

Audio Guide: Sai no Kawara

Just down the street from Manmyōji, you will see numerous small, almost childlike statues alongside the road. These are images of Jizo, one of the most beloved Buddhist deities in Japan.

In Buddhist tradition, children who die are sent to the underworld, where they are unable to get across the River of Three Crossings because they have not performed enough good acts—in particular, acts of filial piety. Trapped, they sit naked along a sandy beach called the Sai no Kawara. Their only way of honoring their parents is to endlessly stack small stones into towers that are soon knocked down by the demons who torment them.

It is Jizo who comes to their rescue, protecting the children in the folds of his robe and helping them on their way to paradise. For this reason, Jizo statues can be seen all over Japan, often wearing a red hat or bib and accompanied by small piles of stones or even toys. Parents will often leave these offerings in sorrow over their child's death, or in thanks for their having overcome an illness.