

Buddhism and Abortion in Contemporary Japan:
Mizuko Kuyō and the Confrontation with Death

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While based on research which began intensively in 1986 and which will extend over more than two years, this particular article is not a report on that research but an initial attempt to view the contemporary phenomenon of *mizuko kuyō* upon a wider socio-religious background in modern Japan. Briefly, this phenomenon represents emotional problems encountered by large numbers of Japanese women following an abortion experience, and efforts by Buddhism and other religious groups in Japan to respond to these problems. Once the field research has been completed,¹ we shall begin to formulate in some detail our own understanding of the diverse ingredients within this phenomenon.

The primary research is of several kinds. It includes extensive interviews with temple priests and with women who have experienced the loss of a child. We have also distributed over three thousand questionnaires to worshipers who have participated in memorial services (*kuyō*) for aborted and/or stillborn children (*mizuko*). Beyond this, we have access to data being collected on *mizuko kuyō* by sociologists at a major Japanese national university, and to more than twelve hundred questionnaires completed by women at an important temple in Kyoto. Finally, we have collected sizable amounts of published materials in Japanese which deal directly with abortion and *mizuko kuyō*, or which seek to relate these to wider social and religious issues of both a contemporary and historical nature. In part because it will take longer to digest these materials, this present essay will not refer to them directly.

The General Context

As many readers may have seen, two articles on *mizuko kuyō* have already appeared in this journal, one by Anne Page Brooks (1981) and, more recently

¹ This field research is being done collaboratively with Elizabeth Harrison of Kyoto.

(December 1987), a translation of an essay published two years before in Japanese by Hoshino Eiki and Takeda Dōshō. Surprisingly, this is the extent of serious research on the subject yet to appear in English. The article by Brooks is a good overview of the scene, and the essay by Hoshino and Takeda is helpful in placing *mizuko kuyō* within the general conceptual framework of Japanese attitudes toward the spirits of the dead, in providing reasonably current statistics on abortions in Japan, and particularly in making careful distinctions between the meaning of abortion and/or infanticide (*mabiki* 間引き) within traditional life in Tokugawa Japan and the meaning of *mizuko kuyō* today. It is to the contemporary scene that this paper is addressed.

As is generally known in Japan, the term *mizuko kuyō* literally refers to a *kuyō* 供養 or memorial service conducted in most cases by Buddhist priests for the spirits of *mizuko* 水子, meaning “water child or children” and referring normally to an aborted fetus (induced or spontaneous) but also to stillborn infants and those who die soon after birth. This service is in part intended as consolation to the mother, as the one most directly affected, but often with other members of the family in mind as well. While the differences between traditional and contemporary Japanese social systems are complex, among the major assertions of the Hoshino article is the following: that with the gradual devolution of the traditional family system in modern urban areas the responsibility for abortion, which used to be shared by the local community in Edo Japan, must now often “be borne in secret completely by the individual” (Hoshino 1987, p. 314).

It is precisely this “broken connection,” as Robert Lay Lifton uses the term, that needs examining, not only with respect to earlier family systems and communal forms of support but also compared with former ways of relating death to life. Arising out of his extensive interviews with survivors from several contexts (including Hiroshima, the Chinese cultural revolution, and the Vietnam War), Lifton’s studies have focussed on the importance and difficulty of grieving, on the process by which one confronts death (or “death equivalents”), and on symbols relating death to the continuity of life. “Images of death begin to form at birth and continue to exist throughout the life cycle. Much of that imagery consists of death equivalents — image-feelings of separation, disintegration, and stasis. These death equivalents evolve from the first moments of life, and serve as psychic precursors and models for later feelings about actual death. Images of separation, disintegration, and stasis both anticipate actual death imagery and continue to blend and interact with that imagery after its appearance” (Lifton 1983, p. 53). Lifton’s research makes clear the importance of psychoanalytic studies which take seriously the life process as well as an individual’s feelings such as anxiety, guilt, rage, and violence which often accompany the confrontation with death, or any of its

equivalents. And, at the same time, his research indicates the equal importance of images of continuity, or life equivalents such as connection, integrity, and movement. While modern existence is frequently the experiencing of broken connections of various sorts, Lifton believes that life-promoting connections are possible provided one confronts and learns to handle factors within human community which resist the facing of death, or death equivalents such as injustice, collapse of communal order, profound disillusionment, and the like. Lifton's twofold approach (i.e., realism in the face of death equivalents and hope if these are seriously encountered) is, implicitly, central to the theme of this present article.

Thus far, no attention has been paid to the implications these sorts of findings have for the widespread modern social and religious phenomenon known as *mizuko kuyō*. This seems ironic, since at the heart of this phenomenon lies both the experience of death and difficulties encountering this death. Lifton's research confirms my own suspicion that the problems experienced through abortion in Japan are not only more serious than is often acknowledged, but that complex factors related to abortion exist within Japanese society which are rarely discussed. It is part of this paper's purpose to identify some of these factors.

As is commonly done in the media, one can easily dismiss the phenomenon of *mizuko kuyō* as another form of *shōbai* 商売, or business enterprise. There has clearly been the tendency for commercialization in many circles. There has also been an inclination among some priest-practitioners to capitalize upon feelings of guilt and fear which women frequently experience following abortion, and to attribute most personal and family problems to the decision to abort. On the other hand, our findings also reveal the problematic nature of economic support for many temples, thereby forcing some priests into activities which even they may find questionable. The present economic basis of temple support is thus, in our estimation, an important subject on which careful research needs to be done. As far as we are aware, no such systematic studies exist.

On whatever grounds one can legitimately question certain forms of *mizuko kuyō* practice, however, one quickly encounters the emotional problems which significant numbers of women experience after abortions (in some cases years later). Our interviews reveal both the diversity of these experiences and the varied ways in which temple priests and sympathetic lay people have responded. The more deeply one looks, the more evident it becomes, not only that widespread abortion creates genuine problems within Japanese society, but that this society has in fact made it almost inevitable that these problems exist. While problems connected with abortion are hardly unique to Japan, there are peculiar features here which one does not find elsewhere, or in earlier times within Japan. Hoshino and Takeda are right,

for instance, in stressing that while early death was common in previous times, there are new ingredients in the modern experience. For one thing, the very number of abortions today; for another, the more private nature of the experience and hence the greater emotional burden upon individuals. In Lifton's sense, the experience of this death becomes even more difficult within the framework of a vastly broken religious and cosmological worldview. The old connections are more problematic today. This raises the interesting question as to whether the extraordinary public attention being paid to *mizuko* (whether aborted or stillborn) in Japanese society has arisen partly because the image of *mizuko* itself may have become yet another symbol of the broader social sense of disconnection.

The basic thrust of this paper is thus to begin raising questions about what lies behind the complex phenomenon of *mizuko kuyō*. First, it will discuss the anomalous situation of birth control in Japan in which abortion is the most effective of the widely used methods, with the result that the number of abortions is unusually high for a society like Japan. The very lack of significant procreative choice for most Japanese women contributes to the many problems which are not being adequately faced by the medical profession or by other segments of Japanese society. Therefore, the paper also looks at the emotional needs women frequently have following abortion and asks what these represent. Thirdly, since the *kuyō* or memorial service is the most common response offered by Buddhist temples, its general nature is examined briefly. Furthermore, because ritual and cosmology are necessarily related, the paper discusses certain forms of traditional Buddhist cosmology, especially the omnipresent figure of Jizō and the concept of the six paths (*rokudō* 六道), and asks about the appeal of these ancient ideas within a modern and "broken" era. Finally, the article concludes by questioning whether the present Buddhist response addresses itself to certain deeper and often unstated grievances felt by Japanese women. In the context of this discussion other forms of ritual which seek to confront resentment and anger in particular will be mentioned. A concern of this kind is akin to Lifton's conviction that the life cycle process and rituals related to it help to create forms of renewal, with social as well as personal meaning, only when they address the pervasive experience of broken connections, in Japan or anywhere else.

The Paradox of Abortion: A World of Necessity and Sorrow

To enter the world of abortion is to observe a scene of resolution undermined by doubt, a scene of both conflict and relief. As one perceptive viewer of this world has put it: "This is the heart of the struggle. The quality of life pitted against life. Whichever we choose, we lose. And that, too, is part of being human. That too is the dilemma of abortions" (Denes 1976, p. 245). It is no longer surprising to hear American or European women who have gone

through an induced abortion, and who affirm a woman's right to do so, express the emotional difficulty of such an experience, even to hear them reliving spiritual or psychic pain for years after the fact. And, it is clearly more anguishing to absorb, through miscarriage or stillbirth, the death of a child one wished to have, let alone the death of an older child. Each instance is unique, though support from those who have encountered similar sorrow helps in offsetting isolation. The pain of grieving, inevitably personal, becomes more bearable when it can be shared, when it becomes less private.

In modern Japan the world of abortion is both similar to that of other countries and very different. While abortion has been legal in the United States only since 1973, Japan passed the Eugenic Protection Law in 1948 (with revisions in 1949 and 1952), making abortion legally possible for the first time. Furthermore, radically different approaches to birth control exist here than in most modern societies. As many studies reveal, there are but three primary methods of birth control practiced in Japan. One is the rhythm method, which lacks reliability. The second is the condom, which can be reliable if used properly, but this means of contraception obviously keeps the woman in a position of dependence upon the male partner. The third method is by far the most effective, namely, abortion, thereby setting the stage for widespread emotional unrest — especially when adequate contraceptive alternatives are minimal. It is therefore accurate to say that the degree of procreative choice available to Japanese women is remarkably slight.

Because of fears about side-effects, oral contraceptives are not normally available. Neither the diaphragm nor the IUD is widely used. It is possible that some form of abortifacient (preventing the fertilized egg from becoming implanted in the uterus) may be on the market in two years if it proves free of serious side-effects. The result would be a considerable lowering of the incidence of abortions and thus should be welcomed. The present conservative estimate of abortions per year is about one million, which is twice the officially reported number. More liberal estimates put the figure at close to one and a half million. At any rate, obstetrician-gynecologists (Ob-Gyns) have a tremendous economic stake in abortions, deriving a large share of their income from this practice. The fewer reported, the less income declared. A clear conflict of interest exists — abortions pay off for the profession.

The most thorough analysis of birth control and abortion in Japan is by Samuel Coleman, entitled *Family Planning in Japanese Society*, the data for which goes through 1976. While written in English, this study uses primarily Japanese sources along with personal research conducted over a period of twenty-eight months in Tokyo. This analysis spells out the inadequacies of family planning methods and sex education in Japan. The consequences of this situation appear not only in the general unavailability of modern contraceptive means, but in the continued lack of reliable information provided

to men and women regarding safe and effective methods of family planning. "Few private practice Ob-Gyns provide contraceptive counselling and methods for their patients. The most striking omission of this service appears among abortion cases, where contraceptive counselling should be a matter of routine" (Coleman 1983, p. 40). The topic of sexual relations remains a taboo subject for discussion in school and in most family circles (even between husband and wife, at least in early stages of a marriage, let alone between parents and children). The result is naïveté, embarrassment, misinformation, and an alarming rate of unwanted pregnancies within marriage and, increasingly in the past ten years, outside of marriage as well. It is common for women to have had at least two abortions by the time they are forty years old. Coleman speculates about what might alter this picture and believes that change will only be prompted from the bottom up, not from government or from the medical profession (primarily males in this case) with its vested interests.

There are other, even more fundamental differences in the Japanese social and cultural scene which compound the problem of whether to keep or abort a pregnancy. It is perhaps true that the average relatively young, politically liberal Japanese professional woman, married or not, might have few qualms about an abortion if she wishes not to have the child. That category of person in Japan, however, is a tiny minority. As is well known, the vast majority of women are family bound, normally getting married in their mid or late 20s. For them, this path is deeply embedded in their self-image and in social expectations. Within this customary pattern are two children, with a family beginning as soon as possible. For the married woman who does not wish to work full-time, therefore, the issue of abortion is not one she faces at the beginning. *Before* she is married, however, or *after* her complement of two children, the issue is real. It is at these times that the lack of adequate family planning methods makes abortion a statistical probability if pregnancy occurs. The fact that women often have small procreative choice contributes not only to frustration but to considerable resentment, however diffused or obliquely expressed. Our findings reveal that women, trapped in this fashion, have strong feelings, even if these are seldom voiced in public. Indeed, it is precisely because so few contexts exist in which to discuss such matters that frustrations mount.

At the most basic level, therefore, Japanese women possess insufficient procreative choice. Huge numbers become pregnant against their wishes, or because of ignorance of adequate family planning methods. Husbands and wives rarely discuss matters of this kind in ways which help to open up communication on such issues, let alone correct the problem. As a result, women experience considerable frustration and it is only after one or two abortions that they begin to assert their needs and rights in this arena. Japanese society

does little to help in the areas of family planning and sex education. The medical profession would seem to be especially recreant in its responsibility to serve the needs of women who may neither want to get pregnant nor wish abortion to be their primary option. Often one hears the rationalization that more contraceptive means are not made available because this would simply encourage teenagers to become sexually promiscuous "like their Western counterparts." (Actually, women frequently express the same fear about their husbands: the safer sex becomes, the more he will play around.) As the statistics given in the Hoshino article make clear, the teenage years are one of two age brackets in which there have been sharp increases (almost doubled) in the number of abortions during the period 1974–1981, which simply means that more unmarried people are having sexual relations but without adequate birth control protection.

A Spectrum of Reactions to the Abortion Experience

Even if a woman favors having an abortion, it does not mean she will go through this experience unscathed. Even with perfect assent, she may later encounter feelings of guilt, much to her own surprise. She will often experience a sense of sadness, brought about by something deeper than hormonal adjustments. Thoughts of "what might have been" surface in almost every person. The experience, in other words, is rarely simple relief, as though the object removed were an intruder with no connection to the woman.

At a still deeper level there is the unexpected awareness that one's need to mourn this loss is very real and not unnatural. This is not simply because Buddhism teaches that human life begins at the instant of conception. Actually, it is more likely the reverse: Buddhism's teaching may be the endorsement of a profoundly human experience, namely, that nothing less than a human life is at issue. One question revolves around the symbolic nature of what are called *mizuko*, for in the case of *mizuko* there is obviously a fundamental inversion of the typical and expected sequence in the ancestor-descendent continuity. A child here dies before its parents. This naturally raises religious questions in Buddhism about what happens to the *mizuko* as well as psychological questions as to how one experiences the loss, how one grieves. Even this prospective experiencing of family bonds becomes an avenue for discovering hidden connections in life (in Lifton's sense) and a source of deep meaning. If so, whenever ambivalence exists in the decision to abort, mourning becomes the acknowledgement that something of consequence has occurred, that one is never quite the same again. It is thus to acknowledge death, even a death which one has willed. Once more, in the words of Magda Denes, "That . . . is the dilemma of abortions."

At a still more painful psychic and spiritual level, there is the encountering of a reality so filled with sorrow that much deeper healing is required.

One experiences a rupture or brokenness that tears at one's inner nature. Many Japanese words convey this quality of affliction: *nayami* 悩み, *kurushimi* 苦しみ, or *modae* 悶え, each of which suggests anguish, torment, ache, agony. Perhaps the most appropriate term would be *kumon* 苦悶, incorporating the *kanji* of *kurushimi* and *modae*, doubling their intensity. An apt Western equivalent might be Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death," that is, a form of spiritual malaise for which there is no remedy without cost. There remains only the possibility of healing through deep suffering.

The earliest Buddhist example of this may be the story of Kisa Gotami who lost her only child, a young son. Her grief was such that she could not face the reality, and refused to bury the child. Days ensued and the neighbors became alarmed, urging her to visit the Buddha. While sympathetic, the Buddha advised her to make the rounds of each house in the village, requesting a grain of mustard seed from any family where death had not occurred. At the day's end she returned, with no mustard seeds. The universality of pain suddenly struck her. In Lifton's sense, she had in some authentic way confronted mortality itself. She could then bury her son and, while continuing to mourn his passing, she was able to release her attachment to grief. As this happened, her own capacity for compassion emerged.

It is appropriate now to provide some sense of what the Buddhist memorial service called *mizuko kuyō* entails. To begin with, the term *kuyō* literally means "to offer and nourish." In this sense, it is the offering up of prayers for the nourishment of the spirit of the aborted or stillborn child. It is also, as mentioned earlier, intended to be consoling to the parents, especially the mother, though not infrequently one finds the father coming with the mother, or even by himself. This service may take place once, or once every month; or it may occur annually upon the anniversary of death. Also, one may request a private service, or include one's offering within a service for many *mizuko*. The latter is more common. As one would expect in Japanese Buddhism because of the sectarian variety, there is no one pattern to this service. Since the very existence of a memorial service for an unborn child had no precedent until the past two or three decades in Japan, one finds considerable variations in content and emphasis. While debate occurs in denominational circles among priests about all aspects of the *mizuko kuyō* phenomenon and about the service in particular, no official stated policy exists, nor any recommended form of service.

On the other hand, the number of common elements are significant, since the general pattern that is followed bears some resemblance to what is used in regular services for the recent dead and even more to the memorial services for ancestors known as *senzo kuyō* 先祖供養. In general, the priest (or priests) conducts the service on behalf of those requesting it and faces the altar during most of the service. At the beginning, the names of one or more

forms of the Buddha and various bodhisattvas are invoked. Parts of several Mahāyāna sūtras are chanted, often including the Heart Sūtra (*Hannya-shingyō* 般若心經) or the Kannon Sūtra (or *Kanzeon bosatsu fumon-bon* 觀世音菩薩普門品 from the Lotus Sūtra), as well as selected *wasan* 和讚 or songs of praise in behalf of figures such as Jizō Bosatsu 地藏菩薩. Frequently, the congregation joins in this chanting, but not always. Central to these services is the offering of light, food, flowers, and incense to the Buddha on behalf of the child and as tokens of the larger offering of one's life. In most cases, some sculpted representation of Jizō or of an infant symbolizing a *mizuko* is bought by the family and left in a specially designated place within the temple grounds. Quite frequently a *kaimyō* 戒名, or posthumous Buddhist name, is given the child and this is inscribed on an *ihai* 位牌, or mortuary tablet, which is left in a special chapel within the temple or is taken home and placed in the family *but sudan* 仏壇.

It is also important to realize that much more is involved in the memorial and grieving process than the externals of ritual. There is often, for instance, a sermon given, which tries to put the experience of those who attend into a wider human and Buddhist context. Furthermore, there is normally a certain amount of counselling which precedes and may also follow the service. In some cases there may be contact with other women who have already gone through a similar experience. On the other hand, for reasons of privacy, it is common for people to have these services performed at a temple where they are not known. Again, this supports the claim made by the Hoshino article that we are here dealing with a phenomenon in which there is often little, if any, communal support.

To provide another example, both of the sorrow of losing one's child and of a *kuyō* in the child's behalf, it is instructive to take a look at a well-known Noh play entitled "Sumidagawa." Written by Jūrō Motomasa (1395–1459), son of Zeami Motokiyo, this play is in the genre called *kyōjo-mono* 狂女物 or "mad woman" piece. The scene is set at the banks of the Sumida River in what is now Tokyo. A ferryman is about to take an unnamed traveler to the other shore when an obviously distraught woman appears, also seeking passage across. Unknown to the others, she is the widow of Lord Yoshida of Kita-Shirakawa in Kyoto and the mother of a twelve-year-old boy who was abducted one year before by a slave trader. Ever since, she has searched with "frenzied longing" for her lost son, Umewaka-maru. As the boat makes its way across, the woman divulges her mission. The ferryman realizes that she is the mother of the boy whose death anniversary is just then being memorialized on the opposite shore by villagers who remember well his valor in the face of sudden illness and death.

One needs to see this play to appreciate the emotion portrayed by the mother as she takes part in the memorial service for her son. "Before the

mother's eyes the son appears/ And fades away/ As does the phantom broom-tree./ In this grief-laden world/ Such is the course of human life/ . . . Now my eyes see how fleeting is this life." On stage, the ghost of Umewakamaru emerges from the burial mound, disappears, and reappears again. Each time the mother tries to touch him, but she cannot cross the boundary between life and death. The child speaks to her and echoes the villagers' chanting of the *nenbutsu* 念仏. She reaches for his hand again. "The vision fades and reappears/ And stronger grows her yearning./ Day breaks in the eastern sky./ The ghost has vanished;/ What seemed her boy is but a grassy mound/ Lost on the wide, desolate moor./ Sadness and tender pity fill all hearts. . . ."

One is struck by how effectively the play creates genuine feelings of loss and grief in the viewer. The play not only incorporates a *kuyō* service but in a dramatic sense becomes one itself. By its very length on stage it draws out these feelings of grief in extended catharsis. The tragedy of the child's death remains, but of central importance is the way in which this has been faced in full, not glossed over or denied. A grief not encountered is a grief denied, and one thereby retains the "frenzied longing" in one guise or another. She begins to accept his death, and to regain her sanity, only through realizing that the apparition is a ghost.

Confrontation with Death and Death Equivalents

Alongside the direct encounter with grief is the necessity to confront feelings such as anger, guilt, or despair, which frequently accompany the experience of another's death. As Lifton's research makes evident, these feelings may derive from significant exposure to what he calls "death equivalents," i.e., the sense of profound separation, fragmentation, and immobility or stasis. Sigmund Freud, in his rich essay entitled "Mourning and Melancholia," makes a related point in distinguishing between two conditions whose symptoms often appear alike. "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable. . . ." (1917, p. 254). As Freud knew, a gradation exists between these conditions, not a sharp line. The clearest distinction is that the symptoms of mourning fade in time while the low esteem of melancholia persists. Freud also observed that in melancholia there is strong ambivalence toward the person who has died; an inner struggle occurs "in which love and hate contend with each other." Indeed, he correlates "obsessional self-reproach" with this ambivalence, regarding it as "the motive force of the conflict."

With Freud's thesis in mind it is reasonable to suggest that women who become pregnant against their wishes and who may also feel guilty over having to abort are prime candidates for a type of inner conflict which includes not only diffused resentment but self-reproach as well. This combination of

repressed anger, guilt, and diminished self-esteem has many ramifications in the lives of women. This is not to imply that they are caused mainly by the problems over birth control and abortion. If anything it is the reverse, namely, that problems arising there are attributable to less-than-satisfying relationships between men and women in so many areas of Japanese social life. The literature on women and the Japanese family is filled with portrayals of tensions within the home. The reality may be better or worse than the image, but it is certain that the widely read novels of Enchi Fumiko (1980, 1984), Ariyoshi Sawako (1981a, 1981b, 1984), and other female writers present a bleak picture. In them one finds vivid portrayals of the kind of fragmentation and disconnectedness Lifton cites as death equivalents. While the absence of realistic procreative choice, often leading to the necessity of abortion, is sufficient cause for frustration, the deeper causes are rooted within the whole social structure in which women have little opportunity to participate in decision-making which affects important areas of their lives. It must be acknowledged that Japan is hardly alone in this, as the women's movement in all its variety throughout the world makes clear.

A recent anthropological study by Takie Sugiyama Lebra (1984) provides a different but not opposing view to that of the Japanese women novelists just mentioned. Her discussion of the well-known phenomenon of the close mother-child relationship is pertinent here. Referring to the mother's existence as a filiocentric one in which she tends "to see a mirror image of herself in the child" (p. 165), Lebra calls the relationship one of "double identity" (herself and the child as one entity). The most vivid expression of this relationship is suggested by the term *ikigai* 生きがい, or that which is worth living for. In this case, the mother's worth is inherently related to her child. On one level this can mean genuine caring; on another level it suggests preoccupation, which is the usual connotation. What I am proposing here is that a correlation may exist between this heavy investment of self-esteem in her child and the ambivalence and dissatisfaction so many women feel (even if rarely expressed publicly) about their situation within Japanese society in general and their subjection to frequent abortion in particular. It would not be surprising if considerable melancholia (in Freud's sense) were present in the psyche of Japanese women, arising from a high level of ambivalence about their status in a male-governed society, a situation in which they develop various strategies to compensate for a sense of relative powerlessness. If so, Japanese women would not be alone, but they may have devised unique ways to approach their dilemma. I hope to discuss this subject in a subsequent paper.

At this point I turn to the concept of redressive ritual, as one means of confronting situations of frustration caused by broken connections of one sort or another. It is my thesis that rituals of this kind can assist in providing

imagery not only of death and death equivalents but also imagery of life's continuity, as Lifton uses these terms. In the process people find assistance to confront threatening situations or broken connections both more profoundly and more constructively.

In his last few years the anthropologist Victor Turner wrote at length on the topic of performative ritual and its relation to four phases of social drama (breach, crisis, redressive action, and outcome). His basic assumption is that society and social dramas are combative, filled with conflict, "agonistic," not yet settled, indeterminate (1974, pp. 38–44). Breach and crisis are chronic possibilities, not exceptional circumstances. The third phase, redress, implies the possibility of encountering conflict and moving through and beyond it, either to resolution or to recognition of stalemate. While the latter may be unsatisfactory, it is at least honest. The phase of redress "reveals that 'determining' and 'fixing' are indeed processes, not permanent states or givens . . . Indeterminacy should not be regarded as . . . negation, emptiness, privation. Rather it is potentiality, the possibility of becoming. From this point of view social being is finitude, limitation, constraint" (1982, p. 77). Turner sees ritual (and theater) as able "to mediate between the formed and the indeterminate," for these especially entertain the subjunctive mood, thus employing a serious engagement of new visions of reality.

There is a distinct similarity between the Turner thesis of ritual's potential within conflictive situations and Lifton's psychoanalytically based research into how one copes with life's broken connections. In both, there is the recognition of the commonness of conflict and situations of fragmentation. And, in both, there is the stress upon encountering these situations and learning how to experience them anew. In Lifton's words, there is a "three-stage process available to the survivor of actual or symbolic death encounter, consisting of confrontation, reordering, and renewal" (1983, p. 177). It is within the second of these stages that one discovers the possibility of "converting static to animating forms of guilt" (p. 177) or anger or despair. Using an anthropological approach, Turner elaborates a theory of the therapeutic nature of "rituals of affliction" (as distinguished from the "prophylactic rituals" of life-crises and seasonal festivals), and thereby takes his notion of redress a step further. Central to rituals of this kind is "divination into the hidden causes of misfortune, conflict, and illness (all of which in tribal societies are intimately interconnected and thought to be caused by the invisible actions of spirits, deities, witches, or sorcerers)," along with curative rituals which seek to move the afflicted person through and beyond the causes of this affliction (1986, p. 41). As Turner well knew, these phenomena were not limited to tribal societies, and he had plans to study their presence in Japanese life before he died.

It is precisely in the genre of rituals of affliction that one could place *mizuko kuyō*, for the sources of anguish are not only within each person's

experience but within a larger cultural and social environment. Again and again our research reveals how frequently women in Japan, in seeking explanations for repeated illness, financial troubles, or tensions within the family, begin to attribute these to an earlier experience of abortion. This search for causation is entirely understandable and is analogous to Western explanations of evil from Job to Camus (questions of theodicy). One is struck, however, by how often in Japan today abortion is cited as the cause for personal and social misfortune. The simplest form is to view such misfortune as the punishment or evil spell (*tatari* 祟り) caused by the spirit of an aborted child. As Hoshino states, "In traditional society the spirits of the children were not considered as possible purveyors of a curse, whereas in contemporary society the spirits of children are considered as the same as the spirit of an adult, and thus have the potential for casting a curse" (1987, p. 316). While this is but one way of explaining the very diverse phenomenon of *mizuko kuyō*, it is a common explanation offered by some proponents and cited by most critics.

It is our judgment, however, that behind the attribution of misfortune to abortion is a much larger issue, namely, the attempt to understand what underlies the confusions and fragmentation of a culture whose connections with its past are simultaneously broken and yet in many ways still alive. It is for this reason that one needs to look at the forms of ritual and cosmology which are repeatedly used in Buddhist temples, and to ask whether these are potential means to enable men and women to confront the deeper and more systemic causes of death equivalents. One problem, of course, is that in the modern period men and women may live with several, often conflicting, worldviews. On the other hand, worldviews are always in process, and traditional forms of cosmology and ritualistic expression respond in various ways to newly experienced human needs. This is again to put the anguish so often experienced after abortion into a larger cultural framework and to seek for more complex factors behind this widespread phenomenon.

Paths to Healing through Cosmology and Rituals of Affliction

In an essay on Thai Buddhist healing, Stanley Tambiah discusses the inevitable relationship between ritual and cosmology. "In the rituals we see cosmology in action. Ritual is symbolic action that has a telic or instrumental purpose—to effect a change of state. The cosmology and ritual are closely connected because the cosmological concepts and categories are translatable into an action medium that employs symbols of various kinds—verbal, visual, auditory, graphic, tactile, alimentary, and so on" (1985, pp. 103–104). To anyone familiar with Japanese Buddhist ritual, this is an apt description. Of particular importance here is the instrumental purpose of ritual in effecting a change of state. In the case of some worshipers, the cosmological symbols

experienced in a ritual setting will be taken with a certain literalness. The ritual state is the real state. For most, the symbols will refer to something else, imperfectly understood but also real in some sense. For any one, their meaning in an age of broken connection becomes problematic. And yet, this happens frequently in history.

Within all forms of Buddhism, for instance, both Theravāda and Mahāyāna, there is reference to the six worlds or paths or destinies known as *rokudō* in Japan. These are paths within the realm of desire (the ego world), far removed spiritually from the realms of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and are composed of six graduated levels: the world of gods or heavenly beings, humans, asuras (warlike spirits who can also protect the Buddha Dharma), animals, hungry ghosts, and those who inhabit the many hells. Even if not taken literally as physical places, their meaning is metaphorically symbolic of real states of existence which all beings experience in one way or another. In the language of Japanese proverbs: “the Six Roads are right before your eyes”; “Hell and Heaven are in the hearts of man”; and “there is no fence to the Three Realms, no neighborhood to the Six roads” (meaning “beyond there is only *nirvāna*; and short of that there is nowhere to escape”). In modern parlance, Sartre’s play *No Exit* or Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* might serve to convey analogous visions of entrapment, the central difference being that none of the six worlds or paths is a permanent place of residence. Each person is reborn or finds oneself in one or another because of previous karma, remaining a pilgrim in these realms until all sense of a separate self (what the French call *le moi*, the idea of “me”) is extinguished. Because progress along these paths is slow and arduous, Buddhism provides symbols of hope and sources of grace. Foremost among the bodhisattvas who have vowed never to rest until all beings are rescued are Kannon and Jizō. Because Jizō is especially central to *mizuko kuyō*, he will be singled out here.

Jizō is omnipresent in Japan, from now-deserted but once-used mountain trails, to crossroads throughout the land, to tiny neighborhood shrines, to chapels and main altars in larger temples. He is the foremost protector of children, particularly those who have died early. As such, he is intimately identified with those who have been aborted, who never came into this realm of existence. Jizō Bosatsu is therefore the most important single figure in the drama of young children, infants, and unborn fetuses in Japanese Buddhist cosmology, and in related ritual. He is known as *migawari* 身代わり, one who suffers on behalf of others, one who can transform his shape infinitely in order to rescue those in dire straits. He is the only bodhisattva who is associated with all six worlds, being present in each simultaneously, though he identifies especially with those in the three unhappy conditions (*san-akudō* 三悪道): the realms for animals, hungry ghosts, and those in hell.

In other words, Jizō identifies with those in any kind of suffering. He is an

apt paradigm for worlds where strife, discouragement, and passion reign. In such a world he represents the possibility of hope; he is the epitome of compassion in a realm where this is rare. In Turner's language he is the liminal figure par excellence; he is the androgyne who represents male and female equally. He is in the midst of life and death, present symbolically in the womb and tomb alike. Moreover, he is the alternative to chaos, but challenges all forms of order implicitly by his compassion, settling for nothing less than rescue from defeat and ultimate liberation. He is thus both anti-structure and the hope for *communitas* (in Turner's words) beyond all present structures. In Lifton's sense, Jizō assists in the confrontation of death, and death equivalents. Serene in appearance, he nonetheless confronts demonic and other forms of hellish experience.

He is thus potentially a symbol toward which all redressive action points. And, within pan-Buddhist cosmology he is said to be the connecting link between Gotama (the last historical Buddha) and Maitreya (Miroku), the Buddha-to-be. This in-between age is typically depicted in Buddhism as one devoid of buddhas. It therefore epitomizes a time of broken connection; it is separation, disintegration, and stasis per se. It is the time once called *mappō* 末法, the last days of the law, when conditions worsen, when hope seems impossible, and skillful means of rescue have powerful attraction. For these many reasons, Jizō's symbolic importance to the believer is clear. It is partially within this cosmological context, ancient but still alive, that *mizuko kuyō* needs to be viewed. On the other hand, these are the words of conventional piety, and they may not reach those whose sense of broken connection is more than personal, and who view the disorder of the modern world with greater seriousness.

As one seeks to understand a phenomenon as widespread and complex as this, is it possible that the Jizō and *mizuko* figures can be viewed as opposite yet virtually inseparable symbols, and, in their dialectical relationship, as life/death paradigms? If Jizō is clearly the salvific boundary figure between all forms of life and death, one symbolic meaning of *mizuko* lies in its representation of radical isolation, a figure with no connection to anything living or dead, one whose "spirit" remains in limbo unless freed ritualistically to reenter, to be reborn within this world.

A traditional term in Japanese Buddhism for someone who has died without relatives is *muenbotoke* 無縁仏, one who has lived but dies with no "connections." This term was used for anyone who died without descendants to make offerings for their spirit. It was regarded as the ultimate desolation, and also as a potentially dangerous circumstance because the person's spirit had not been finally put to rest. Its very restlessness was highly threatening, a concept which has been pervasive throughout East Asia, as well as elsewhere, since ancient days. As Ohnuki-Tierney has said: "The freshly dead hover at

the margin of culture and nature, the point at which the latter threatens the former . . . the world of the ancestors and the world of the living” (1984, p. 70). They are therefore in a condition of limbo, which has always been seen as both polluting and dangerous to the Japanese. While it would be too simple to equate the *mizuko* with the *muenbotoke*, there is a sense in which they are genuinely homologous. Each represents a radical disconnection from their origins, and the departed spirit of each has not received proper treatment in the ancestral tradition. Indeed, in the case of the *mizuko* the point is precisely to put them into the ancestral lineage. It is also the function of ritual to assist in the process of transforming potentially malevolent or demonic forces into ones which are capable of being protective and benevolent to the living. In the classical Buddhist sense, all mortuary ritual has this continuing transformation as central to its purpose.

It is but one step of the imagination to propose further that the condition of *muen* 無縁, or not-relatedness, is a pervasive experience in the modern world, and certainly within Japan. In this vein, the symbolic power of the *mizuko* or the *muenbotoke* is not as metaphors abstracted from living human existence, but as indicators of what one experiences all too commonly. Perhaps only in this sense can one come to understand the rather extraordinary preoccupation with abortion manifested by so many Japanese women, and with the various ways to encounter the meaning of this experience (as illustrated in *mizuko kuyō*). This may also help one to understand the immense weight put upon the mother-child relationship, in which the average woman seeks to find her deepest identity. Without disparaging this bond, it is ironically a tie which tends to undermine the sense of wider, more corporate, relationships with others within a pluralistic world. The price paid for forging a relationship so potentially narcissistic is not only that it may backfire (in cases of failure) but also that it fails to encourage broader, transpersonal bonds across lines of social difference. In other words, its very limited nature contributes paradoxically to the world of broken connection instead of helping to heal this condition in more basic ways. The current privatism of urban Japanese family life may be an attempt to construct connections of a closely personal sort, but most evidence suggests that this is rarely the outcome, either for parents or for children, and that it serves primarily to increase the sense of brokenness and isolation from a larger social fabric.

This is, of course, what Lifton is arguing on a more general level and what he means by the term “broken connection.” His discussion of this condition is on many levels. Fundamentally, it deals with images of death and life, and of the symbolically broken connection between them. “Much more elusive is the psychological relationship between the phenomenon of death and the flow of life. Psychological theory has tended either to neglect death or to render it a kind of foreign body, to separate death from the general motiva-

tions of life. Or else a previous deathless cosmology is replaced by one so dominated by death as to be virtually lifeless" (1983, p. 4). It would be gratuitous to claim that a condition of non-relatedness is the only experience men and women have in Japan, or anywhere else. In fact, one might observe the very high premium put upon relationships, especially close emotional relationships, in modern society including Japan. Yet it would be plausible to say that this emphasis exists, to a significant degree, precisely because so many of the old connections in traditional societies lack compelling power. This is not to romanticize these connections, but, in Lifton's words, "something has gone seriously wrong with everyone's images and models" (1983, p. 3).

In our research on *mizuko kuyō* we have come to realize that what is of central importance in any analysis of non-relatedness or broken connection in Japan is the steady deterioration of traditional ancestral bonds. This cannot be overemphasized. While these still exist in many forms, and in certain circumstances they remain powerful, they are not strong enough to offset the more powerful experience of a people's increasing deracination from its past. Again, this phenomenon is worldwide. Half a century ago Walter Lippmann labelled this process as "the acids of modernity." This is not to suggest that new forms of ancient traditions are not possible, only that the condition of disconnection is extreme. At the core of his research on survivors in many important contexts, Lifton has observed a factor which has no precedent in history and which certainly affects the Japanese mind deeply, more so than that of any other people except perhaps the Jewish community (because of the Holocaust experience). The following words are telling: "The broken connection exists in the tissues of our mental life. It has to do with a very new historical—one could also say evolutionary—relationship to death. We are haunted by the image of exterminating ourselves as a species by means of our technology. Contemplating that image as students of human nature, we become acutely aware that we have never come to terms with our 'ordinary'—that is, prenuclear—relationship to death and life-continuity. We seem to require this ill-begotten imagery of extinction to prod us toward examining what we have steadfastly avoided" (Lifton 1983, p. 5).

I wish to conclude this section by suggesting that there are many ingredients within the Japanese worldview which are potential catalysts in this confrontation with both death and its equivalents and with the continuity of life and its equivalents. If the imagery of benevolent grace is powerfully expressed within Japanese religions, so too is the dark side of human existence with imagery of fury and malevolence. While scarcely unique in this respect, the Japanese consciousness has managed to keep alive (whether in traditional or modern form) the awareness that these elements within the human and non-human scene (in worlds visible and invisible) are constants within psychic and spiritual existence. Japanese art and mythology are rich in depict-

ing demons (*oni* 鬼); ghosts (*yūrei* 幽霊); raging deities (*araburu kami* 荒らぶる神); ferocious guardians at temple gates; and menacing divinities like Fudō 不動 who epitomizes sternness in the face of evil. In fact, Jizō and Fudō are often seen as complementary figures, two seemingly opposite forms of encountering tough reality. At least two features about these “dark” portrayals of the spirit world are central. First, they attest to the ambiguity of all existence, which clearly can be malevolent but is not inherently so. And second, intrinsic to all Buddhist mythology is a transformationist motif, meaning that the most malign of forces can be transmuted into benevolent protective figures of those who seek wisdom and compassion. Metaphorically, all of these forces suggest an august realism about the basic Japanese worldview, that is, an absence of sentimentality about the destructive potential within all existence, and, at the same time, a basis for believing that even the most painful forms of non-relatedness or separation are not the final or deepest expression of human experience. The key question here, of course, is how this might relate to the issue of abortion in modern Japanese society.

Redressive Ritual and Social Disorder: A Concluding Paradigm

If the symbols of *mizuko* and *muenbotoke* have a homologous relationship, and if these represent human experience in some universal sense, then the question naturally arises of how ritual in particular can assist persons and communities to confront obstacles within themselves to the possibility of transformation and renewal. When one considers the full ritualistic process, as Arnold van Gennep did in his classic work entitled *The Rites of Passage* (1909), one typically sees it as a movement from symbols of discontinuity to those of transition, to those of continuity (or reincorporation). In this final section my focus is on the first phase only, in part because I see it as crucial to the others and as frequently neglected in much modern expression of ritual. I have in mind *mizuko kuyō* in particular, for I also believe this same ritual has the potential to become effective in helping people face forms of social disconnection as well as the inner anguish they may feel personally after having lost a child or experienced deeply negative feelings following abortion.

For this purpose I return to Turner’s idea of redressive ritual as one way to understand the deeper potential of a phenomenon such as *mizuko kuyō*. Central to any redressive ritual is its attempt to “include divination into the hidden causes of misfortune, conflict, and illness” (1986, p. 41). It is one thing to settle for the same explanation for all personal turmoil or family problems (attributing these to “vengeful spirits”), and it is another to allow for, even smoke out multiple interpretations (see Davis 1980). In the case of *mizuko kuyō* one of the major problems is to get society to conceive of a wider diag-

nosis. To pursue this wider diagnosis is to encounter the complexity of real existence. As Turner writes, this openness to plural interpretation is evident "in ritual procedures, from divination to shamanistic or liturgical curative action, in which many invisible causes of visible afflictions are put forward by ritual specialists as they try obliquely to assess the main sources of discord in the communal context of each case of illness or misfortune" (1984, p. 25).

Such a diagnosis takes more time, though its value lies not only in inviting a richness of contending interpretations, but even more in its involvement of a wider community of people who then puzzle about their own implication in the misfortune at hand. As a way of gaining a certain perspective on the Japanese scene I wish to provide an example along similar lines from another culture with which I am familiar.

An eloquent discussion of this process is given by Bruce Kapferer in his book *A Celebration of Demons: Exorcism and the Aesthetics of Healing in Sri Lanka*. More often than not, in cases of spirit possession it is unclear why someone has become possessed, or who the possessing spirit is. In other words, the diagnosis is part of the cure, is even intrinsic to the cure. It becomes a means of widening the circle of involvement both sociologically and cosmologically. In Sri Lanka "demonic spirits" are not viewed as foreign to the natural or human realms but as permanent ingredients within a more universal sphere. Demons, so-called, are allowed their place. Symbolically, they personify the possibility of disorder, confusion, and injustice, but they are seen within a deeper framework of social and cosmic order, not as independent of this order. The demonic element is therefore recognized as inherently present within a world of pain, not as some intrusion into it.

This recognition is identical with Turner's view of existence as conflictive and agonistic. The demonic element may be found anywhere within the social and natural order, but its existence is not granted free play. It too is part of contingent reality. Demonic possession thus symbolizes the inversion of true order, somewhat like the death of a child represents a fundamental inversion of typical expectation. Also, this demonic possession manifests itself within normal human contexts of family and neighborhood. Exorcism (which is one form of redressive ritual) is designed as the means of reestablishing harmonious order, but only after the roots of disharmony have been confronted and displaced. The relationship of order to disorder (the demonic) is thus ritualistically the same as that of life to death, for unless the threats of fundamental disorder and death are confronted (personally and communally) in symbolic, psychological, and liturgical ways, one is avoiding the dark side of existence and hence the situation remains paralyzed by it.

In the process of encouraging over many days multiple diagnoses of the illness at hand, the Sri Lankan exorcist invites those close to the victim (family, neighbors, friends) to assess why it is that so-and-so has become afflicted.

In the hands of a skillful practitioner, the speculations grow more and more complex and many plausible explanations are rehearsed. There are even acknowledgements by those who perceive how they may have contributed to a poisoned and disordered climate (not unlike what can happen in group counselling if candor emerges). At a certain point, the exorcist deems the time ripe for the ritual itself to begin; without that preparation, diagnosis would be premature. It would have settled on causes within the patient alone, raising no questions about the social environment in which he or she exists. All possibility of confronting the wider picture would have been neglected, and the ritual's impact would be severely limited. Whenever the social roots of the disease or of the broken connection are ignored, the communal involvement in healing is also diminished.

There are important implications here for how one may approach the anguish of losing a child and the ritual of *mizuko kuyō* in Japan. While afflictions take infinite shape there is a lesson here in how one tries to assess what lies beneath the surface and who else may be involved in creating the situation at stake. On one level, through *mizuko kuyō* thousands of women are being helped with passing through the mourning process after experiencing the turmoil of abortion, miscarriage, or stillbirth. That certainly has great value. On the other hand, there remains a need to address the specific factors which keep making abortion so frequently necessary. These are rarely being addressed, in part because doing so would reveal other sources of conflict and pain. However, their very avoidance may also contribute to what Freud called melancholia, and to diminished self-esteem. While women can become skilled in coping with intolerable aspects of a male-oriented society, the very strategies they employ successfully may serve to perpetuate the basic problems.

As mentioned earlier, this essay is not intended as a descriptive report on our research. While admittedly speculative, it is one effort to see the *mizuko kuyō* phenomenon within a broader socio-religious background, and to place it in the context of other research, notably that of Robert Jay Lifton and Victor Turner, since theirs has been concerned with similar issues. If one adopts the metaphor of social drama, as Turner and others do, then what one finds in relations between men and women in Japan is precisely what Michel Strickmann intriguingly calls a "theatre for the unspeakable," in his case discussing an ancient Taoist ritual in which resentment and anger against a dead parent are expressed, but obliquely through a priest. Thus the form of filial piety is maintained, but very unfilial emotions are given expression. The ritual is therapeutic, though not basically redressive.

It is a truism that whenever deep feelings cannot be expressed either with sufficient candor or in some effective ritualistic manner, then anger and frustration go underground. If this is true, then the important phenomenon of

mizuko kuyō must finally be seen within a larger context. When analyzed in this fashion, it serves to illuminate more aspects of Japanese society and religion than one would initially suspect. The significance of any ritual and its healing powers will usually vary with the level of depth at which affliction is perceived and the extent to which the social fabric is seen as connected to the suffering of individuals, particularly when the extent of that suffering is so widespread. This paper represents the first stage of trying to outline some connections which I detect between the momentum behind this movement and certain features of the present Japanese social system and its economic values.

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