is thus the duty (*yakume*) of the woman and her offspring to perform. She may also find that it is both her destiny and mission (*shimei*) to promote the development of such rituals and pass on the practice, in order to help heal and empower women like herself. She then discovers that in helping others to heal, she herself progresses in her own healing process and is thus empowered. Hence, she finds that at final analysis, it has been her *unmei* to experience all that she has and her *shimei* to encourage other women like herself to help heal and empower one another.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how women have played the key role in popularizing and reifying the Jizō cult and rituals in various forms. I have asserted that women are the reason Jizō worship as a whole has sustained its popularity, prompting new movements such as *mizuko kuyō*, through the vicissitudes of time and regions across the country—and now more recently, across cultures (WILSON 2009).¹⁷ My assessment is that for women, ritual practices pertaining to Jizō bodhisattva are phenomena that are socioculturally driven, as well as personally and spiritually charged. Furthermore, *mizuko kuyō* can be viewed as the rite of affliction for its multivalent aspects of redressing the sense of wrong and pain of various sorts. As such, Jizō worship through ritual practice allows for active participation of women seeking healing and protection. I have briefly explored my conceptual framework that I am developing to add support to this view.

By actively *choosing* to participate in the ritual, then, women experience the amalgamated power of Jizō and the local gods, unlimited by sectarian boundaries. Thus, in societies deeply rooted in Confucian traditions like Japan, the importance of reestablishing “harmony” (*wa*) and “the natural order of things” cannot be overemphasized for maintaining ties between families, among both the living and the dead. While the unforgiving social mores continue to be imposed on women, active participation in the ritual can transform these women as both the recipients and the conduits of the compassion and power of Jizō.

17. *Mizuko kuyō* rituals are now being performed in temples and religious centers in the United States.

The bodhisattva Jizō thus continues to fulfill his vows by being the protector, the savior, and the champion for the weak, the damned, and the lost—especially for women of varied backgrounds over many centuries. I am certain that Jizō will continue to occupy an important place in the lives of many women who call on him, as their healing and empowering agent, not only in Japan today but also in countries across the globe in the future.

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APPENDIX

A translation of the *Jizō bosatsu hongan kyō* 地藏菩薩本願經 (Ch. *Dizāng púsà benyuan jing*) (Daizōkyō Text Data Base: T no. 412, 13.778b18–c11):

他不可說劫尚為菩薩。又於過去不可思議 阿僧祇劫。時世有佛號曰覺華定自在王如來。彼佛壽命四百千萬億阿僧祇劫。像法之中有一婆羅門女。宿福深厚眾所欽敬。行住坐臥諸天衛護。其母信邪常輕三寶。是時聖女廣說方便。勸誘其母令生正見。而此女母未全生信。不久命終。魂神墮在無間地獄。

時婆羅門女知母在世不信因果。計當隨業必生惡趣。遂賣家宅廣求香華及諸供具。於先佛塔寺大興供養。見覺華定自在王如來其形像在一寺中。塑畫威容端嚴畢備。時婆羅門女瞻禮尊容。倍生敬仰私自念言。佛名大覺具一切智。若在世時 我母死後。儻來問佛必知處所。

時婆羅門女垂泣良久。瞻戀如來忽聞空中聲曰。泣者聖女勿至悲哀。我今示汝母之去處。婆羅門女合掌向空而白空曰。是何神德寬我憂慮。我自失母已來晝夜憶戀。無處可問知母生界。時空中有聲再報女曰。我是汝所瞻禮者。過去覺華定自在王如來。見汝憶母倍於常情眾生之分。故來告示。婆羅門女聞此聲已。舉身自撲支節皆損。左右扶侍良久方蘇。而白空曰。願佛慈愍速說我母生界。

The Sūtra of the Past Vows of Earth Store Bodhisattva (ŚIKṢĀNANDA 2000;¹⁸ Buddhist Text Translation Society 2000, 6–8; cited in GLASSMAN [2012, 16–17]:

At another time, inconceivable *asamkhyeya* eons ago, there was a Buddha named Enlightenment-Flower Samādhi Self-Mastery King Thus Come One. That Buddha's life span was four hundred billion *asamkhyeya* eons. During his Dharma-Image Age, there lived a Brahman woman endowed with ample blessings from previous lives who was respected by everyone. Whether she was walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, the gods surrounded and protected her. Her mother, however, embraced a deviant faith and often slighted the Triple Jewels. The worthy daughter made use of many expedients in trying to convince her mother to hold right views, but her mother never totally believed. Before long, the mother's life ended and her consciousness fell into the Relentless Hell.

When her mother's life ended, the Brahman woman, knowing her mother had not believed in cause and effect while alive, feared that her karma would certainly pull her into the Evil Paths. For that reason, she sold the family house and acquired many kinds of incense, flowers, and other gifts. With those she performed a great offering in that Buddha's stupas and monasteries. She saw an especially fine image of the Thus Come Enlightenment-Flower Samādhi

18. The authorship of this scripture is attributed to the seventh-century Khotanese monk Śikṣānanda, who purportedly composed it in either Khotan or China (NG 2007, 107). It was not, however, incorporated into the Chinese Buddhist canon until sometime in the Ming period (1368–1644).

Self-Mastery King in one of the monasteries. As the Brahman woman beheld the honored countenance, she became doubly respectful while thinking to herself, “Buddhas are called Greatly Enlightened Ones who have attained All-Wisdom. If this Buddha were in the world I could ask him where my mother went after she died. He would certainly know.”

The Brahman woman then wept for a long time as she gazed longingly upon the Thus Come One. Suddenly a voice in the air said, “O weeping worthy woman, do not be so sorrowful. I shall now show you where your mother has gone.” The Brahman woman placed her palms together as she addressed space, saying, “Which virtuous divinity is comforting me in my grief? Ever since the day I lost my mother, I have held her in memory day and night, but there is nowhere I can go to ask about the realm of her rebirth.” The voice in the air spoke to the woman again, “I am the one whom you behold and worship, the former Enlightenment-Flower Samādhi Self-Mastery King Thus Come One. Because I have seen that your regard for your mother is double that of ordinary beings, I have come to show you where she is.”