



## Jizo Ceremony

By [Yvonne Rand](#)

In Japan, Jizo is the much-loved form of the bodhisattva of the underworld; he is the emanation of compassion who guides and protects transmigrators into and out of life. My first encounter with Jizo happened in 1969 after a dear friend of mine died and my teacher, Suzuki Roshi, suggested that we mark the spot where we buried the ashes with a small stone figure of Jizo. This first meeting affected me deeply.

For some years afterward, I felt a strong pull to the figure of this sweet-faced monk with hands in the mudra of prayer and greeting. Subsequently, I began spending time in Japan and became reacquainted with Jizo. On a three-month pilgrimage on Shikoku Island, I encountered the evidence of countless people turning to Jizo in the face of born and unborn children who had died.

Back home, in the 1970s and '80s, women began asking if I could help them with their suffering in the aftermath of abortion or miscarriage. I began doing a simple ceremony for people who had experienced the deaths of fetuses and babies. Initially I did the ceremony primarily with women. Now I include men and children as well. Strangers assemble with their grief and unresolved dismay. Over time I have been struck by how successfully the ceremony has provided a container for the process of acknowledging what is so, for encompassing what is difficult, and for bringing about resolution and healing.

The ceremony is as follows: we sit in silence, sewing a bib or hat for one of the compassion figures on the altar. The figures are from different cultures: Jizo, Mary with Jesus, "Spirit entering and leaving" from the Eskimo people, or a mother and child. Once I have a sense that the group has settled, I then invite people to speak if they wish to do so. Our commitment is to listen to those who wish to talk without attempting to give advice or comfort. The principle of no cross-talk provides safety from uninvited comforting and solicitude, and many

find it to be the most healing of possible attentions.

After this, we form a circle and go through a simple ceremony of acknowledging a particular life and death. One by one, each person says whatever is in his or her heart while offering incense, placing the sewn garments on one of the altar figures, and bowing. I then chant the Heart Sutra mantra, give the unborn beings Dharma names, and say goodbye to them. Prayer sticks are made and inscribed with prayers for forgiveness and for the well-being of those who have died. No names are signed; this is all done anonymously. The prayers are hung from the bushes and trees in the meditation garden, thus committing our messages to the wind and the rains. Afterward we have a cup of tea, walk in the garden and go home with a quieter heart.

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***Yvonne Rand** began studying Buddhism in the 1950s when she was a student at Stanford University. In 1966, she met Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and began studying Zen with him. Since then she has studied with teachers in all of the major schools of Buddhism. She also has training in Western psychological traditions.*

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