Kshitigarbha

A Popular Early Bodhisattva

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

Kshitigarbha is one of the most popular early *bodhisattvas* (an enlightened being who postpones nirvana to help living beings). Known in Chinese as Dìzàng Púsà ('*Bodhisattva Dizang*') he was introduced by the historic Buddha to a large congregation of followers, who gathered to hear him preach in Indra's Trayastimstra Heaven. The Buddha explained that those who worship Kshitigarbha will be "removed from the ocean of suffering". Because Kshitigarbha pledged to remain on earth until all sentient beings were saved – even those already suffering in hell – he is sometimes known as the 'Bodhisattva of Hell'.

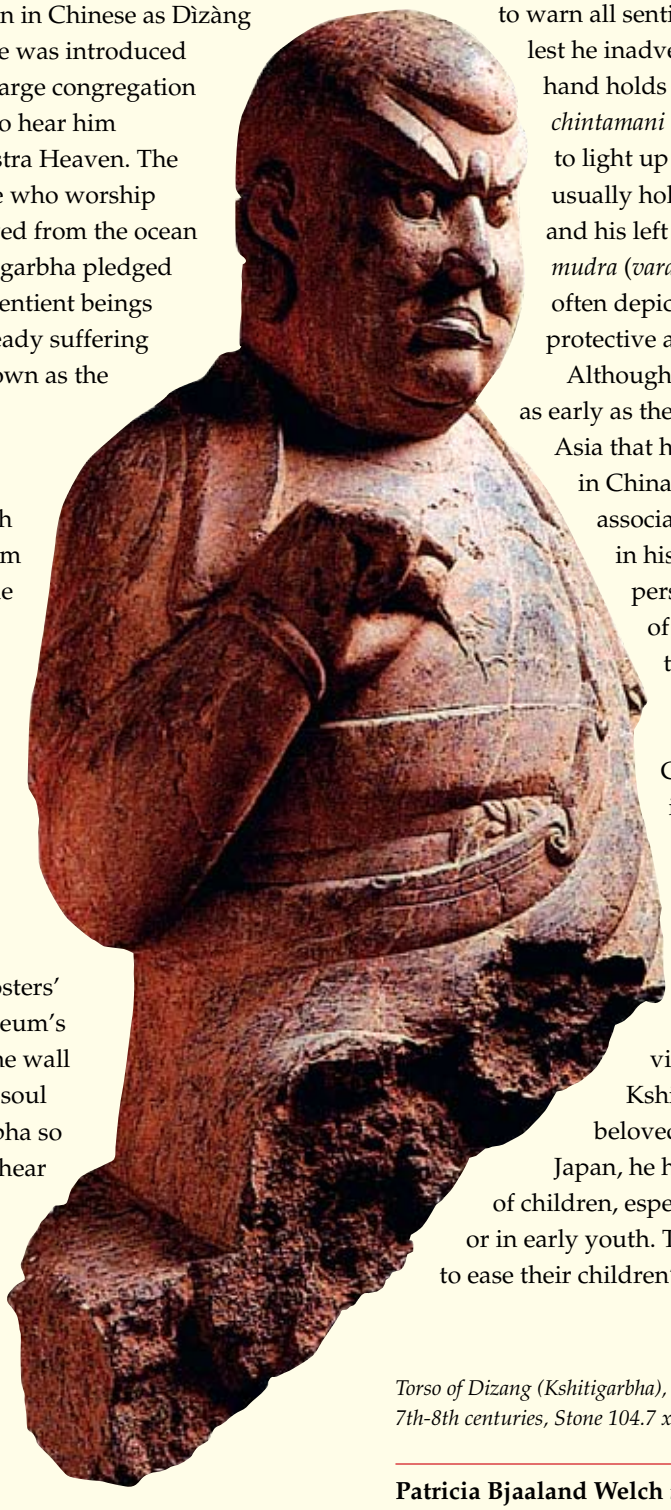
His name literally means 'Earth Treasure' or 'Earth Womb' and reaffirms a depth of compassion that brings him into even the most despicable realm conceivable to bring hope to those who call his name.

The Asian Civilisations Museum currently has two representations of Kshitigarbha on display: one is a statue fragment in the China Gallery's small 'Silk Road' passage, and a second in one of the 'Hell Posters' near the entrance to the museum's special exhibition gallery. The wall hanging shows a tormented soul in hell, praying to Kshitigarbha so imploringly you can almost hear his voice over the crackling fire in the background. When I'm guiding I always connect these two images – the poster makes the cold stone figure come alive.

Kshitigarbha is one of the easiest *bodhisattvas* to identify. Unlike most *bodhisattvas* who appear adorned as young royalty, he is depicted with a shaven head that is sometimes covered in a hood and he wears a monk's robe. When standing, he carries a long monk's staff (known as a *khakkara*) with six clanging metal rings (representing the six realms of existence) to warn all sentient beings that he is approaching, lest he inadvertently injure them. His other hand holds a wish-fulfilling jewel (a *chintamani* representing spiritual wealth) to light up the darkness. When seated, he usually holds the jewel in his right hand and his left hand is in the wish-granting *mudra* (*varada mudra*). In paintings, he is often depicted with a large head halo. His protective animal is the lion.

Although known in Indian Buddhism as early as the fourth century, it was in East Asia that he gained his prominence. It was in China that Kshitigarbha first became associated with Hell and first appeared in his 'Hooded Dizang' (*pímào Dìzàng*) persona as ruler of the Ten Kings of Hell. He is the patron deity of travellers, so he was especially popular at the time the Silk Road flourished. In Dunhuang's Mogao Caves, Kshitigarbha appears both in his earlier iconography as a shaven-headed monk, usually in the company of other *bodhisattvas* or Buddhas, as well as in his later 'hooded' form, typically in the company of the Ten Kings.

Our Japanese docents and visitors will instantly recognise Kshitigarbha as one of the most beloved of Japanese *bodhisattvas*, Jizo. In Japan, he has a special role as the protector of children, especially those who die before birth or in early youth. The surviving parents implore Jizo to ease their children's way into the afterlife.



Torso of Dizang (Kshitigarbha), China, 7th-8th centuries, Stone 104.7 x 30.5 cm

Patricia Bjaaland Welch *is the author of* Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery *(Tuttle, 2008). She recently led the FOM study tour to the Silk Road.*

Photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum