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Glassman/The Face of Jizo

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CHAPTER 1

The Iconology of Jizō

The history of Buddhism in Japan is from its very origins a history of images. The poles of attraction and anxiety marking the first encounter with the foreign religion and its icons set up an oscillation felt down through the centuries. It was the gift of a Buddha statue in the mid-sixth century from the Korean kingdom of Paekche (known in Japan as Kudara) that first inspired the court to embrace and propagate Buddhism. In the chronicler's account of this event, appearing nearly two centuries later in the *Nihon shoki,* the awestruck emperor and his court are drawn to the image's "countenance...of severe dignity" and find the neighboring ruler's description of the power and truth of the Buddhist faith appealing, but they are not sure what course of action to take.[1] There is considerable trepidation that bowing down to this god of foreign provenance might anger the local deities. From this time forward, the competition and cooperation between indigenous gods and imported ones was to be mediated through the visual field.

> King Seimei of the Korean kingdom of Kudara dispatched Kishi Nurishichikei and other retainers to Japan. They offered as tribute a gilt bronze statue of Śākyamuni Buddha, ritual banners and canopies, and several volumes of sūtras and commentaries.... Thereupon, the emperor inquired of his assembled officials, "The Buddha presented to us from the country to our west has a face of extreme solemnity. We have never known such a thing before. Should we worship it or not?"[2]

Here we see the ways in which the face of the saint serves to foster a direct and visceral emotional connection. The reaction, however, is a

decidedly ambiguous one. The account given in the *Nihon shoki* goes on to describe the troubles and the debates that ensued from the worship of this image by the powerful statesman Soga no Iname. After an epidemic claimed many lives in the capital, the statue was seized and thrown into a canal. Still, after this ambivalent start, as subsequent entries in the *Nihon shoki* attest, statues continued to be imported from the peninsula over the ensuing decades; carvers and painters specializing in Buddhist iconography also made their way across the straits.

Before long, Buddhism became a driving force in Japanese religious and political life, and this trend only deepened over the course of the seventh century. The enshrinement of a colossal Buddha image in the capital, at Nara's Tōdaiji in the middle of the eighth century, marks the adoption of Buddhism as a powerful tool of statecraft. Its consecration, or "eye-opening," by the Indian monk Bodhisena, who painted in the pupils of the completed statue (the final act required to bring the image to life), also indicates the truly international character of the new faith. Clearly, the reasons for the eventual enthusiastic adoption of Buddhism in Nara-period Japan are complex, and a desire for improved political and cultural relationships with the mainland—especially on the part of clans with blood ties to the continent, like the Soga, a Korean immigrant lineage—no doubt played a large part. Nevertheless, the story of the impression made by the Buddha image in the brief and semi-mythological account of the *Nihon shoki* is a compelling one.

Images speak to the human mind and heart in a direct way that texts cannot. In this book, I explore the function and meaning of visual representation found in the history of one religious tradition. My aim is to make clear how images of the bodhisattva Jizō were essential to certain men and women at specific times, in specific places, in their efforts to understand this deity, to understand Buddhism, to understand themselves and their place in the world. Also, I take the writing of this book as an occasion to ponder the role of images in religious life more generally. As is clear in the earliest account of a Buddhist image in Japan—the *Nihon shoki* entry cited above—interpretation of the numinous power of icons was from the beginning ambivalent. (My interpretations will also be necessarily thus.) If nothing else, this incident and its aftermath demonstrate how the effects of religious works of art reverberate far beyond the frame; they cannot be contained within the body of the statue, but flood out into society.

It is my sincere hope that this book might also be of interest to those outside the field of Japanese history, as we together devise ways to think more deeply and more complexly about the use of images in religious cultures. There are moments in my narrative where a close knowledge of the

time and place will prove essential, but I will endeavor to move forward in a way that brings along as many people as possible. To this end, I have glossed Japanese and Buddhist terms in the text, providing romanization and a short explanation to help along the reader less familiar with the field, and have confined names and terms in Asian scripts to a glossary at the back. There may be places where the uninitiated may scratch their heads in puzzlement, but I ask them to press on, trying to keep the larger canvas in mind. I trust that the gist of my arguments will thus be available to any interested reader, not just to close colleagues.

This book is largely inspired by the methodological approaches developed by Aby Warburg, an art historian who lived around the turn of the last century and was a student of the Italian renaissance. While it is a commonplace today to insist that the scholarly examination of religious art must go beyond an analysis of form, style, and simple iconographical content, in Warburg's day the type of formalist analysis that would come to dominate twentieth-century art history was being heralded as the great new approach, a scientific method suited to the modern world. Going against the scholarly fashions of his time, Warburg insisted upon a different mode of investigation, one that took contextual meaning as a primary object, while at the same time refusing to be hemmed in by a narrow view of historical possibility. He occasionally referred to this approach as "iconology."[3] Bernard Faure has warned of the "double pitfalls" of formalism and historicism inherent in such an enterprise: "Iconological interpretation, despite (or because of) its sophistication, tends to hermeneutic overkill."[4]

Although Warburg never developed his methods into a clear and distinct discipline (Robert Klein famously quipped that it was a "science without a name"), his writings contain a great many tantalizing hints and his oeuvre as a whole provides a fascinating model for the contemporary student of religious art.[5] It has been said that Aby Warburg was the father of cultural studies, and indeed his approach (which he sometimes called *Kulturwissenschaft*) is just the sort of comprehensive and integrative method that scholarship produced under the banner of "cultural studies" has tried to be. For Warburg, though, images in particular were always the central point of inquiry. He could also be saddled with a similarly paternal role in the creation of what we have been calling visual culture (a term that refers to the study of visual culture rather than the objects of that study, as its name might wrongly imply).[6] Warburg felt that the doctrinal, political, economic, and social dimensions of a culture are most clearly expressed through the images it creates. I agree with this assessment and also follow Warburg in his insistence that images reveal points of tension in history and culture, fissures or fault lines that can

lead us to deeper understandings if we have the curiosity and fortitude to plumb them.[7]

Francis Haskell, in his fascinating work on the uses of images as sources and as evidence by historians from Petrarch to Huizinga, praises Aby Warburg for his embrace of ordinary images. It is not that Warburg had disdain for aesthetically pleasing images or great works of art, but rather that he felt just as much, if not more, could be learned from the quotidian painting or the clumsily carved statue. While many scholars in his day were interested in "low art" and in the folk, primitive, or grotesque, Warburg's innovation was to combine high and low in his investigations.[8] Just as he had an aversion to the "border police" at the edges of the disciplines and sought to integrate various methodologies into his investigations, Warburg worked to break down the imaginary barriers between the elite and the popular.

Giorgio Agamben maintains that Warburg's approach to images and to their contexts has deep implications for the practice of historical scholarship. In confronting the past through images, seeing through our own eyes what the people we study saw, we are forced to examine our own subjectivity in a visceral response that collapses the diachronic and the synchronic:

> The greatest lesson of Warburg's teaching may well be that the image is the place in which the subject strips itself of the mythical, psychosomatic character given to it, in the presence of an equally mythical object, by a theory of knowledge that is in truth simply disguised metaphysics. Only then does the subject rediscover its original and—in the etymological sense—speculative purity.[9]

That is, for Warburg, images offered a door to the interior worlds of historical actors. And while image and word certainly form an opposition in his thought, he also saw them as an inevitably linked synergistic pair. At the historical moment when his colleagues were emphasizing the timeless nature and universality of great artworks, Warburg insisted upon understanding all visual artifacts as embedded in specific social, economic, and narrative contexts.[10]

While the present study is nominally a book about the deity Jizō, it is also a book about the religious culture of medieval Japan as a whole. By focusing on the worship of one bodhisattva, we are able to discern the transformation and popularization of Buddhism throughout Japan over the course of the medieval period in a manner quite different from the sect-based approach taken by many scholars over the past half century.

In this book I intend to use certain strains of Warburg's thought to

create a kind of ad hoc method. That being said, it is never necessary for this method to become more than just that, a heuristic lens, serving where it will to allow us to see into the past with greater clarity. In reading Warburg, I have learned something about a different way of attending to images—a new way to listen to the stories they tell. I hope through this study to make a small contribution to the growing body of scholarship on "living images" in Asian religions. In studies such as Richard Davis' *Lives of Indian Images* or Donald Swearer's *Becoming the Buddha,* the idea of the nonmaterial aspects of religious icons is made clear. Through rituals of consecration and animation, through the practices and beliefs of the image's devotees, statues and paintings take on lives of their own to become "real presences," to borrow Robert Campany's term.[11] The notion of living images has been a potent one in Japan, and Jizō statues (resembling as they do the ordinary human Buddhist monk) are particularly rich in legends of embodied interventions on behalf of believers.[12] Criticizing the historicist and contextual research of Baxandall and others, Faure has pointed out that in an attempt to go beyond formalism by clarifying the economic, social, and political networks standing behind images, this research still poses a real danger of reducing the complexity of the religious icon to the fact of the object itself. Faure argues that what is missing is the response of the beholder, not just as an aesthetic reaction; icons need to be studied with an eye to "the *performative* function they have in a ritual context" (emphasis added).[13]

This book examines the Jizō cult from its first flourishing in the late twelfth century through its expansion and transformation in the late medieval period and into the "early modern" seventeenth century. It undertakes this examination through the cult of images. The study is an iconological one. I use the word "iconological" in the sense originally intended by Aby Warburg, not as recast by his widely influential disciple Erwin Panofsky.[14] For Panofsky, "iconology" referred to a level of analysis that unpacks the symbolic meanings of iconographies to interpret the meaning of the art object against its social and cultural background. For Panofsky, iconology was a tool for reading the encoded language of masterpieces of religious art, a language that was sui generis and sprung from the mind and soul of the artistic genius. For Warburg, the term had more to do with reading meanings through historical context and looking for ways to restore connections that would have existed in the mind of the contemporary viewer but are lost to modern eyes. With its attention to elements of the visual that are beyond the plastic, such as dance, performance, dreams, visions, and oracle, the present study is similarly less about the images themselves than about the events, actions, and stories that surrounded them and suffused them with an aura of miraculous efficacy.

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate the centrality of images in the promotion and dissemination of the Jizō cult and additionally (if only between the lines) to outline a general theory of images. Central to this imagined theory is the idea that it is a fundamental error to regard religious images first and foremost as works of art.[15] Icons are not art per se; to read them this way is to mistake them for something else. The powerfully affecting properties of paintings and statues depicting Jizō, while they are certainly also grounded in an aesthetic response, are really at core about the sacred power or efficacy of the object. This numinous quality is known as *ling* in Chinese, *rei* in Japanese.[16] My framework for this hermeneutic endeavor is a narrative one. The story I tell here is not the only explanation for the ubiquity of Jizō in Japanese Buddhism, nor can it exhaust all meanings of this bodhisattva's cult. It is but one possible telling, and I hope it is a compelling one for some readers. In this version of the story of Jizō's centrality in Japanese Buddhism, this bodhisattva who was an extremely important figure in China is utterly transformed in medieval Japan. While keeping most of the attributes he had in Chinese Buddhism as "lord of the underworld," he was assimilated to local gods of boundaries, fertility, and sexuality in Japan.[17] (Dare we call them indigenous, even autochthonous?[18]) Jizō's cult, especially through its connection to the journey of the soul in the otherworld, became closely intertwined with rituals of pacification for the victims of natural disasters and for the war dead. He also became the champion and special protector of those on the margins of personhood itself: women, children, and "the unconnected," or *muen*.

Jizō at the Threshold

Jizō has always been a bridging figure in Japan; he oversees life's transitions and guards the territory at the peripheries. It is no accident that one of Japan's most celebrated Jizō images is located at the checkpoint town of Seki ("Barrier") on the great east-west road, the Tōkaidō. Jizō's liminal nature made him an essential element in the creation and implementation of the logic of *honji suijaku* (literally, "original ground and trace manifestation"), whereby Buddhist deities were identified with local gods.[19] In legends of trips to the otherworld he has invariably been the Virgilio, the psychopomp, the guide through hell. Jizō also represents the possibility of return from that place, the presence of hope in the midst of despair. As a bodhisattva with the appearance of a human renunciant, he replicates the role of the Buddhist clergy, mediating between this world and the next.

In the sutras describing Jizō's past lives and his present mission, he is the savior of sentient beings in the period of "a world without a Buddha" (J. *mubutsu sekai,* Ch. *wufo shijie*) between the death, or *parinirvāṇa,* of the founder Śākyamuni and the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya.[20] The problem of the death of the historical Buddha and continued access to his teachings, blessings, and saving power has been a perennial one in the doctrinal, ritual, and soteriological formulations of the religion. This crucial question—why call it a problem?—manifests in many guises, from the cult of relics and stupa worship, to the notion of the essentially deathless and ever-abiding Śākyamuni of the *Lotus Sutra,* to the desideratum, common among monks of the Yogācāra school to pray for rebirth in the Tuṣita heaven at the pinnacle of our world of form, a kind of way station. They vow to dwell there with the future Buddha Maitreya until the time of his far distant advent. Of course, devotion to Amida Buddha (Ch. Amituo, Skt. Amitābha), lord of a glorious paradise in the west, is another response to Śākyamuni's absence. None of these concepts were ever mutually exclusive, but rather they meshed together in an endless variety of combinations. Jizō's charge from the Buddha to watch over and care for the beings in this long interval has often been invoked throughout East Asia, and in fact one source for his initial popularity in China was the enthusiastic promotion of his cult by the millenarian Sanjie jiao, or Three Stages Sect. This movement, which was suppressed as a heresy by the government of the Sui dynasty from the start of the seventh century, was particularly influenced by the *Shilunjing* (J. *Jūringyō*), or the *Sutra of Ten Wheels.*[21] Inherent in the doctrines of the sect and its approach to Jizō (Ch. Dizang) was a theory of decline: the present day is a particularly corrupt age, and reliance upon Jizō is the surest way to avoid the sufferings of hell. This is a way of thinking that held great sway in Japan from the late eleventh century forward. From the Hossō school to the Pure Land schools, Jizō was widely held up as a savior for beings living in these evil latter days.[22]

Some scholars have argued that over the course of the medieval period Jizō's role as a deity progressed increasingly from offering salvation in the next world to providing boons and protection to the living. While this distinction between "benefits for the next life" *(raise riyaku)* and "benefits in this life" *(gense riyaku)* is a very common one in the study of Japanese religion, I do not think it is particularly useful when applied to this bodhisattva, especially when looking for change through time. Jizō was invoked in rainmaking ceremonies from an early date and, with Kannon, was considered a protector of women in childbirth. This pair was referred to in the latter context as the light-emitting bodhisattvas *(hōkō bosatsu).*[23] These are early examples of Jizō worship for "benefits in this

life." Of course Jizō was also from the start a savior in the hells as he had been in China, and furthermore in Japan he became identified with King Enma, the supreme judge of hell, but he was also often invoked in more practical matters, the grave or mundane concerns of the living. What is true of Jizō is that as the middle ages wore on, his cult became more and more associated with liminal times and places, with marginal people, and with the special dead. This book is about his movement into that territory, the world of betwixt and between, a zone where his cult flourished. By the close of the medieval period, Jizō had become the most familiar and intimate figure in the Japanese Buddhist pantheon.

The story I will tell here is that of the emergence of Jizō as the bodhisattva of the *muen,* the unconnected, and thus as the bodhisattva par excellence. The Jizō cult thrived at the margins of the capital in Kyoto, near the cremation grounds and burial sites of Toribeno to the east and Adashino to the northwest. The gateway to the former, just north of Kiyomizudera, is known as the crossroads of the six paths of rebirth, *rokudō no tsuji.* It is here that a few storied Jizō temples stand—Rokuharamitsuji, Rokudō Chinnōji, Saifukuji—and across town at the entrance to Adashino we find the Nenbutsuji and the Seiryōji temples. Both areas, Toribeno (Higashiyama) and Adashino (Saga), were important centers for religious performance of the chanters and storytellers, sites for staging plays and ecstatic dances. It is here, in these sites on the edges of the city near the places of death overseen by marginal and outcaste performers and ritual specialists, that the Jizō cult found its full expression. From the time of the first national explosion of the Jizō cult as promoted by Ritsu, Shingon, and Zen monks in the thirteenth century, Jizō has occupied a central place in Japanese Buddhist practice. As Tanaka Hisao has suggested, the Jizō cult was spread by many groups: among them the mountain ascetic *(shugen)* practitioners and Pure Land preachers, as well as the elite and influential priests of Nara.[24] One of the lessons of the present study is that attention to the cult of a particular deity, or focus on devotion to a particular practice, can yield insights not readily attainable when the object of inquiry is a sectarian lineage. Looking at Japanese Buddhism and Japanese religious culture through the lens of the Jizō cult, we are able to see many things often lost in the gaps between sects, schools, and social classes. It is in fact these liminal spaces between that we will be seeking out—and by "liminal" here I mean not only standing at some geographical or social crossing or border (though certainly that too) but also standing at doctrinal, institutional, and familial fault lines. These interstices were a particular interest of Warburg's, since he saw images as devices born out of contradictions and oppositions, as embodi-

ments of cultural and ideological conflict.[25] Images, then, act as intermediaries between various social groups and different lineages of practice and of philosophy. Negotiations about soteriologies, about family, about sentiency itself, take place at the site of the image.

For Warburg, the gesture of the image, that frozen motion, is the expression of something inexpressible in words that unites polar forces. The message is not intelligible at a distance. It is deeply contextual and local, even if drawing upon global discourses.[26] The images that appear in this study are conducive to this sort of interpretation. They reconcile opposing forces: a Buddhist deity with a local god; the ideal of renunciation with cults of fertility and sexuality; the world of death with the wild forces of generative potential.

Jizō's cult attained a range of diffusion and a special status in Japan qualitatively different from what it had seen in Korea or China, and much of Jizō's popularity was directly related to his assimilation to local gods and local practices. The mechanisms by which this diffusion through the religious culture of Japan took place will be a principal subject of this book; we will turn first to the Buddhist and Shintō enthusiasms of the aristocratic Fujiwara family and eventually to village phallic stones, where Jizō images were erected on the very spots that these semi-autochthonous gods of various sorts had occupied. The custom of piling small stones in front of Jizō images, so often remarked upon by travelers to Japan, is evidence of the influence of the ancient practices associated with these deities upon his cult. As Ōshima Takehiko has written, "Jizō more than any other buddha or bodhisattva came to represent, like the *dōsojin* and the *sae no kami,* the protector of boundaries, and thus was offered the same obeisance of stone-piling."[27] The deities referred to here, the *dōsojin* and the *sae no kami,* are a central topic of the fourth and final chapter. This roadside god of physical and existential boundaries embodies the liminal aspects of Jizō's cult: (1) a close identification with performance by marginal "beggar priests," religious specialists in the *ars dramatis;* and (2) an increasing association with gestation, childbirth, and the care of the infant dead.

Rather than an attempt to conclusively determine origins or pin down meanings, this study is a way to tell a story. How people in Japan celebrated Jizō and brought him to life down through the centuries, how they imagined him into being—this is the story I am telling. This is a book about the human impulse to create religious meaning through word and image. As much as anything, it is meant to serve as a reminder that visual images not only are created with brush and pigment or with chisel and file but are in fact the physical instantiations of beliefs, yearnings,

dogma, and tales first given expression through voice or in writing. When we open up these images of Jizō, figuratively and literally, we find them to be stuffed with stories, echoing with a multiplicity of voices, filled with complex human relationships. And indeed, the images themselves come to inspire more stories, and thus the dynamic relationship between text and image continues to reverberate down through the centuries.

While remaining historically grounded and sensitive to context, I have tried, to a certain degree at least, to allow my imagination to have free reign. This is a hint from Warburg's methodology, especially as described by Margaret Iversen in her article on "Warburgian invention."[28] Here Iversen sees important parallels between Warburg's approach to problems and the discipline of feminist history. Welcoming marginal voices into the center and making clear the pervasive influence of folk traditions in the creation and development of Japanese Buddhism, I hope I will be able to clarify a few murky areas in the story of Jizō in Japan. If at points I have overstepped in my interpretations or been too free in my descriptions, I hope the reader will indulge me, knowing that this work is an inevitably imperfect attempt at translating something felt (and not just by me) at the deepest level of consciousness—a strong pull of attraction toward the evocative and simple figure of Jizō, the bodhisattva monk. I have tried to capture some of this feeling with the title of the book.

The term "Jizō face" *(Jizōgao)* refers to a roundish face with a gentle and friendly expression exuding love, compassion, innocence, and benevolence.[29] Jizō's iconographical features are known to all. Any Japanese person over the age of three or four, even one unable to recognize any other deity, could easily identify "O-Jizō-sama." He is all but unique among bodhisattvas in that he is represented as a shaven-headed monk wearing a surplice. All other major bodhisattvas wear an elaborate headdress, are coiffed, and are covered in jewelry. Jizō is also known by the things he carries, "attributes," or *jimotsu,* in art historical parlance; these are the ringed monk's staff *(shakujō)* and the wish-granting jewel *(mani, nyoi hōju)*. These two items are visible in most of the images reproduced in these pages.[30] It is in part this ease of recognition that helps create a feeling of closeness with the bodhisattva. In an expression that is perhaps not as common as it once was in Japan, one expresses relief at seeing a friendly face or finding a helpful presence in a difficult situation by exclaiming, "I feel as if I've encountered a buddha in the midst of hell!" *(jigoku de hotoke ni atta yō da)*. "Jizō" is often substituted for "buddha" in this phrase. The simile dates back to the medieval period, where we find it in the *Tale of the Heike (Heike monogatari)*. Major Counselor Narichika has incurred the wrath of his liege, the tyrant Kiyomori. He is

to be tortured and in all likelihood executed, but his ally Shigemori—Kiyomori's eldest son, who had already saved his life on one occasion—arrives on the scene. We find them at the moment that Shigemori opens the door to the cell in which Narichika has been confined, and finds him prostrate on the floor, afraid to lift his eyes. In Helen Craig McCullough's translation:

> "What's happened to you?" Shigemori said. Then Narichika knew who had come, and a pitiful look of joy spread across his countenance. Even thus, it seemed, must appear the faces of sinners in hell who behold the bodhisattva Jizō.[31]

Watari Kōichi, the young doyen of Jizō studies, has insisted that people who write books on Jizō should offer their own "theory of Jizō" *(Jizō ron),* even a partially formed one.[32] Toward this end, allow me to put forward the following assertion. Jizō in Japan reached a degree of approachability, familiarity, even intimacy, for devotees that had been unknown on the continent, and this owes largely to his position as the guardian of spatial boundaries, the protector of the limen, and the savior of people and spirits on the verge of becoming something else. My necessarily fragmentary theory of Jizō, then, is developed in various ways over the next chapters: (1) this bodhisattva proved a very malleable figure, easily associated with local deities; (2) his iconographical identity as a monk made him a convenient and powerful stand-in for the human clergy and, in more than a merely metonymical way, for Buddhism itself; (3) Jizō is a bodhisattva characterized by motion, both in the ambulatory nature of Jizō images and in the ecstatic dancing of worshippers; and, finally, (4) Jizō's eventual association with liminality both above and below, in this world and the next, guaranteed him a large and devoted following from all quarters of society.

By focusing on images, I hope to draw forth a certain special quality, perhaps most palpable in those rough and ambiguous stones that have been given a bib and a cap and thus been transformed into Jizō statues. While this book contains many plates of wooden statues and painted works on paper or silk, one of its primary fascinations is the power of stones to engage the human heart. It is then in large part dedicated to those artisans, both named and unknown, who carved images of Jizō throughout the Japanese countryside and to those hands, ancient and modern, that took an old grave monument or a worn statue and gave it new life, setting it aright again, bestowing it with new meaning and new life as a Jizō image, another silent witness to the ages (fig. 1.1; plate 1).