

THE BUDDHA'S WAY AND ABORTION: LOSS, GRIEF, AND RESOLUTION

By Yvonne Rand, 2002



Attitudes about abortion have given birth to heartbreaking polarization and violence. The need for a safe and respectful meeting ground for everyone concerned now overrides the issues themselves. My own view on the issues may appear inconsistent on the surface, for I am anti-abortion and pro choice, but what concerns me these days is the intolerance and intemperance which prevent any harmony between the contending camps. I see remarkable grief in people as an aftermath to abortions and miscarriages and no container in which to heal that grief.

The perspective on abortion I present here has developed through my experiences as a practicing Buddhist and as a Zen priest. In conducting memorial ceremonies under the benevolent auspices of Jizo Bodhisattva, I have come to appreciate the capacity the Buddha Dharma gives us to accept what is painful and difficult. In Japan, Jizo is the much loved form of the Bodhisattva of the underworld; he is the emanation of compassion, which guides and protects transmigrators into and out of life.

My first encounter with Jizo happened in 1969 after a dear friend of mine died in a train accident in Japan. Several years earlier, my friend had gone on a search for himself, which ended at a Zen monastery. His sudden death was a blow and I grieved his passing deeply. Later that year I found myself driving Suzuki Roshi to Tassajara Zen Mountain Centre from San Francisco. When I told him that I had been taking care of a footlocker holding my friend's precious belongings (music, a flute, essays, books drawings), Suzuki Roshi suggested that we burn the belongings in the stone garden near his cabin at Tassajara. After a proper funeral and fire ceremony, we buried the ashes in the rock garden, and marked the spot with a small stone figure of Jizo.

This, my first meeting with Jizo, affected me deeply. For some years afterwards, I could not explain my pull to the figure of this sweet-faced monk with hands in the mudra of prayer and greeting.

Subsequently, I began spending time in Japan and became reacquainted with Jizo. Figures of Jizo are everywhere there. I saw firsthand that Jizo ritual and ceremony involved not just graveyards and death in general, but particularly the deaths of infants and fetuses through

abortion, miscarriage or stillbirth. Back home, during the 1970's and 1980's, women had begun coming to me and asking if I could help them with their difficulties in the aftermath of an abortion or a miscarriage. In consequence I began doing a simple memorial service for groups of people who had experienced the deaths of fetuses and babies. After many years of counseling both men and women I decided in 1991 to spend several months in Japan doing a focused study of practices around Jizo.

Initially, I did the ceremony only with women. But now I include men and children as well. The participants are neither all pro-choice nor all pro-life in their politics; a full spectrum of opinion and belief is represented in the circle we make. Many of the people who come are not Buddhists. Yet somehow this old Buddhist way seems to absorb whoever does come.

Each of those who attend our ceremonies has suffered the death of one or more small beings. Strangers assemble with their grief and unresolved dismay. Over time I have been struck by how successfully the ceremony has provided a container for the process of acknowledging what is so, for encompassing what is difficult, and for bringing about resolution and healing. When I initially performed the Buddhist Memorial Ceremony, I followed a quite traditional form. Slowly I have modified and added to it in a way that seems to work better for Americans.

The ceremony is as follows: we sit in silence, sewing a bib or hat for one of the compassion figures on the altar. The figures are from different cultures: Jizo, Mary with Jesus, "Spirit entering and leaving" from the Eskimo people, or a mother and child. Our commitment is to listen to those who wish to talk without attempting to give advice or comfort. Some of us know from twelve-step meetings the important practice of simply listening.

The principle of "no cross-talk" provides safety from uninvited comforting and solicitude, and many find it to be the most healing of possible attentions. After this, we form a circle, and go through a simple ceremony of acknowledging a particular life and death. One by one, each person says whatever is in his or her heart while offering incense, placing the sewn garments on one of the altar figures and bowing. We then chant the Heart Sutra, give the unborn beings Dharma names and say goodbye to them. Prayer sticks are made and inscribed with prayers for forgiveness and for the wellbeing of those who have died. No names are signed. The prayers are hung from the bushes and trees in the meditation garden, thus committing our messages to the wind and the rains. Afterwards we have a cup of tea, walk in the garden, and go home with a quieter heart.

Over the years, I continue to learn from the people who participate. About seven or eight years ago, at a conference for Women in Buddhism, I led the Jizo ceremony for a large group of conference participants. At the end of the ceremony a woman spoke about her own experience. She described herself as a nurse midwife who did a lot of abortion counseling. After undergoing an abortion herself, she had begun to ask women who came to her for help to first go home and talk to the fetus they were carrying. She encouraged each woman to tell the baby all the reasons for her inner conflict about the pregnancy. She reported that the number of spontaneous miscarriages that occurred was remarkable.

After hearing this woman's story, I began to hear about a similar practice of speaking to the fetus in other cultures: in Cambodia, in the Netherlands, and among native peoples in America, to name a few, find great sense in this practice. Speaking to the fetal baby is a way to recognize and acknowledge that the being in-utero also is a presence, also has a voice, also has some concern for the outcome. I continue to be struck by the deep rightness of such an attitude in the midst of the suffering that comes with conflict over a pregnancy.

I have added modern touches to the ceremony. Yet the wisdom it embraces comes from traditional Buddhist teachings which, although steeped in history, nevertheless offer profound guidance for the current conflict over abortion. For me, the Buddha's first grave precept - not to kill intentionally - cannot be denied, much less minimized. Since I am convinced that the teaching embodied in the precept is correct, both conventionally and ultimately; and since adherence to it is a necessary step on the path that leads away from suffering, I feel compelled to take a stand against abortion.

At the same time, I can readily and willingly keep someone company when abortion is the choice she has arrived at. I am strongly in favor of the freedom of each individual to choose what to do for herself regarding a conflicted pregnancy. I could not and would not advocate a return to the years when the government controlled the woman's decision. In 1955 when abortion was illegal, almost one out of four American women had an abortion by the age of forty-five, and some perished in the process.

What, then, is the solution? My experiences as a Buddhist priest continues to teach me that looking into a situation in detail, without glossing over what is unpleasant or difficult, is what helps us to stay present and clear and break through ignorance. This is certainly true in the potent realms of sexuality, fertility and gestation. The premise of restraint, which underlies all the Buddha's precepts and is fundamental in the practice of compassion, is also of critical importance in how we lead our sexual lives. Through the precepts and through the practice of awareness of what is so, we can understand our previous actions and make wise decisions about future actions. By contrast, action which is based on unexamined and habitual thought patterns—implanted in childhood and reinforced by the generalities, platitudes and superficialities of the common culture—perpetuate ignorance and sentence us to ever-renewing suffering.

The solution I propose is neither tidy nor quick. I have seen that there is no easy or "right" answer. I think that each woman must stay with her experience and be with what is so in as simple and clear a way as she can. I feel that it is important, whatever one's starting point on the abortion issue, to study its history in this nation. By doing so, we will benefit from a wider framework and a more open point of view.

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