The Middle Way of Abortion

By Jennifer Keishin Armstrong | September 8, 2021

In America, pro-life and pro-choice voices are pitted against each other with some on both sides denying the complexity of the issue. Jennifer Keishin Armstrong reports on how Buddhist teachings could transform the abortion debate—and benefit women.

In Japanese culture, the bodhisattva Mizuko Jizo is regarded as the guardian of aborted and miscarried fetuses. People place Jizo statues in cemeteries in hopes that Jizo will care for their unborn child. The color red is traditionally believed to ward off evil. Photo by istock.com / taka4332.

Kira Dane had just graduated from NYU film school in 2017 when she got pregnant. She knew she wanted an abortion and it was a relatively uncomplicated process. At age twenty-three, she wasn't ready for a child and wasn't conflicted. She was in New York City, where access to the procedure was easy. She was still on her parents' health insurance plan, which covered it. And she had a supportive mother who accompanied her to her appointment.

Yet the experience was still terrifying, says Dane, and a few months afterward, she broke down crying about it. "I had pushed away a lot of emotions," she says. "I had pushed away the acknowledgement that abortion wasn't just a surgical procedure."

Real change comes from being more honest.

Dane had been raised atheist, but her mother had grown up Buddhist in Japan, so Dane had dabbled in Buddhist ideas. She had heard in passing about a ritual called mizuko kuyo, in which parents mourn children they've lost—whether through abortion, miscarriage, stillbirth, or sudden infant death. Dane found a book on the subject, William LaFleur's Liquid Life, and the ritual struck her as amazing and validating.

Mizuko kuyo means “water baby memorial service,” and it draws on the idea that life has no beginning or end. Life is a fluid resource, which takes human form and then returns to the source with ease. The ceremony allows grieving parents to make bibs and caps for a statue of Jizo, a bodhisattva traditionally seen as the protector of children, and to leave offerings such as toys and candy with the statue.

Filmmaker Kira Dane’s documentary, Mizuko, is about a Japanese ritual that gives people the opportunity to mourn after an abortion or miscarriage. Photo by David Caprara.

Being a filmmaker, Dane saw an opportunity. She secured a collaborator, Katelyn Rebelo, and funding. Then she moved to Japan to make a short documentary titled Mizuko that explains the ritual’s Japanese Buddhist origins for an American audience. “I specifically felt the U.S. needed a voice that wasn’t a pro-choice voice or a pro-life voice,” Dane says. “It’s necessary to talk through a middle ground. I don’t want people covering up certain sides of the story in order to make a political point.”

Buddhism urges us to look beyond black-and-white, yes-or-no thinking. It focuses on interdependence, weighing individual actions within their specific context in order to understand how they will affect multiple people. Very little of this sort of thinking shows up in American political discussions about abortion.

In the U.S., abortion sits high on the list of especially divisive issues, and it helped create the us-versus-them culture that is so prevalent in politics today. Since Roe v. Wade, the 1973 Supreme Court ruling that protects abortion rights, abortion has become a wedge issue that has driven conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats far apart.

Pro-choice forces argue that women should have absolute control over their own bodies, including the right to abortion services; that a life in utero is qualitatively different than a life after birth; and that safe access to abortion is key to women's liberation. Anti-abortion activists, led by the religious right, contend that life begins at conception, and so ending a pregnancy is murder. Strident anti-abortionists have gotten violent at times, even killing doctors who perform abortions.

Recent years have brought increasingly restrictive laws in some states, making abortion nearly impossible if still technically legal. And now, with the appointment of Justice Amy Coney Barrett, a Roman Catholic who has publicly opposed abortion, the U.S. Supreme Court looks like it has an anti-abortion majority.

With abortion rights likely to be up for serious national debate in America in the coming years, we asked several female Buddhist teachers and scholars for their thoughts on this fraught issue.

Religions such as Catholicism offer clear guidance on abortion; Buddhism has not traditionally focused on it.

Zen teacher and pediatrician Jan Chozen Bays leads mizuko kuyo ceremonies at Great Vow Zen Monastery in Oregon. She always explains to participants the concept underpinning the ceremony—that life is a continuous process of appearing and disappearing. Photo by Shokan Harrison Martin.

Historically, Buddhist scholars and teachers have categorized abortion as taking a life and thus against the precepts of any Buddhist sect. But many contemporary teachers point out that blindly following precedent on such matters is not very Buddhist. "The Buddhism that is practiced in the West today is different than the Buddhism that was practiced at the time that the Buddha lived and passed on his teachings," says Roshi Grace Schireson, president of Shogaku Zen Institute in Berkeley.

That said, the early Buddhist Sanskrit tradition of the Mahasanghika school, for one, argued that early-stage embryos are still in a "fluid state," without arms, legs, a head, or senses, notes Amy Paris Langenberg, an associate professor of religious studies at Eckerd College and a specialist in South Asian Buddhism. "This doctrinal school actually makes the statement that very undeveloped fetuses don't count as human yet," she says, "so aborting them is not as bad as killing a late-term fetus. That's what Roe v. Wade basically says."

Many modern Buddhist leaders caution against strict either–or reasoning: the negative aspects of taking a developing life may be outweighed by other concerns; the mother's health may be endangered by the pregnancy; the parents may not be equipped to care for the child adequately, for example.

"Of course, abortion, from a Buddhist viewpoint, is an act of killing and is negative, generally speaking," the Dalai Lama said in a 1993 interview. "But it depends on the circumstances. If the unborn child will have a mental disability or if the birth will create serious problems for the parent, these are cases where there can be an exception. I think abortion should be approved or disapproved according to each circumstance."

Many of today's female Buddhist teachers share nuanced versions of this stance: they feel the first Buddhist precept of not killing isn't as straightforward as it seems. "What does not 'killing' mean?" asks Anne Carolyn Klein, a professor of religious studies at Rice University and the founding director and resident lama at Dawn Mountain Tibetan Temple in Houston.

She recalls a retreat in India where participants walked in a single-file line to minimize the killing of bugs. "We didn't cancel the retreat because bugs would be killed. One does one's best, and it's really important to do your best and not say, 'Oh, well, you had to kill some bugs, so it must be okay.' That's not okay. We do things that are not okay, and we recognize that they are not okay. But we do them."

This is where Buddhism helps most, with its emphasis on principles such as impermanence and avoiding black-or-white thinking.

Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara, founder and abbot of the Village Zendo in New York City, agrees, emphasizing that most Zen traditions interpret the first precept as "non-harming," rather than "not killing." "We are an interconnected whole," she says. "We're not just separate beings."

On a societal level, Klein points out that the principle of dependent arising is in play when it comes to abortion. Women need contraception to avoid unwanted pregnancies. They need proper health care and nutrition if they're expected to carry their babies to term. So until such support systems are in place, the government is in no position to require women to see their pregnancies through no matter what.

"We want to reduce harm," she says. "It's not always an easy calculation. It is a negative, having an abortion. But what about the woman's health? The health of her family? The potential life of the child? What we're looking for here is to minimize harm across the board."

O'Hara points out another aspect of potential harm: environmental concerns. "You can't talk about abortion without talking about climate change," she says. "We are overpopulated. When we talk in a holy way about some precept that is 2,500 years old, we forget that we are all interconnected and we all have a responsibility to this world now."

The intensity of the political debate surrounding abortion has led to, among other things, efforts to stop all government funding of organizations such as Planned Parenthood, which includes abortion among its services but also offers many other kinds of health care to women. "So the focus of this debate is not about life," Klein says. "It's about controlling women."

That said, Buddhist teachers caution against pro-choice activists' tendency to shut down shades of gray within the abortion debate. "I'm not saying there's nothing problematic about abortion," Klein clarifies. "Even though some of my feminist friends are like, 'Whoa, you can't say that.'" The issue is so polarized that people are discouraged from speaking the truth.

Roshi Jan Chozen Bays has experienced the personal side of the abortion debate through the mizuko kuyo ceremonies she leads a few times a year (in non-Covid times) at Great Vow Zen Monastery in Clatskanie, Oregon. As one of the few people who regularly lead such ceremonies in America, she welcomes anyone who has lost a child through not only abortion, but also miscarriage and sudden infant death, as well as parents whose adult children have died. But most participants come for abortion or miscarriage, she says.

Each ceremony draws about twenty participants to the monastery. They first gather indoors, where Bays explains the idea behind the ceremony—the Japanese concept that life is a continuous process of appearing and disappearing.

"It's like the waves on the ocean," she says. "We know a wave is a temporary phenomenon. It eventually disappears from our perception of it as an individual wave. There's a vast ocean of life out of which an apparent individual arises, and we call this 'a baby' or 'a child' or 'a fetus.' Then that life form returns to its origin."

Bays, who is a pediatrician by profession, has found that this philosophy comforts many of those who participate in a mizuko kuyo. "In the Western view, life begins at a certain point, whether it's conception, heartbeat, reactivity to stimuli, quickening, or birth, so we get into arguments about when life begins," she says. "But the kind of enmity that has developed in the West doesn't exist in Japan because of this view of life and death as not separate."

As part of the ceremony, Bays also shares the history of mizuko kuyo, which began in Japan after World War II. People there were suffering and starving in the wake of losing the war and enduring not only the atomic fallout from bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also fire bombings in other cities. Many families lost children and couldn't afford more children. Because birth control methods such as intrauterine devices and diaphragms were expensive and unpopular, abortion became legal. Soon it was the most common form of birth control, and many women were having several abortions in their lifetimes. For this, they needed spiritual support, and Buddhism filled that need with the ritual of mizuko kuyo.

Bays learned about the ceremony in the late 1980s, when she attended one at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center in Muir Beach, California, led by Soto Zen priest Yvonne Rand. Rand, who died last year, brought the tradition to the United States in the 1970s. Bays had been working with abused children and wanted to mourn the children she knew who had been murdered. Soon afterward, she learned the ceremony from Rand and began offering it herself.

After Bays explains the history to participants, the group enters silence and begins making bibs, hats, and paper memorial plaques for their Jizo statues using supplies provided by the monastery. Boxes of tissues and pamphlets with support resources are scattered throughout the room. After about an hour of sewing and creating, the group proceeds to the monastery's Jizo garden, a half-acre of outdoor space filled with trees, pathways, and Jizo statues. There, they chant and dress their statues in the items they sewed.

The ceremony fills a particular need in modern-day America, allowing space for grief around a personal decision that comes with a lot of political baggage. "Nobody wants to have an abortion," Bays says. "That's something that many people don't understand in this country. Nobody does this happily."

Her experience with doing these ceremonies year after year, as well as her work with abused children, has informed her own political stance. She's all for reducing the need for abortions. But she thinks it's most important to "take care of the children that we have." She says, "We do not provide adequate education nationwide for our children. If this country really believes in life, we should guarantee that. We should do parent training for all new parents. If you want to do haircuts, you have to be trained and get a license. But a bad haircut grows back. We have no training for parents, and the damage done to children is lifelong. We know that having a good source of medical care would prevent child abuse and child deaths. We don't have that."

In France, she points out, pregnant women are assigned nurses to oversee their care, from gestation through birth, and their new baby's care until the child is two years old. "This is not regarded as an intrusion," Bays says. "It's regarded as support that's been shown clearly to prevent child abuse. That is civilization."

A cave by the sea on Sado Island in Japan is an unofficial temple known for its Jizos. People make bibs and caps for the statues and leave offerings such as toys and candy. Photo by by Kira Dane.

After experiencing the mizuko kuyo ceremony in Japan while making her film, Kira Dane had her own revelations about the political debate: namely, that public discussions should include the positives and negatives of abortion.

“Real change comes from being more honest,” she says. “There are a lot of women who’ve had an abortion and want to be able to mourn, and at the same time know that they did the right thing. But it’s really hard right now because of that extreme debate.”

This is where Buddhism helps most, with its emphasis on principles such as impermanence and avoiding black-or-white thinking.

In preparation for her own mizuko kuyo, Dane went to Tokyo to visit a monk who helps people make their Jizo statues. “He was a very quiet, kind man, who sat me in this room, lit some incense, and taught me how to mold the clay into the right shape,” she says.

Dane worked hard on her statue. She wanted it to look just right. “You’re manifesting this face of a child that never existed, but the face of a child that could have been your child and changed your entire life,” she says.

When she was finished, he blessed the statue. Normally, it takes two months for a statue to dry out and set so he can fire the clay. But Dane’s time in Japan was limited, so she had to take her statue while it was still wet. She asked the monk, “Do you think it is going to erode away when I put it outside?”

He thought about it and answered, “Yes, but I actually think that’s appropriate.”

Dane understood. That didn’t mean she liked it. “It felt harder than I expected it to feel,” she says. “I worked hard on this thing. I wanted to be able to come back and visit it. But that was a good exercise. You know, just letting go.” For her, the mizuko kuyo was a way of acknowledging the future that could have existed and putting it to rest.

In the end, Dane dressed her statue in a hat that the codirector of her film had knitted and a jacket Dane had made herself out of her own clothes. Then she took it to an unofficial temple on Sado Island—nothing more than a cave by the sea, known for its Jizo statues.

There, after the liquid life ceremony, she said goodbye to the statue, which was sure to dissolve in the water.