

Sentai Jizō

During the Meiji era (1868–1912), a caretaker of Unrinji Temple, Morinaga Sadakichi (dates unknown), was visited in a dream by the bodhisattva Jizō. In the dream, Jizō told him to dig a hole and enshrine what he found there at Unrinji. Morinaga, who lived about a kilometer from Unrinji in the small hamlet of Era, did as he was bid, and to his astonishment, he began to unearth hundreds of small, handmade statues of Jizō. Since then, the statues have been kept at the temple. It remains a mystery who buried the statues, although legend suggests that in ancient times there was a large temple at the site.

Such a collection of statues is known as Sentai Jizō, meaning “a thousand statues of Jizō,” and they are venerated at many temples across Japan. The Unrinji collection contains 825 statues, each roughly 8 centimeters in height. All are ceramic and each bears a different facial expression. Many show signs of having been hand-painted, although the pigments have largely faded. In the past, local villagers came to Unrinji to pray to the Sentai Jizō for the health of a sick child or woman.

Jizō is one of Japan’s most beloved divinities. Known as a protector of women, children, and travelers, he endeavors to ease the suffering of the living and the dead and deliver the faithful into Amida Buddha’s Pure Land.