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## *Mizuko Kuyō* and New Age Concepts of Reincarnation

This essay is an attempt to apply the religious views of people who follow New Age ideas, based on particular beliefs concerning reincarnation, to the question of abortion and memorial rites for the aborted. The performance of *mizuko kuyō* 水子供養 (memorial rites for aborted or stillborn children) expanded dramatically from the 1970s. Two of its characteristics are the threat of a curse from the aborted fetus, and sexual discrimination based on fixed gender roles. The performance of these rites has spread, however, without any religious answers to questions concerning the meaning of abortion and when life begins and ends. In contrast, the idea of reincarnation, which sees life in this world as continuing from past lives and into the present and future lives, offers a new perspective to the act of abortion as a choice involving human relationships for the fetus and the mother who bears it. In this article I present the findings of a survey of people whose ideas on life are based on New Age beliefs of reincarnation, and show how these beliefs allow them to accept the experience of abortion as women and offer support to continue their lives in a positive way.

KEYWORDS: *mizuko kuyō* – gender – New Age – reincarnation – ideas on life

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THE ABORTION was unavoidable. I think that this choice was the best one.  
Yet, we put an end to one life.  
I have to bear this burden for the rest of my life.  
I was frightened when I thought that we could never go to heaven.  
When I found this homepage and read the comments of people who are trying to live life more positively, I was relieved to discover that there are others who share these thoughts.

I think that abortion is one path. I think that a child suffers if the mother is not smiling.  
But until I die I will carry with me the memory of the child I did not bear.  
This is my memorial for that baby.

Abortion inflicts great damage, both mental and physical.  
The wounds continue to grow deeper and deeper.  
Nevertheless, the option I chose—to have an abortion—  
Though I am tormented still by a sense of guilt,  
Was not a mistake. Of this I am certain.<sup>1</sup>

The “old story” that “the number of abortions is increasing because young people these days are sexually promiscuous,” or “people who have abortions are not normal; they’re just young people out for a good time,” or “people who have abortions are indifferent to the fact that they have killed a child” is still repeated as “common sense.” And yet, where are the people that appear in the mass media as “the women who are indifferent about abortion”? As I look around me, I realize that I have never met such a person. And with the spread of the internet, people who have had an abortion have begun to speak of their experiences in their own words. Messages from people who have experienced an abortion are being sent to various internet homepages and bulletin boards, providing their side of the story in contrast to the commonly accepted “old story.”<sup>2</sup> As a result of these developments, we can see a significant shift in perceptions and attitudes toward abortion.

1. Comments culled from a homepage—[www.geocities.co.jp/BeautyCare/1022/top2.html](http://www.geocities.co.jp/BeautyCare/1022/top2.html) (accessed January 2003)—offering information and support concerning abortion.

2. See, for example, the comments at [www.kanashiikoto.com/issues/10.shtml](http://www.kanashiikoto.com/issues/10.shtml) (accessed January 2003). Comments are written by people who have had an abortion, and sometimes there are responses from people who have not experienced an abortion. There are also debates on how men should, or should not, be involved in an abortion experience.

In this essay I would like to examine how religions have responded to the voices of suffering of those who have experienced abortion. In particular I will take a look at comments by people who could be described as followers of “New Age” movements, especially the idea of reincarnation. Unlike the sense of a threat or sexual discrimination that accompanies the performance of *mizuko kuyō* 水子供養 (memorial rites for aborted or stillborn children), the New Age idea of reincarnation offers a process for dealing with problems in this life—both for the fetus and the person who has the abortion—rather than viewing abortion simply in terms of right or wrong.

The performance of *mizuko kuyō* expanded dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>3</sup> These memorial rites are based on the assumption that abortion involves killing a human life; further, the aborted fetus is known as a *mizuko* (“water-child”), this *mizuko* is believed to cause various diseases and suffering that trouble the people involved in the abortion, and this trouble continues until the *mizuko* is mollified through these memorial rites. This aspect of a threat from the *mizuko* “curse” (*tatari*) does not provide any religious answers to the questions of the meaning of abortion, or to the problem of when “life” begins and ends. In addition, *mizuko kuyō* involves sexual discrimination in that it is based on fixed ideas of gender roles, so that the pressure from the abortion experience is focused solely on women. On these two fronts, the performance of *mizuko kuyō* not only plants a strong sense of guilt in the hearts of those who have an abortion, but does not provide a resolution of the suffering that accompanies this experience. In contrast, the New Age ideas that I will introduce below, based on a particular conception of reincarnation, provide a religious view concerning abortion and the life of the fetus that is different from that of the ethos of *mizuko kuyō*.

First I will clarify the background in which *mizuko kuyō* became so popular, and the problem of the idea of a curse associated with *mizuko*, and then discuss the problems with *mizuko kuyō* in general. Then I will introduce the views of some people who have accepted New Age ideas and analyze how this presents the potential for different ways to solve issues connected with the abortion experience.

### *Mizuko Kuyō and Curses (Tatari)*

It is said that *mizuko kuyō* has no basis without the threat of a curse (see TORII 1994, p. 134). The fact that belief in curses permeates and supports the practice of *mizuko kuyō* is supported by the following, though limited, survey. Accord-

3. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of many international scholars, who have analyzed its particular characteristics and social impact; see BROOKS 1981, SMITH 1988, WERBLOWSKY 1991, LAFLEUR 1992 and 1999, HARDACRE 1997, HARRISON 1995 and 1999, UNDERWOOD 1999, GREEN 1999. See my discussion below.

ing to the results of a survey conducted among people who had visited a temple for the purpose of a *mizuko kuyō*, 85.2 percent answered “I feel guilty” or “I feel somewhat guilty” to the question “What feelings do you have with regard to the aborted child (*mizuko*)?” In response to the query “Do you think there will be a curse if you do not perform a *kuyō*?” 72.1 percent answered “I think so” or “I sometimes think so.” One of the conclusions of this survey was that, among the people who asked for and performed a *kuyō*, “the fear of a curse, the longing for some concrete benefit, and the intent to remember and memorialize the lost child are often inseparably fused.”<sup>4</sup>

What is the response of traditional Buddhism to this situation? It is rare for members of established Buddhist schools to deny the performance of *mizuko kuyō*; rather, there is often the attempt to justify *mizuko kuyō* by minimizing the aspect of a curse. TORII (1994, p. 134) points out that Buddhist priests do not use the expression “*tatari*” in order to avoid a direct confrontation with official teachings. Instead they emphasize memorializing *mizuko* as a “child” or “person” for three reasons: there has been the taking of life, an abortion causes harm or evil to the child, and to protect the “rights” of the fetus. The first two reasons—that abortion is murder (or at least the “taking of life”) and involves harming the child—still implies the threat of a curse. Even the third reason, which is the least unreasonable of the three, reveals a desire to treat the aborted fetus as equal to an adult human being, though it is still not clear how this can somehow sweep away a sense of guilt or the threat of a curse.<sup>5</sup>

Again, it goes without saying that a pregnancy includes the involvement of a man. Under current law, an abortion cannot be carried out in Japan without the signed consent of a man. If an abortion is problematic, then it is obvious that the man involved in the case shares the guilt. At the temples where *mizuko kuyō* is performed, however, the rites are performed almost always for women. Various reasons are given for this: “the woman has a deeper relationship with the fetus”; “A child’s problem is the mother’s problem”; “A mother has the strongest concern for a child”; “A child always seeks first his mother”; and so forth. All of these sayings reflect the modern myth of an innate “maternal nature.” As a result it is the woman—as the one who makes the final choice for, and physically experiences, an abortion—who bears the brunt of criticism, and is censured as a murderer, purveyor of harm and evil, or the one who infringes the rights of the unborn child.

In any case, it is clear that sexual discrimination against women through the practice of *mizuko kuyō* is not resolved through merely criticizing the idea of

4. This survey was conducted by Kanbara Kazuko, Iwamoto Kazuo, and Ōnishi Noboru of Tokyo Kōgei Daigaku; see IWAMOTO 1987.

5. It is worth noting that Ishikawa Rikizan, who promotes this interpretation, also actively calls for the Sōtō school to stop providing *mizuko kuyō*, since it functions as a burden to women, as they are the ones who have to take the responsibility; see ISHIKAWA 1993.

courses. Instead, let us take a look at the background to the criticism of women who have had abortions, and how abortion has been viewed as a “sin.”

### *Mizuko Kuyō and Gender*

The number of women requesting and participating in *mizuko kuyō* increased sharply in the 1970s and 1980s. The reasons for this increase can be seen in the fact that a large number of women became full-time homemakers, in line with the increased uniformity of the family in Japanese society, centered on the nuclear family, that developed between 1955 and 1975.<sup>6</sup> Gender roles within the family became more sharply defined, with women doing the housework and raising children considered a universal ideal. The myth of mothers as naturally affectionate toward children was born in this context.<sup>7</sup> Due to this “myth of innate motherly affection” (*bosei-ai shinwa* 母性愛神話), women who have chosen not to have children are easily perceived as problematic or antisocial.<sup>8</sup>

The number of abortions in Japan increased dramatically after the passing of the “Eugenic Protection Law” (*yūsei hogo hō* 優生保護法) in 1948 and through the mid-1950s, but then they began to decrease at a sharp rate. During the 1960s the preferred method of birth control shifted from that of abortion to contraception, and recently abortion is generally taken as a method of last resort, indicating that people now consider abortion to be a serious matter (see TAKAZAWA 1999).

After the war (in the later 1940s), it became increasingly common that childbirth would take place in a medical facility, under the supervision of medical personnel, and thus the woman having the child was no longer in control and often gave birth without knowing much of the actual conditions of the birth. The same was true for abortions—often the woman had no idea of how the procedure took place nor how the fetus was disposed of after the operation. This situation became the basis for a sense of guilt being forced on women from the outside (see FUJITA 1979 and YOSHIMURA 1992). During the 1960s it was not the women undergoing abortions, but the obstetricians and the members of the placenta-handling industry, who were promoting *mizuko kuyō*. The situation was sensationalized by the mass media, thus creating and manipulating social opinion.<sup>9</sup>

6. OCHIAI Emiko (1993) calls this the “postwar family structure” (*kazoku no sengo taisei* 家族の戦後体制).

7. ŌHINATA Masami (2000), by casting doubt on this “myth of innate motherly affection,” has been the target of severe criticism. Nevertheless she has pointed out that the difficult-to-explain nostalgia towards one’s mother is a cultural construct.

8. At a conference on 26 June 2003, former Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro said that women who do not bear children should not be entitled to receive social welfare benefits. He has never withdrawn or modified this comment.

9. In the 1960s there were many articles about the “dark side” of “Japan the abortion paradise,”

Again, WERBLOWSKY (1991, 1993) argues that the main reason religious organizations began performing *mizuko kuyō* was economic. That is, with the separation of state and religion and the agricultural reforms of postwar Japan, religious organizations lost many of their sources of income. With their income from funerals and related memorial services also declining due to urbanization and the shift to smaller nuclear families, the fees from *mizuko kuyō* serve to supplement this income.

As we have seen, behind the developments of the performance of *mizuko kuyō* are factors such as the strengthening of gender roles through changes in the social structure and the dominant form of the family, and the concomitant formation of gender-related myths. Women who become housewives in the midst of a dominant “myth of innate motherly affection” and are then faced with having to have an abortion, are then confronted with a sense that their worth as a woman is problematic. These women now face the criticism of people who are apprehensive about the recent sexual misbehavior and reductions in population levels. Another important factor in the spread of *mizuko kuyō* that must not be overlooked is the role of religious organizations that blithely incorporated this practice as a way to directly increase their revenues. Of the temples that currently offer *mizuko kuyō*, seventy percent of them began this practice after 1965 (TAKAHASHI 1999, p. 114). Considering the fact that a completely new ritual was created, it is clear that religious organizations uncritically accepted the social trends outlined above through incorporating the performance of *mizuko kuyō*, and they should take responsibility for practicing this while avoiding the problem of providing a theoretical basis for performing memorials for dead fetuses.

### *Research on Mizuko Kuyō*

Various research has been done to examine the recent developments concerning *mizuko kuyō*. KAWAHASHI Noriko (1995, 1996) has pointed out that it is necessary to differentiate two aspects of *mizuko kuyō*: retribution and misogyny,

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which emphasized the brutality of abortion and also called attention to the memorial services, and which contributed to making “*mizuko*” an accepted and common term to refer to dead fetuses. For details see the information on “Death before Life?” (*tanjō mae no shi* 誕生前の死), gathered on the homepage [www.ne.jp/asahi/time/saman/index.htm](http://www.ne.jp/asahi/time/saman/index.htm) (accessed August 2001), a site sponsored by the *Mizuko kuyō no Bunka to Shakai Kenkyūkai* 水子供養の文化と社会研究会, that seeks to make such information easily available to people in general, and not just to experts.

In her essay on “A novel about pregnancy,” SAITŌ Minako (1994) argues that the tendency to equate abortion with murder can be traced to the criticism of Japan’s attempt to control population growth through abortion by American and European delegates at the International Conference on Planned Parenthood organized by the IPPF (International Planned Parenthood Federation) in 1959, and to the media reports idealizing childbirth and attacking abortion on the occasion of the birth of the crown prince in 1960.

that is, the commercialization of belief in a curse (*tatari*) or threat from aborted children, and the sexual discrimination forcing a sense of guilt that accompanies responsibility for an abortion one-sidedly onto women. Helen HARDACRE (1997), in a major publication that censures the commercialization of curses (“marketing the menacing fetus”), criticizes the way such memorial rites are performed by various individual temples in response to requests from their parishioners, without any supporting theoretical basis from their Buddhist organization, and incorporating and sympathizing instead with memorial rites taught by non-Buddhist spiritual mediums.

On the other hand, some scholars have pointed out positive features of *mizuko kuyō* for women. For example, Meredith UNDERWOOD argues that it is a ritual of repentance that functions for women, being in a position of weakness or subordination, to be accepted in society: “In her willingness to repent, however, a woman indicates her willingness to realign herself within traditional lines of family and social authority” (1999, pp. 762–63). William LAFLEUR (1992) points out that *mizuko kuyō*, by utilizing the symbol of rebirth, provides a way to overcome the sorrow and regret that accompanies the loss of a child. By performing these rites, a woman who has experienced an abortion can avoid severe censure and still be accepted in society. In the European and American countries with a Christian cultural background, by contrast, no care is provided for people who have had abortions, which may explain their interest in the aspect of healing that the performance of *mizuko kuyō* can provide.

Elizabeth HARRISON (1995), in contrast to the emphasis on women as weak scapegoats, focuses on the active participation of women, pointing out that *mizuko kuyō* would not have become so popular without the active support of women. Harrison studied the activities of two women and concludes that *mizuko kuyō* involves a strategy of borrowing male authority, strengthening the mother-child relationship, and making public the heretofore hidden experience of abortion or loss of a child, and is thus an act of rebellion against men and a way to control the procreative power of women. A very significant point that Harrison brings out is that many women who actively become involved in *mizuko kuyō* are open about the fact that they have had an abortion, rather than becoming involved in anti-abortion movements, thus indicating that involvement in *mizuko kuyō* and an anti-abortion stance do not necessarily coincide.

There is also some research that indicates that *mizuko kuyō* and abortion can be quite compatible. Memorial rites at temples do not involve any reproach to people who have been involved in an abortion, but instead emphasize the sorrow that accompanies such an experience. It is said at some temples that if memorial rites are performed while “embracing the sorrow of a woman who cannot become a mother if she cannot give birth, and the regret that springs forth naturally from a woman who chooses not to give birth,” then not only will one’s misfortune be resolved, but this will bring about good fortune. At times

abortion can be an unavoidable choice, but the deep regret of a woman who lost the opportunity to become a mother can, through her penitence, open the way to harmonious family relations. Thus, abortion and *mizuko kuyō* “can, in some sense, be in a complementary relationship.”<sup>10</sup>

It is certainly true that women can find healing through *mizuko kuyō*, and that it is acceptable to women and became popular since it functions to make their activity more socially acceptable. However, this does not remove the stigma that is forced on women for having an abortion. The idea that women who perform memorial rites are somehow favored or blessed, and that women who do not perform such rites are still perceived as deserving of criticism, in no way eradicates the idea of a “curse.”<sup>11</sup> Bardwell SMITH (1988, 2000) points out that *mizuko kuyō* can help women who have experienced an abortion come to grips with their grief, but that it also contributes to evading “the need to address the specific factors which keep making abortion so frequently necessary” and “may serve to perpetuate the basic problems” (1988, p. 22). *Mizuko kuyō*, as Smith so aptly points out, not only forces women to be penitent about their choice to not become a mother, but also fails to provide any guidance for a woman to live her life in a positive way after having an abortion. Further, the attitude that abortion is the result of a woman’s carelessness does not contribute to any social activity that would help in minimizing abortions. As long as the religious meanings of abortion are not clarified, the explanation that *mizuko kuyō* provides aid and relief to women and their families rings hollow.

The question of curses in connection with *mizuko kuyō*, and the problem that criticism of abortion tends to focus and apply pressure on women, are two problems that remain even if one admits that participation in memorial rites offers some healing. One of the reasons for these problems is that a religious basis or justification for *mizuko kuyō* has never been clearly delineated. Both issues are dependent on the explanation of when human life begins and ends; as long as this point is not clarified, the issues surrounding *mizuko kuyō* will never be resolved.

*Mizuko kuyō* depends on the assumption that human life begins at the moment of conception. If one accepts that an individual human person exists from the moment of conception, then—for whatever reason, whether through a miscarriage or an abortion—when that life comes to an end, an irrevocable sense of guilt will surface. As long as abortion is thought of as the taking of life,

10. See the homepage [www.ne.jp/asahi/time/saman/index.htm](http://www.ne.jp/asahi/time/saman/index.htm), section 5 on “Buddhist Monks and the Mass Media” (Bukkyō sōryo to taishū zasshi 仏教僧侶と大衆雑誌). Accessed in August 2001.

11. The same homepage quotes a Buddhist monk who criticizes women who do not perform memorial rites in the same terms as his criticism of women who have had an abortion: “they can commit murder and not be bothered. How can you live and raise children with such feelings? But if they are penitent, and [have an abortion] because it is unavoidable, then they should perform memorial rites. This is what I teach them.”



that is, as long as there is a perception that it is wrong, then it is easy to conclude that this will lead to evil results, and the blame for that will tend to be focused on women.

Is it an obvious principle, however, to consider conception as the beginning of life? IGETA (1996) claims that this is not an absolute truth but an idea that people have constructed along with the development of concepts of human rights in a modern society, and the claim that the fetus is “a human being from the moment of conception” is a type of paradigm that is arbitrarily constructed in various societies and cultures. Ogino Miho, who has studied the history of abortion in various cultures, writes, “The point at which life begins, as well as where it ends, has not yet been determined through modern biology, and perhaps can never be determined. Where does one draw the line in the continuous process of the emergence of life and say that, beyond that line there is no ‘person’? Such distinctions are relative and arbitrary, and depend greatly on the values and views of life and death in individual societies” (OGINO 2002, p. 59).

Nevertheless, various religious traditions—including traditional Buddhism and some new religions—have promoted the idea that conception is the beginning of human life as an obvious principle and absolute truth. This idea is based on modern concepts of human rights or contemporary scientific and medical standpoints, and a construction based on religious ideas has been neglected. Sensational images such as “buried in the dark” or “the crying spirit of the *mizuko*” are repeated, but it is not clear whether there is any difference between a fetus and a child who survives the birth process, whether or not the spirit of the *mizuko* is reborn, or whether it goes to “paradise” (*gokuraku* 極楽). Neither is it clear why the responsibility for the abortion is limited to the woman who has the abortion, and not to the man who was involved in the conception and the decision to have an abortion, nor to the doctor who performs the abortion. Again, it is not clear why an abortion would lead to disease and suffering among people who were not directly involved in the abortion (such as the woman’s other family members). In other words, the religious explanations connected with *mizuko kuyō* are designed to emotionally arouse a sense of guilt among women who are suffering from the experience of an abortion.

In contrast to the worldview reflected in the practice of *mizuko kuyō*, there is another way of thinking in which it is meaningless to try and identify one single moment as the beginning of life. From the perspective of reincarnation, in which life in this present world is just one form of a spirit that continues from the past and into the present and future, the act of abortion is a choice made within the human relationship between the fetus and the pregnant woman, that is, it is an act that involves the choice of the woman, the choice of the fetus, and the choice of the others involved in the situation. It is not that the choice is good or bad, but is something that must be resolved within the lives of each of

the involved persons. This way of thinking can be called “New Age,” and I would like to examine it in more detail.

### *New Age Worldviews*

Recently at bookstores, lectures, seminars, and therapy sessions, it is not uncommon to come across mention of terms such as the spiritual world, New Age, new spiritual movements, therapy culture, healing, and so forth. I have investigated a number of people who have been influenced by New Age ideas, have become aware of their own spirituality, and have become involved in activities with people who share common ideas, in order to see how they perceive the question of abortion and *mizuko kuyō*. I limit my investigation to those who show an affinity to the concepts of “reincarnation” (*rinne* 輪廻) and “previous lives” (*zense* 前世). Most of the people interviewed happened to be women, but that was not my intent from the beginning. Also, the people discussed here do not necessarily use the terms “spirituality” or “New Age” themselves. They are a mixed group, including people who have studied hypnotherapy and then started a method of therapy involving previous lives (*zense ryōhō* 前世療法), who are involved in teaching channeling through giving lectures, who are active as “voice healers” teaching that everyone possesses a “voice” that is capable of healing, and so forth. Their activities include lectures, seminars, workshops, and concerts, and are not limited to a regular group of participants. These movements can be called New Age in the sense that they resist organization. Again, many of the books that are used by these people or groups can be classified as New Age. Many of these people or groups show a strong interest in healing, another reason to consider them participants in New Age movements.

There are various definitions of “New Age.” KOIKE Yasushi (1998, pp. 8–12) defines “New Age movements” in the following terms: “New Age, in a general sense, refers to various currents in the industrialized nations in which people seek individual and present transformation of consciousness through participation in a loose network of people sharing a worldview that stresses a harmonious and holistic attitude.” SHIMAZONO Susumu (1996) points out that the term “New Age movements” is ambiguous, and says that the term is often applied to similar movements and causes confusion. He also points out that there are regional differences that should not be applied to such movements in all geographical contexts. To refer to a global phenomenon, Shimazono prefers to use the term “new spirituality movements” (*shin reisei undō* 新靈性運動). In this essay I will use the term “New Age” in order to make a contrast between some contemporary ways of thinking and that of the ways of thinking that support *mizuko kuyō* among people who considered themselves Buddhists or members of new religions.

One common feature of New Age movements in many areas is an interest in

life after death. In a study of New Age worldviews, Wouter HANEGRAAFF (1998, pp. 256–75) proposes that belief in the continuity of life after death is an idea common to the New Age worldview. The idea of reincarnation in New Age movements, says Hanegraaff, is different from the traditional view of reincarnation in Hinduism or Buddhism, and is characteristically this-worldly. It assumes a “progressive spiritual evolution” (1998, p. 262), that is, human beings are living in order to realize their own evolution on the basis of the universal law of the evolution of the cosmos. Therefore human beings are reborn many times in this world, and are faced with accomplishing a different task in each lifetime. If one fails to achieve progress in one lifetime, this does not mean that one will be caught forever in a world of darkness. Such a negative world-denying perspective is avoided in favor of a weak yet nevertheless world-affirming worldview. Hanegraaff quotes Sanaya Roman’s words, “the universe is perfect and...everything you do and everything that happens to you is perfect,” and the words of Gary Zukav: “you contribute appropriately and perfectly to your evolution and to the evolution of others no matter what you choose” (1998, p. 285).<sup>12</sup> According to this line of thought, it follows that no matter what choice one makes, there is no better choice to be made, since it is in line with the plan of the universe.

Reincarnation is part of the evolution of the universe, so each person, upon experiencing death, must choose one’s own next life in order to learn what is necessary for the one’s own evolutionary process. Since “learning” is the purpose, it is not necessarily the case that one will choose an “easy” life.

Our Higher Self, in contrast, knows that pain and suffering are often necessary parts of learning; accordingly, it devises a personal “learning program” which—like any “course” taken at school—does not have rest, harmony and happiness as its top priority, but is set up in order to provide the personality with the maximum opportunities for progress. (HANEGRAAFF 1998, p. 268)

This way of thinking can also be seen among people in Japan who are actively involved in healing and therapy. It is quite likely that this positive view of reincarnation is one reason that New Age ideas are accepted by many people. In the next section I will introduce the results of interviews with activists who have accepted this view of reincarnation, and consider their views on abortion.

### *Interviews with New Age Activists*

Hanada Miho has studied hypnotherapy and received certification from the American Board of Hypnotherapy. She offers a program called STEP to teach

12. Hanegraaff lists four movements as the main streams of New Age religion: channeling, healing and personal growth, New Age science, and neopaganism.

child-raising and self-discovery. In addition to the STEP program she also runs “Wind Workshops.”<sup>13</sup> In one of her books Hanada explains reincarnation as follows:

We are reborn many times in this world so that our spirit will grow. When one life ends, we enter the realm of the dead and reflect on our previous life, and then put together a program for our next life that will correct our faults.

This program may involve accepting many very severe experiences. Rather than having to face a judge or some wise person in the afterlife who forces matters upon us, however, we ourselves actively choose these ordeals. It is not that God punishes our sins, or that we receive divine retribution. Everything follows the law of karma, and each spirit receives the results of their learning. People are reborn in a very rational and positive way.

(HANADA 1999, pp. 37–38)

According to this way of thinking, having an abortion is not in itself wrong or evil or a sin, but is an experience from which one must learn something. This allows for a positive interpretation of one’s life. Hanegraaff adds:

“Meaningless suffering” or “injustice” are nonexistent: whatever happens to us can be welcomed as a learning task offered to us, for the very best of reasons, by our own Higher Self. However, it is added that everything that happens in our life is fully meaningful and right only if we react to the “lessons” in a positive way and absorb what they have to teach us. We are perfectly capable of missing the opportunities offered to us, or of reacting to them in a negative and non-constructive way. This happens especially when we complain about “injustices” done to us: by doing that, we are projecting guilt onto others and avoid taking responsibility for our own life. If this is the consistent pattern in our life, then after death we may find that we have led a meaningless life because we have let too many opportunities pass us by unnoticed. We have not “passed the exam,” so to speak, and will have to try again in a next life.

(HANEGRAAFF 1998, pp. 268–69)

In other words, every situation in this life is the result of one’s own choice, and the way to resolve any problem is also available in this life.

During my interviews Ms. Hanada referred to a number of examples with regard to abortion and the role of the fetus. According to her, “sometimes a child is conceived having already accepted that it will be aborted.” The example was given of a woman who suffered from very painful menstruation, but that this pain was healed as a result of her becoming pregnant, albeit temporarily. It

13. These “Wind Workshops” do not meet regularly, but only when enough people get together. In the past these workshops consisted of less than ten people at a time, and Hanada has held over sixty workshops and worked with a total of about five hundred people. At first only women were involved, but recently some of the participants are men.

could be said that the purpose of this pregnancy was to ease this woman's painful menstruation. Thus the purpose of this child was to ease the woman's pain, and was conceived with the prior knowledge and assent that it would be aborted.

Among those who have participated in Ms. Hanada's workshops on "previous-life therapy" are two women who said that the children that they aborted were later born as their relatives. Others claimed that the aborted child becomes a guardian spirit. There was also mention of children who claim, after growing to a certain age, that they were born "from the wrong mother." Based on these examples, Ms. Hanada said that the children have a choice in who will bear them and in what situation they will be conceived, and that they can make a mistake in their choice.

Again, there is a woman, Ms. Watanabe, who is active as a "voice healer." After having a mystical experience, she encountered the Noguchi chiropractic method. Through various encounters she came to know about her past lives, and became aware of her "inner voice." She is currently active as a healer who can bring forth the "spirit's voice" that is within each person. Ms. Watanabe believes she has met God, who told her that "the ultimate basis of the universe is 'supreme bliss', and we human beings, and everything that lives, are extensions (*bunshin* 分身) of this," and she felt a joy that she had never experienced before (WATANABE 2000). Ms. Watanabe says that she has "continuously sought after the meaning of life," and claims that "there is no past that is irredeemable."

When I asked Ms. Watanabe about abortion, she told me the following story. She herself went to see a medium who claimed to be able to perform exorcisms, and was told that "you should have two boys." In fact she has one child, a girl. She was once told by her daughter that "I was supposed to be born a boy, but it seemed better to be a girl so I changed." In light of the family situation when her daughter was born, says Ms. Watanabe, it probably would have been more difficult if a son had been born. There was also a time when she wanted to become pregnant and have another child, and there may have been a male child who decided that the time was not right and therefore was not born. Based on these experiences, Ms. Watanabe says that a child not only can choose its parents and choose its conception based on its own knowledge, but can also decide later in the process whether or not it will actually be born.

A channeler ("C"), who began to receive messages about ten years ago, says that she can perceive three of her previous lives. In each of these lives she failed to do the work that was required of her by society, and she still bears this responsibility. The messages she receives through channeling are not clear and specific pieces of advice, but rather guidance in how she should think, and this has trained her to think clearly for herself. As for *mizuko*, "C" says that spirits

make their own choices as to their births, so it is not proper to blame only the person who has the abortion.

As we can see from the comments of Ms. Hanada, Ms. Watanabe, and “C,” they believe that pregnancy and abortion involve matters that transcend their own individual powers, and they also perceive the fetus and the woman as independent entities. The fetus cannot yet survive outside of the woman’s womb, but still the fetus and the women are two independent entities. Their existence as independent entities did not begin at the moment of conception, but they both live within the eternal process of reincarnation. Therefore it could be said that pregnancy and abortion are both part of an encounter between two spirits, those of the fetus and the pregnant woman.

If it is said that a fetus cannot pass on to its proper resting place (*jōbutsu* 成仏) because it was aborted, then it means that the person who had the abortion has a one-sided control over the destiny of the fetus, which does not take into account the independent influence of the ever-repeated reincarnations of the spirit or soul (*tamashii* 魂) of that aborted fetus. Again, the idea that the resentment of an aborted fetus would have an evil influence not only on the person who had the abortion but also on that person’s wider family, is an idea that cannot be accepted from the perspective that all spirits bear the burden of their own karma from their previous and current lives.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the idea that memorial services are performed in order to deal with spirits who would otherwise put a curse on you, or which cannot attain rest, the women I interviewed claimed that people cannot control everything in their lives, and nobody lives a life without making any mistakes, and so they expressed sympathy for women who had had an abortion and wanted them to live with confidence.

Ms. Hanada added the following words for people who have had an abortion. “You should not feel a sense of guilt for having had an abortion, but you should remember what you did and be grateful for what you have now.” Again, Ms. Watanabe clearly stated, “Whether or not to give birth, or to take advantage of reproductive technologies, are choices that must be made by women.” They share a perspective that is summed up in the following words by a different hypnotherapist:

What I would like to proclaim with a loud voice is that the choice of whether to give birth or not give birth is a matter of a woman’s free choice. Abortion is

14. As far as I know, there is no Buddhist explanation which clearly rationalizes *mizuko kuyō* in terms of reincarnation and karma. For example, when I asked one priest, who received ordination at Tōdai-ji—where *mizuko kuyō* is performed—about the fact that Buddhist thought does not contain the idea of a “spirit” (*rei* 霊), he answered that this *rei*-“spirit” is different from what is denied as a *tamashii*-soul in Buddhism, and refers to something that must exist, because the purpose of Buddhist memorial services is to help lead this spirit to find its final rest (lit. “attain Buddhahood,” *jōbutsu*). By the way, this Buddhist priest also explained that karma is passed down from parents to children through their DNA.

a sorrowful matter, but who can criticize a decision that is unavoidable?... I myself believe that “the fetus does not definitely settle in the child until the moment of birth,” so I advise my clients that they should never harbor a sense of guilt over an abortion. A study of previous lives and of reincarnation shows that the matter of whether a fetus is finally born or not born is not something that just the mother decides. There must be an agreement between the spirit of the mother and the spirit of the fetus, and the decision rests on numerous factors, including the karma and lessons of the child’s spirit.<sup>15</sup>

In this view, life in this world begins when the spirit enters the child immediately after birth.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, abortion does not involve the taking of a human life, but is a choice to be made by the people involved in the pregnancy, and is an opportunity for learning. The experience of pregnancy and abortion should be viewed from the perspective of one’s whole life, and should be a lesson for making the best of the rest of one’s life.

Nevertheless, the people who think in this way do not necessarily deny the usefulness of memorial services completely. The hypnotherapist quoted above has this to say:

If you wish, you can call up the [aborted] child’s spirit through hypnotherapy or meditation, apologize for not being able to bear the child this time, and promise to bear it and take care of it some time in the future when you are ready.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, if it helps or is necessary for someone to accept their abortion experience in a positive way, then performing memorial services or prayers is acceptable.

Again, concerning the existence of the spirits of *mizuko*, Ms. Hanada accepts the explanation of one of her acquaintances, a Buddhist monk with a strong spiritual power. This monk says that the spirits of the *mizuko* are not strong, but are just lonely, so if we communicate with them, that is enough to bring

15. From a homepage owned by Yanō Setsuko on “Hypnotherapy for Your Heart, Body, & Soul” at [www.geocities.co.jp/Technopolis/3556/marriage4.html](http://www.geocities.co.jp/Technopolis/3556/marriage4.html) (accessed August 2001).

16. The same idea is expressed by “I,” who runs an acupuncture clinic. During an interview he made the following comments: “A fetus still does not possess *ki* 氣. This condition continues while the child passes through the birth canal, and the spirit-body (*reitai* 霊体) enters the child at the moment it comes in contact with the outside air (*gaiki* 外氣), and it experiences *ki*. . . . The parents give birth to a vessel for accepting a spirit (*reitai*) or soul (*reikon* 靈魂), of which they do not know the identity. . . . When the child comes in contact with the outside air, the spirit—which is made of *ki*—enters the child at that moment and is able to see the karma of that child. This becomes that child’s karma for its entire life, and this does not change.” See MORITA 1996, p. 96. When I interviewed this man, he said concerning death that the spirit leaves the body when the heart stops beating, and therefore to use the body of a person who is diagnosed brain-dead for organ transplants is akin to murder.

17. See the homepage of Yanō Setsuko at [www.geocities.co.jp/Technopolis/3556/marriage4.html](http://www.geocities.co.jp/Technopolis/3556/marriage4.html) (accessed August 2001).

them rest. Ms. Hanada will not say definitely that such memorial services are necessary, and does not actively promote them. However, she will recommend experts such as the monk mentioned above for people for whom such experiences are helpful. She is also aware, however, that there are monks, health workers, and medical personnel who are quick to be abusive toward people who have had abortions, and says that some people came to her seminars for help after being told that their lives were “worthless.” She tells such people that it is up to them to decide how to feel about their own experiences, and advises them to visit three temples and decide what to do.

“C” says that she has no intention of keeping the messages received through channeling to herself, and so uses the opportunity of public lectures to share them. She says that religion should not be something that offers salvation only to people who belong to a certain group.

Ms. Watanabe also visits other spiritual mediums and healers. However, neither Ms. Hanada nor Ms. Watanabe nor “C” rely on the authority of male mediums or monks, but rather are independently active. This stands in contrast to the women activists involved in *mizuko kuyō* as introduced in Harrison’s studies.

### *Conclusion*

Memorials for aborted or miscarried children, or *mizuko*, have been performed perhaps since the Edo period. These early memorials, however, were not to pacify the curses brought about by *mizuko*, but to soften and heal the sorrow of having lost a child, and to pray for a safe rebirth or reincarnation of the child (see ITO 1999, p. 167; CHIBA and ŌTSU 1983). A study by ONO Yasuhiro (1982) shows that places where traditional memorial services such as memorials for dogs (*inu kuyō* 犬供養) or for women who die during childbirth (*nagare kanjō* 流れ灌頂) are still performed, there is little interest in *mizuko kuyō*. Ono concludes that modern *mizuko kuyō* is based on the needs of individuals in modern society who must resolve their anxiety and no longer are supported by a community to share their sorrow. It used to be the case that when a *nagare kanjō* service was held for a woman who died in childbirth, women from miles around would gather to share in the service of pouring water over a white cloth by the river, even if they never had any connections with the woman who had passed away. This served not only as a time to pray for the woman who had passed away, but also to pray for a safe child-bearing experience for oneself in the future. People in the modern world no longer belong to a community that shares their sorrow in this way, so when they have an accident or become sick, they are faced not only with a lonely sense of anxiety, but also must deal alone with the fear of a curse from the *mizuko*. NEMOTO Haruko (2000), who has done a similar survey, speculates that the Buddhist monks were powerless to



comfort the sorrow of women in such a situation, and points out that these practices were probably developed by women as a way to help themselves.

*Mizuko kuyō* is a memorial carried out by the individual. The traditional community no longer exists, and modern society offers little in the way of connections among women. The experience of an abortion takes place in the dark and is hidden away in the dark. It is assumed that abortions are performed in secret and should not be discussed with anyone. However, people have begun to talk publicly about such experiences. On the internet there are homepages and bulletin boards where people who have experienced abortion can encourage each other, and share their experiences with women who have not yet had such an experience. As people who have had abortions share their direct experiences, many people have begun to openly discuss abortion. It is possible that the sharing of such experiences will lead to new movements. If so, what will be the response of those religionists now involved in *mizuko kuyō*? So far, in response to women who have suffered from an abortion experience, such people have taken a pedantic attitude, accusing women who have had an abortion of being self-serving and rebuking them for committing a sin, without offering instead a religious answer to the questions of life and death.

The activities of the people introduced in this article are worth noting in that it offers a perspective from which women who have experienced abortion can accept the fact and still face their lives positively. This does not mean that they make light of life, but rather that they show respect for all life. And the basis for this perspective is the New Age idea of reincarnation and karma.

The New Age ideas taken up here are only a part of a wider picture. The explanation of reincarnation is this-worldly, evolutionary, and emphasizes individual religious experience—all important characteristics of New Age ideas. Is it not important to take a critical look at traditional Japanese religious ideas from such new perspectives? New Age ideas, however, as Hanegraaff points out, are not completely new, but rather are the secularized form of ideas that appeared in the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> These ideas finally formed new movements in the 1970s that were capable of criticizing contemporary society. With the help of the mass media, and commercialized as part of the fad for “healing” therapies, it is not clear whether or not New Age ideas will continue to provide a new and alternate way of thinking. By emphasizing individual experience, it is possible that its religiosity will become increasingly diluted. In any case, developments in this area are worthy of continued attention.

18. HANEGRAAFF (1998, p. 522) says that it may be more appropriate to call it “secularized esotericism.”

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