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Buddhism and Abortion: “The Way to Memorialize One’s Mizuko”

William R. LaFleur

Mizuko, literally a “child of the waters,” is the term used in modern Japan to refer to an aborted fetus or a stillborn. In today’s Japan, Buddhist institutions feel uneasy about condoning abortion but are also reluctant to condemn it outright. Abortion has been legal in Japan since 1948 and there is no great interest in changing the law. Many Buddhist temples provide a ritual called a *kuyō* through which both “parents” of a *mizuko* can pray for its well-being in the “beyond,” that is, in the “realm of the gods and Buddhas.” The bodhisattva Jizō is prayed to as the powerful and compassionate figure who guides deceased children through the realm of the dead. Some observers hold that this ritual does much to relieve the so-called postabortion syndrome. In the public press as well as in some Buddhist periodicals, however, some temples have been criticized for being crassly commercialized in the provision of these rituals. Shiun-zan Jizō-ji (Purple Cloud Mountain Jizō Temple), a relatively new establishment on the outskirts of Chichibu, itself an object of such criticism at times, provides promotional brochures, one of which is translated below.

This translation of a brochure published by Shiun-zan Jizō-in first appeared as an appendix in William R. LaFleur, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992): 221–223.

Further Reading

Samuel Coleman, *Family Planning in Japanese Society: Traditional Birth Control in Modern Urban Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Hoshino Eiki and Takeda Chōshū, “Indebtedness and Comfort: The Undercurrents of *Mizuko Kuyō* in Contemporary Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 14, 4 (December 1987): 305–320; William R. LaFleur, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

The Way to Memorialize One's Mizuko

1. The *mizuko* resulting from a terminated pregnancy is a child existing in the realm of darkness. The principal things that have to be done for its sake are the making of a full apology and the making of amends to such a child.

In contrast to the child in darkness because of an ordinary miscarriage or by natural death after being born, the child here discussed is in its present location because its parents took active steps to prevent it from being born alive in our world. If the parents merely carry out ordinary memorial rites but fail to make a full apology to their child, their *mizuko* will never be able to accept their act.

Think for a moment how even birds and beasts, when about to be killed, show a good deal of anger and distress. Then how much more must be the shock and hurt felt by a fetus when its parent or parents have decided to abort it? And on top of that it does not even yet have a voice with which to make complaint about what is happening.

It often happens that the living children of persons who have repeatedly had abortions will in the middle of the night cry out "Father, help!" or "Help me, Mommy!" because of nightmares. Uncontrollable weeping or cries of "I'm scared! I'm scared!" on the part of children are really caused by dreams through which their aborted siblings deep in the realm of darkness give expression to their own distress and anger. Persons who are not satisfied with this explanation would do well to have a look at two publications of the Purple Cloud Villa; these are entitled *Mizuko Jizō-ji's Collection of the Experiences of Departed Souls* and *The Medical Dictionary of Life*.

2. The next thing to do in remembering the *mizuko* is to set up an image of Jizō on the Buddhist altar in one's own home. That will serve as a substitute for a memorial tablet for the *mizuko*. Such a Jizō can do double service. On one hand it can represent the soul of the *mizuko* for parents doing rites of apology to it. Simultaneously, however, the Jizō is the one to whom can be made an appeal in prayer to guide the fetus through the realm of departed souls. Such Jizō images for home use can be obtained from the Purple Cloud Villa but can also be purchased at any shop specializing in Buddhist art and implements. As long as one performs this worship with a pure heart, it is bound to have a positive effect.

Some prices follow. Jizō images made of metal are either 3,000 yen for silver ones or 4,000 yen for gold. Add 1,100 yen to the price of either of these if home delivery is desired. These are prices as of September 1981.

3. Inasmuch as the Jizō image on the Buddhist altar also does double duty as a memorial tablet for a terminated fetus, it is allowable—after asking permission of the Jizō—to give it a place on the altar lower than the memorial tablets for one's parents and ancestors. Also it does not matter greatly whether it is to the right or the left on the altar.

4. The next thing of importance is to set up a stone Jizō image either in the cemetery of the Mizuko Jizō Temple or at one's own family temple. Such will serve as substitute for a gravestone for the aborted child and will constitute an eternal, ongoing ritual of apology and remembrance. Such action will undoubtedly have a good effect—a fact shown in things published in our monthly periodical *The Purple Cloud*. The expenses involved in setting up a stone Jizō Buddha at our place are fully detailed in our publication *Concerning the 10,000 Jizōs*. If requested, we will be pleased to send it.

5. The following pertains to the number of images needed if a person is the parent of more than one *mizuko*. One of each on the home altar and in the cemetery will suffice if all the *mizukos* were produced by a single couple—whether married or not. If, however, the father of a later *mizuko* was different from that of an earlier one—and, of course, also had a different family registry—separate Jizō images will be required. An exception to this could be made if a woman were to discuss this candidly with her second husband and get his permission. Then it would be just as in the case of a woman bringing along into her second marriage the children begotten in an earlier one. In such a case, if she requests that the deceased ancestors understand the situation, it is allowable for all her *mizukos* to be collectively remembered with a single image.

6. When at your home altar you are giving a daily portion of rice and water offering to your deceased ancestors, be sure to include the *mizuko* too—and let them know of their inclusion. Also pray for the well-being of your *mizuko* in the other world. Do this by standing before the Buddhas there and reciting either the *Heart Sutra* or the *Psalm to Jizō* used at the Jizō cemetery in Chichibu. In addition to that, if as an ongoing remembrance of your *mizuko* you write out in longhand a copy of the *Heart Sutra* once a day, you will at some point along the way receive the assurance that your child has most certainly reached Buddhahood. Until you receive such an assurance, you should continue to perform these rites of apology and remembrance.

7. To make amends for the fact that you never had to pay anything for the upbringing and education of a *mizuko*, you should give to the Buddha every day an offering of 100 yen for each of your *mizuko*. However, if you have had as many as ten terminated pregnancies, there may be hardship in laying out 1,000 yen every day; in such cases it is permissible to give only 300 or 500 yen—or even to give more or less depending on one's income. This is an expression of apology to the child for not having given it a love-filled upbringing. Therefore, you should put your love into these acts of remembrance, not being stingy with your time and resources. Once you get into the habit of thinking how much easier it would be simply to make a 10,000-yen contribution once a month, you are missing the whole point. It is far better to put a daily offering on the altar every day and then on a special, designated day pay a visit to the Jizō Temple at Chichibu and make a contribution to the temple. Alternatively, you could do it while making the eighty-eight-temple pilgrimage

on the island of Shikoku or the pilgrimage to the one hundred Kannon sites in western Japan. [See Reader, chapter 37.]

8. When a person has awakened to the value and importance of remembering *mizuko*, one gains a much deeper faith and makes efforts to live as a bodhisattva, setting one's mind to performing at least one act of goodness each day. Also vowing to go on pilgrimage to Shikoku or the Kannon sites is an excellent way to be total and thorough-going in one's act of apologizing to and remembering the *mizuko*. It is important to be of a mind *tdo* more than enough; to be of the opinion that one has already done plenty just the kind of attitude that evokes a bad effect.

9. Children who are miscarried, born dead, or die shortly at being born differ, of course, from those whose lives are cut short by being ~~min~~inated by their parents. Nevertheless, they too are *mizuko* and, when one ~~ives~~ considers to his or her responsibility for the fact that these too ~~diot~~ enter life successfully, it would seem good to provide them too with *mizo* rites, just as one would in the case of aborted fetuses.

10. Households whose members think about the seriousness of karmic laws related to abortion are also households that can take advantage of such occasions in order to deepen the faith of those within them. By continuing to perform adequate rites of apology and memorial, such persons ~~laer~~ are blessed with the birth of fine, healthy children. Or, as an extension of good fortune, there are many instances of people really thriving. Some person ~~find~~ that their own severe heart diseases are cured or that the rebelliousness of children or neuroses go away. When on top of all that there is increased prosperity in the family business, there is good cause for lots of happiness.

Why not find out more about this by simply paying a visit to the Jizō Temple in Chichibu?