

## **Stones for Jizo** (A children's story)

*This retelling of a traditional story is intended for sharing with children at a Dharma school or in other Buddhist contexts. Please adapt it freely as needed for the age of the children and the circumstances. Kshtigarbha = Jizo = Ti-tsang: Earth Store or Earth Womb Bodhisattva.*

Every year when the children of the temple help celebrate the festival ceremony for Kshtigarbha (Jizo) Bodhisattva, each brings a beautiful stone to place as an offering on His altar. Why is this?

Kshtigarbha—Jizo for short, his name in Japanese—is a Bodhisattva. That's someone—a being—who wants to become a Buddha, to become enlightened, full of light, like the Buddha. You can look at Jizo as Kwan Yin's brother or playmate or special friend—they're both in the "becoming Buddha" business.

Like Kwan Yin (Avalokiteshvara or Kanzeon), Jizo is very compassionate and has made promises—vows—to help all beings. In particular—especially—he helps and guards vulnerable beings, those who are easily hurt, such as children, animals, travelers, and mothers bearing children. It used to be much more dangerous to travel, when people had to rely on horses and camels, and small sailing ships at sea. But even today, we hear of car accidents or airplane crashes, so Jizo still has travelers to protect. And we all know how hard it is to be an animal, especially when it lives in the wild or doesn't have anybody to take care of it. And moms who are bearing children need a lot of special care so they don't hurt themselves or their baby. Jizo helps all of these.

Jizo also looks out for beings in great suffering—those who are hurting—such as prisoners and others who are in harmful or distressing places. He is known for his lovingkindness—his love, kindness, goodwill, and friendliness—wherever he goes. He is also always benevolent—which means giving kind help—to everyone he meets. His pictures show him with a kind and gentle face. We act like Jizo when we are kind and helpful to everyone, especially those who are hurting, suffering.

Jizo always dresses as a monk—see the kesa (monk's robe) over one shoulder? In one hand he carries a monk's traveling staff. The staff has rings at the top that jangle when he walks. That's to let insects and animals know to get out of the way when he travels through so he doesn't step on them or frighten them. The rings are like bear bells that are worn in the woods to let bears know you're coming. That way they'll get off the trail and back into the woods so you can pass safely through. Shaking the staff and making the rings jangle are like blowing on the soles of our feet and on our brooms when we do the Jizo ceremony at the temple to remind ourselves to not harm insects or spiders when we sweep the porch or sidewalk outside.

In his other hand, next to his heart, Jizo holds a beautiful giant pearl—Buddhists call it the "wish-fulfilling gem or jewel." Pearls are very valuable, like diamonds or rubies, and people often make rings or necklaces or earrings with them. Pearls are tiny, perfectly round, usually white stones made on the ocean floor by oysters (a sea animal like a clam—it has two halves hinged at one spot and opens and shuts like two hands making gassho, or our mouths opening and closing). The pearl begins as a tiny grain of sand in the oyster's mouth. The oyster coats it with layer after layer of white liquid stone, so it gets bigger and bigger—like rolling a snowball to make snow people. The pearls are especially beautiful because they give off light like the full moon or a light bulb. They seem to glow all on their own, almost like a rainbow.

The giant pearl Jizo holds grants wishes, like the tooth fairy that gives you your wish when you place a pulled tooth under your pillow at night. The difference is that Jizo is REAL, though we can't always see him. We can feel him though. He fulfills our True Wish, what we really need and want in our hearts—the wish to know and be loved by Buddha, to be with the Buddha, to shine in and be part of His light. Being granted our true wish is like someone wishing for a toy car and being given a real one—life-size, big, and shiny.

As we said, Jizo helps beings, especially children, who are hurting. We call hurting “suffering.” Suffering means pain, a hard time, not getting what we want, getting what we don’t want, not being loved by other people, being with people we don’t like, being away from people we love. A place where there is a lot of suffering and hurt we often call “hell.” However, don’t think of hell as a place, like your school or your back yard. It’s like a dream. It can feel real, like being chased by a tiger or falling off a cliff in a dream. You feel afraid even though you’re not really being chased or falling. Hell is like that. You feel the hurt and suffering even though you don’t go anywhere other than where you are right now.

Hell is part of Jizo’s territory, a part of the world he has promised the Buddha that he will look after. It’s his “turf.” His job is like a police officer on his or her beat, driving or walking around to see if anyone needs their help and to protect people from bullies and robbers and people who hurt others. However, Jizo doesn’t have a car—or a lion or elephant like some of the other Bodhisattvas—he always goes on foot. That’s why he carries the staff. The rings jangling let people know he’s passing by so they can call to him if they need help. It’s like the bell on the ice cream truck that used to visit my neighborhood when I was your age. The truck goes slowly down the street ringing its bell to let all the children know it’s coming. As everyone comes out of their houses with money, the driver stops so everyone can buy an ice cream cone.

Hell—the place that’s not a place—is laid out, arranged, like a huge castle or palace. There are many, many rooms and they’re all different according to the kind of suffering and hurt going on there. There’s a special place for children near a dark, dirty black river with a big sandy beach. When we’re hurting, it’s like being on that riverbank. It feels really awful to be there.

Now hurt or suffering doesn’t last forever. It’s like breaking your arm or scraping your knee or catching the measles. The hurt eventually ends and you can go on with your life. Now in hell, this place that’s not a place, how long we hurt depends upon a king or president that rules over all the suffering. It’s a big territory. The king is named Lord Yama. He is very fierce, ugly and mean. But he’s fair. He keeps us in hell until the hurt ends, till your arm works again, your knee heals, or you get over the measles. Once your time is up, you can go on. It’s like being put on time-out by your parent or teacher. You have to sit off by yourself and be quiet for a while. It hurts because we can’t do the fun thing we were just doing, what we want to do, like playing with the other kids. But eventually, the time-out is over and we can get back to playing games and having fun.

Now in hell there are no clocks. People there tell time in different ways, such as the time it takes a stick of incense to burn down, or the time it takes to grow a tomato or a tree, or the time it takes to build a house. In the children’s hell on the banks of the dark, slimy river, they have to stay there until they finish building walls to keep the river from overflowing and washing away the beach. The children have to collect stones or rocks from all over hell and work together to build these walls.

Building these walls is hard work, and you have to work from the time it gets light until it gets very dark. The sun never shines in hell—there is so much smoke and dirty clouds—but there is a little light, just enough that you can tell it’s not night. Usually it is very hot in hell, and you get thirsty because there are no water fountains and you can’t drink the water because it is slimy and stinky. There are no air-conditioners or fans or even trees in hell, and the river itself is very hot, like boiling water or molten lava (like the kind that flows down from a volcano). Other places in hell are very cold, and because you aren’t allowed to take extra clothes when you go there, it’s like walking through a big freezer with lots of icicles. Because when you enter hell they take away your coat, hat and gloves, your hands either get burned or frozen when you pick up the stones. You also have to carry all the stones by hand because there are no wagons or garden carts or wheelbarrows.

It’s scary work, too. In lots of places where you collect stones there are horrible things being done to other people, which causes them to scream out in agony they’re hurting so badly. And there are monster like beings around: men with the heads of horses and lions and bulls carrying long knives or swords or big sticks. There are also mean dogs that live among the rocks and nip at your heels as you carry the stones back

to the river. Occasionally through cracks in the walls you can see “hungry ghosts” – pale skinny beings with huge bellies like they’re pregnant, and teeny weenie throats that keep them from swallowing food. Everything they try to eat or drink turns to fire. It’s really frightening, and very sad, too.

And what makes things even worse is that every night when the children are sleeping, just worn out and exhausted (very tired), a mean old woman sneaks by them, knocks down the walls that have been built that day, and steals the stones for herself. The old woman is very ugly because she has a disease that cripples her body and deforms her face. What little light there is in hell hurts her eyes, so she can only come out at night. Lord Yama makes her build this tall tower on a high mountain overlooking the river. She has to haul every stone up by hand – and barefoot – because the disease cripples her feet. She can’t wear shoes. The mountain is covered with sharp rocks and thorns, so it hurts her a lot to take those stones up to the top. But every afternoon a terrible thunder and lightning storm blows up and knocks her tower down. So she always needs stones, too. Everyone suffers in hell, even Lord Yama, because he doesn’t like to make people suffer; yet it is his job.

Every day the children wake up and cry because all of yesterday’s work has been torn down, and they have to start all over building their walls. This is more suffering, hurt, because they have to wait even longer to get out of hell, for the hurt to stop. They have to stay in time-out longer than they feel they should have to, and all the other children in the living world are having a good time. They can’t have what they want, which is to get out of hell. They feel it is very unfair.

Now this is where you and Jizo and your stones come in. On his rounds every day through hell, Jizo passes by the river bank and feels really sad and sorry for the children and wants to help them. One way he can help is to give the children one of his giant pearls. Remember how the pearls glow? The bright light of the pearls causes them to stick together and to other stones, like cement or glue. If Jizo gives the children these giant pearls to build their walls with, all the stones stick together and can’t be knocked down by the mean old lady at night. Thus with Jizo’s help, the children can finish building the wall and get out of hell. The suffering stops. Lord Yama has to let them get on with their life. Their suffering, their hurt, is healed, just like a sprained ankle heals and you can walk on it again. Their time in time-out is over.

Now Jizo is very powerful, but he is not yet an all-powerful Buddha. Whereas Jizo’s friend Kwan Yin sometimes has many arms and hands, Jizo has only two, and one holds his staff. So he can only hold and give away one giant pearl or jewel at a time. However, because he feels the children’s hurt – we call that sympathy – and his wish to help them is so strong, his kind heart can turn ordinary stones or rocks into giant pearls. It’s not magic; it’s just that somehow the kindness Jizo has turns even ugly rocks into beautiful, bright pearls when he holds them close to his heart. So if we give stones to Jizo, he can turn them into pearls and give them to the children in hell to build walls with. Then they can build strong walls the old lady or anyone else can’t knock down. This speeds up the time they have to stay in hell. They can get out more quickly. Your kindness and giving of a stone helps the children to get over their suffering more quickly.

The stones you give need to be ones you have carefully picked out yourself, ones you really like and care about, special stones chosen just for this occasion. It doesn’t have to be your very favorite rock, but choose one that you think Jizo will like and have an easy time turning into a pearl. The prettier or more unusual the stone, the easier it is for him. So your kindness and big heart help Jizo in his work by making it so he can have more time to make more pearls. Also, pearls are not always white. Any color stone will do. Ideally the stone is the size and shape of a peach, but any stone will do if it’s chosen and given with care and kindness and a wish to help the children in hell.

Giving the stones with kindness shows how merit works. Merit is the good karma we create by doing kind and helpful things. Merit is a form of love. (It actually is Pure Love.) We usually can’t see it, but we can feel it. It’s like the love your mom or dad shows you when you come home from school or you’ve hurt yourself or when a grandparent makes your favorite food. You can feel their love. Even animal parents show love for their children: it’s easy to see it.

This merit, this love, can be given to others, just like you give the stones to the children in hell to help them build walls. If it's done with a kind heart, it makes both you and the person who receives the gift happy. It brings joy to our hearts to help other people and animals, and to share in their happiness. We can't always see where kindness comes from, because it comes from the heart inside us, our Buddha nature. Just like we can't see the physical heart inside our body. And we may not be able to see the effect of kindness on someone else, for the same reason. But it's there, and that's why we meditate a few minutes when we come to the Priory, to feel the love and kindness in our own heart, and in the hearts of others.

Even if we only offer stones to Jizo once a year at this ceremony, we can offer invisible stones to other beings, especially hurting ones, all year long and all the time. How do we offer invisible stones? By being kind to other beings—people, animals, insects, trees and grass, your shoes and clothes, your house and school. Think how it feels to be them, in their shoes, in their bodies, or do their job. Help them, share what you have with them, love them. Your kindness and big-hearted giving shorten how long they hurt or suffer. Help Jizo help them. Give him an invisible stone—your kindness and your help. If you do so, you will soon find Jizo and his pearl within your own heart. You will become Jizo.

And what of the ugly old lady who stole the stones? Well, the children feel very sorry for her, they feel kindness, sympathy, toward her, because she has to suffer, hurt, just like they do. They remember how kind the children of this world have been to give them stones that Jizo turns into pearls for their walls. So each child as he or she goes away from the riverbank—gets out of hell—they leave behind one of their giant pearls for the old lady. That way she gets her tower finished. The pearls built into the tower make it strong enough that it can't be knocked over by the storms, and so Lord Yama has to let her go back to the land of the living, too. And even more, the giant pearls from Jizo heal her sickness so that she becomes a beautiful woman again. It was her hard-heartedness that made her ugly and have to suffer in hell. The kindness shown by Jizo and the children changes her heart, she becomes kind herself, and that kindness and love within her own heart cures the ugliness on the outside. In this way her true wish is granted, too—the true wish of all of us, which is to have a beautiful, kind, and peaceful heart.

So remember that invisible stones of lovingkindness and benevolence (helping others) help beings that are hurting. This is the reason the Buddha left home and became the Buddha—so He could help people stop hurting and have a peaceful heart. Kindness, and love, and helping others, and meditation are some of the ways He found that help people stop suffering. The Buddha spent the rest of His life—forty-five years, till he was 80 years old—giving away invisible stones to help people, and teaching them to do the same. When we follow His teaching, we give away invisible stones, too—those beautiful bright pearls that Jizo holds close to his heart. In fact, we become a Jizo ourselves, a special friend of the Buddha and Kwan Yin who wants to help people stop hurting. We may not be able to give as many stones as it seems Jizo or the Buddha give, but we give all we can, so that we and all beings might have a kind and peaceful heart.

Adapted freely from several sources. Rev. Oswin Hollenbeck, Eugene Buddhist Priory, October 2004.