

Zen Dharma Protectors (Dharmapāla, 護法 Gohō)

大權修利菩薩 Daigen Shuri Bosatsu, “Great Power/Authority [of the] Practice Principle Bodhisattva” (full name: 招宝七郎大權修利菩薩 Jōhō Shichirō Daigen Shuri Bosatsu, “Summoning the Treasure [Mountain in China where his statue resides] Seventh Son...”). Also known as 龍天護法大善神 Ryūten Gohō Daizenjin, “Dragon Heavenly Being, Protector of Dharma, Great Benevolent Spirit.” Bodhisattva Temple Protector, depicted as shading his eyes with his hand and looking afar, said to have been a Warden of the Coast under the emperor Aśoka. In Sōtō Zen temples he sits to the left of the Buddha on the rear wall of the Buddha Hall (Bodhidharma sits opposite him, to the right of the Buddha). In the Sōtō Zen tradition he is a dragon-king who escorted Dōgen Zenji on his return from China. Dōgen brought him on the ship, in the form of a white snake, inside his okesa bag. According to legend, he helped Dōgen to copy the Blue Cliff Record on the eve of Dōgen’s return to Japan – though he was later eclipsed in this role by Hakusan Gongen, the “avatar” of Hakusan (see below). Thus, Daigen Shuri is closely connected with bringing the Sōtō Zen lineage to Japan, as Bodhidharma is connected with bringing it from India to China.

韋馱天 Idaten, Weito in Chinese, Skanda Deva in Sanskrit (full name: 韋馱尊天 Idasonten, Skanda Venerable/Honorable Deva)

Dharma, Temple, and Food Storehouse Protector; one of the eight generals of Virūdhaka, the Southern Guardian King, and commander of all 32 generals and their armies; he holds a staff as a weapon, sometimes horizontally. His mantra in Japanese: “On Idateta Mokoteta Sowaka.” In China he is considered a bodhisattva and stands in the Mountain Gate or Hall of the Four Deva Kings, facing the Buddha in the Buddha Hall (also depicted on the last page of Sutras, facing Buddha on the first page); in Japan he stands outside the kitchen hall, facing Manjuśri in the sōdō.

三宝荒神 Sanbō Kōjin, “Triple Treasure Wild Spirit”

Wrathful Temple and Kitchen Protector; commanding 98,000 demon attendants, he subjugates the wicked, hates uncleanness, and is honored in the kitchen as the deity of fire. He is spirit of the hearth, the kitchen fire, and protector of land, cattle and horses in Buddhism and Shintōism in Japan. He has various forms, including three faces and six arms, or one face and four arms, or eight faces and eight arms. Images of this deity do not appear widely until the 15th century in Japan. His mantra in Japanese: “On Kenbaya Kenbaya Unbatta Sowaka.” Sanbō Kōjin is also closely associated with a three-headed form of Daitokuten. In Japan he stands outside the kitchen hall.

大黒天 Daikokuten, Mahākāla in Sanskrit, “Great Black Deva” (full name: Daikokusonten [as above]) Dharma, Kitchen, and Dining Hall Protector, he carries a bag of treasure on his back and holds a magic hammer in his right hand; often he is standing on rice bags. His mantra in Japanese: “On Makakariya Sowaka.” In Japan he stands outside the kitchen hall.

竈公眞宰 Sōkō Shinsai, Zaogong in Chinese, “Stove Official Truth Cook”

Native Chinese Guardian Spirit of the Stove/Oven/Hearth. In Japan before cooking lunch, the Tenzo-ryo chants the Daihishin Darani and dedicates it to Sōkō Shinsai. In Japan his tablet sits on the kitchen altar.

烏芻沙摩明王 Ususama Myo-ō, Ucchuṣma Vidyarāja in Sanskrit, “Purifying with Fire Knowledge/Light King”

Protector of the toilet and septic system, purifier of uncleanness, destroyer of impure spirits; he also removes birthing troubles, heals withering trees, eliminates poisonous snakes; he has six arms with a club, vajra, two ropes, and a wheel. In China and Japan he stands outside the toilet.

跋陀婆羅菩薩 Baddabara Bosatsu, Bhadrāpāla Bodhisattva in Sanskrit

One of the sixteen bodhisattvas in the Śūrangama Sūtra, awakened by the touch of water in the bath. In China and Japan he stands outside the bathhouse.

四天王 Shitennō, Chatur-mahārājas or Lokapālas in Sanskrit, “Four Deva Kings”

Temple Protectors, Indra's external 'generals' who dwell on each of the four sides of Mount Sumeru, and who ward off from the world the attacks of malicious spirits, or asuras. Their titles are: Dhṛtarsaṣṭra 持國天 East Deva who maintains the country (white color). Virūḍhaka 增長天 South Deva of increase and growth (blue). Virūpākṣa 廣目天 West Deva of broad seeing (red). Vaiśravaṇa (or Dhanada) 多聞天 North Deva of extensive hearing (yellow); he is a form of Kuvera, the god of wealth. These are the four giant temple guardians introduced to China by Amoghavajra. In China they stand in the Deva King Hall or Mountain Gate, in Japan they stand in the Mountain Gate.

白山妙理大權現 Hakusan Myōri Daigongen, “White Mountain [Mountain near Eihei] Mysterious Principle, Great Power of Seeing”

A Sōtō Zen Dharma Protector, and local deity of Eihei, sometimes depicted as a form of Avalokiteśvara, and sometimes as a dragon-king. See Daigen Shuri Bosatsu above for legend connected to Dōgen. Monks in training carry a scroll with the names of Hakusan and Ryūten as protection.

Other Figures in a Zen Monastery:

Buddha Hall / Main Hall (Butsuden/Hondō):

In China (left to right): Amitabha Buddha, Śakyamuni Buddha, Bhaiṣajyaguru Buddha (or)
Ananda, Śakyamuni Buddha, Mahakaśyapa

In Japan (left to right): Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, Śakyamuni Buddha, Manjuśri Bodhisattva (or)
Maitreya Buddha, Śakyamuni Buddha, Amitabha Buddha (or)
Ananda, Śakyamuni Buddha, Mahakaśyapa (or)
Śakyamuni Buddha

In Southeast Asia (left to right): Śariputra, Śakyamuni Buddha, Mahamaudgalyayana

Meditation Hall / Monks' Hall (Zendō/Sōdō):

In China: usually Bhaiṣajyaguru Buddha; sometimes Avalokiteśvara BS, Maitreya Buddha, Kṣtigarbha BS, Bodhidharma, Ajñāta-Kaundinya (first disciple of Buddha to awaken; he is in the Tiantong Chan Hall)

In Japan: Manjuśri Bodhisattva (Shoso Monju Bosatsu, “Holy Monk Manjuśri Bodhisattva”)

Mountain Gate or Buddha Hall or Arhat Hall (in China and Japan):

16, 18, or 500 Arhats (Juroku Dai Arakan, “Sixteen Great Arhats”)

Assembly Quarters / Study Hall (Shuryō) in Japan:

Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (Shoso Kanzeon Bosatsu, “Holy Monk Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva”)