

## **The Sesshō-seki (“Killing Stone”) Area**

The Sesshō-seki, or “Killing Stone,” is located in a small valley at the foot of Mt. Chausu, just upstream from Yumoto Onsen. A wooden boardwalk makes a circuit of the area, skirting the rocky valley floor where the source of Nasu’s oldest hot spring bubbles from the ground. In addition to the Killing Stone, this easily accessible area has several sites with deep cultural and historical significance.

### **Sai no Kawara**

The valley center is referred to as Sai no Kawara—the name used for the riverbed in hell where the souls of deceased children wait. According to Buddhist beliefs unique to Japan, children who are stillborn or die young are guilty of causing their parents grief; they also had no time to accrue the spiritual merit needed to reach paradise. Consequently, they must remain at the river in limbo, performing penance and praying for salvation. They work to gain merit by stacking stones to form small stupas, but a demon comes every night to scatter them. Luckily, the children have a protector: the bodhisattva Jizō, who is the guardian of travelers and children. Jizō consoles the children, often hiding them in his robes and taking them across the Sai no Kawara to paradise. Relatives of deceased children pray to the bodhisattva and make offerings in the hope he will intercede for their loved ones.

Jizō statues are often seen wearing red bibs or caps. These are donated to clothe the souls of the children, who otherwise must go naked. Visitors will also see many piles of stones along the walkway. Relatives stack them on behalf of the children, hoping to help them reach salvation that much sooner.

### **Kyōden Jizō**

In the early fourteenth century, a Buddhist monk named Kyōden was the head priest at Rengeji Temple in present-day Fukushima Prefecture. One day, he and his friends decided to visit the Nasu hot springs. The morning of their departure, Kyōden was annoyed with his mother for making breakfast instead of preparing his travel pack, so he cursed at her, kicked away his breakfast tray, and left. While in Nasu, his group decided to see the Sesshō-seki. As they approached Sai no Kawara, thunder shook the earth, and flames and hot water erupted from the ground. Kyōden’s friends fled, but he met with divine retribution for mistreating his mother—the priest fell into the sea of fire and perished.

The first Kyōden Jizō statue (at the back) was erected in 1720, and thereafter people came to pray that they would not bring unhappiness to their parents as Kyōden did. A new Kyōden Jizō statue was erected in 1982 and is flanked by two smaller Jizō. An annual memorial service is held for Kyōden in late May.

### **Sentai Jizō (1,000 Jizō Statues)**

The two Jizō statues to either side of the new Kyōden Jizō were part of an undertaking by the local community to carve 1,000 Jizō images. Each statue represents a donor’s prayer for safety from traffic accidents and natural disasters (such as that which befell Kyōden). The first of these statues was installed in 1978. Each statue has distinctive features and hand gestures, and their faces are turned toward Kyōden’s former temple, Rengeji.

***Yunohana* Extraction Site**

*Yunohana* “hot spring flowers” are the result of mineral particulates suspended in hot spring water and its vapor. As the temperature cools, these particulates separate into solid crystals that can be harvested for use as natural bath salts. At this site, grass mats were once placed over fissures to trap the mineral-laden steam. As the vapor cooled, crystal deposits formed. *Yunohana* were a valuable commodity in the Edo period (1603–1867), and some farmers used them in lieu of rice to pay their annual taxes.