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PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION

Key Tenets of Classical Buddhist *Dharma* Leave Space for the Practice of Abortion and are Upheld by Contemporary Japanese Buddhist *Mizuko Kuyo* Remembrance Rituals

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Abstract
Core Buddhist principles of continuity, karmic assignment, and emphasis on separation of mind from body, permit, though do not expressly advocate for, the practice of abortion. Further, in certain contemporary contexts, Buddhist practices exist to mitigate the suffering experienced by women who have lost an unborn child, whether through abortion or miscarriage. In modern-day Japan for example, many Buddhists practice *mizuko kuyō*, a set of formal remembrance rituals, which provides structured support to families in their efforts to mourn, to remember the departed, and to celebrate the redirection of human potential. This contemporary practice is consistent with aforementioned tenets of early Buddhist thought. Although seemingly oxymoronic, the Buddhist view of abortion and the mizuko kuyō rituals are human-centric, not only for the families but also for the redirected. Other societies, cultures, and theological perspectives have and may further benefit from reframing any interpretation of abortion, not as an inherently moral or immoral act (i.e., a binary), but rather as an act overwhelmingly characterized by the complexity of human emotion in the face of unimaginable loss. This humanistic conceptualization of abortion is manifested by the modern Buddhist practice of mizuko kuyō.

Keywords Religious studies · Buddhism · Abortion · Japanese · Mizuko kuyō

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Introduction

Traditionally, becoming a Buddhist involves the ceremonial claim that one takes refuge in the Three Jewels: Buddha, his teachings (*dharma*), and the monastic community (*sangha*). As articulated by the Buddha, the dharma is comprised of the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering (*dukkha*), the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering, termed the Eightfold Path. In order to cease suffering, this structured guide calls for the cultivation of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

In practice, Buddhism is an immersive self-transformative discipline, which encourages the deployment of numerous focused practices, including mindfulness meditation, mantra chanting, sutra reading, visualization, koan analysis, and attention to lucky charms, to name a few. Separate Buddhist traditions, with unique origins and strongholds throughout Asia, prioritize the use of one or several of these tools in pursuit of their purported ultimate goal, the cessation of suffering. The methods of attaining this goal, as well as what it is exactly, differ between various Buddhist schools. In very broad terms for example, practitioners of the Theravada tradition aim to achieve individual liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) by focusing on the cultivation of wisdom (*bodhi*), while Mahayana Buddhists strive to escape suffering by practicing compassion (*karuna*), ultimately aiming to become embodied bodhisattvas that assist in liberating other beings. These differences between Buddhist schools will not be further discussed as they are not the focus of this article, but are noted here for clarity.

Despite these differences, several fundamental aspects of the practice of Buddhism similarly characterize the Southeast Asian Theravada, East Asian Mahayana, and Central Asian Vajrayana Buddhist traditions. The first, and perhaps most unifying Buddhist principle, is the idea of dependent arising or dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*). In his novel *The Five Aggregates: Understanding Theravada Psychology and Soteriology*, Mathieu Boisvert goes so far as to say that this "doctrine [may be considered] the common denominator of all Buddhist traditions throughout the world, whether Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana" (Boisvert 1995). In short, pratitya-samutpada is the idea that all present compilations of matter, beings, and thoughts are the result of past forms and, similarly, act as seeds for future iterations. In this way, there is no concrete, longstanding, or withstanding existence, an idea captured by the Buddhist term *anitya* meaning "impermanence of existence." This idea pervades Buddhist thought. With reference to human beings, the nonexistence of a core, intrinsic quality is articulated by the Buddhist term *anatman*, meaning "no self." Together, pratitya-samutpada, anitya, and anatman speak to the Buddhist idea of continuity.

In addition to the belief in the dynamicity of all living and non-living things, Buddhist schools share beliefs in karma and rebirth. Buddhists believe that people exist temporarily as human beings, just one among many possibilities of existence, during their present lifetimes. Each living being experiences life after life in

a "beginningless, endless cycle of change and suffering" (Wilson 2014, p. 45). One's placement within the realms of existence is determined by past actions. Each action bears an associated karmic weight, predicated on the situational context and the actor's intent. Accordingly, a third traditionally Buddhist principle is the belief in the separation of mind from body, which can be demonstrated through deliberate response, particularly when confronted with challenge.

In an exploration of these features of classical Buddhism—continuity, karma, and mind/body separation—as well as opinions of Buddhist scholars, I begin to unpack possible Buddhist conceptualizations of the practice of abortion. The existence of mizuko kuyō remembrance rituals in modern-day Japan, is consistent with these traditional Buddhist beliefs. Further, mizuko kuyō stands as an example of progressivity by refusing to submit to the pro-life or pro-choice moral binary, instead opting to acknowledge and celebrate human idiosyncrasies. I close by exploring how the adoption of this serious but celebratory Buddhist practice could benefit people existing in different culturally contexts, focusing on its potential to ameliorate frustrations expressed by American women.

Continuity

Buddhism preaches the impermanence of existence (*anitya*) through the explanation of dependent arising (*pratitya-samutpada*), a concept which holds that every moment is both a result of and distinct from a proceeding moment. These ideas govern how Buddhists conceptualize all things. The current state of a non-living object is both contingent on and wholly discrete from its previous forms. The dharma teaching of pratitya-samutpada can also be applied to explain the Buddhist view of existence: every snapshot of a being is derived, yet separate, from a future vignette. In the Buddhist view, life and death are symbionts, each contributing to the identity of the other. Further, the terms life and death, or existence and nonexistence, are merely binary linguistic constructs that inadequately describe the spectrum of being.

This non-binary understanding of existence informs the Buddhist conceptualization of the human self. Unlike the Western tradition of Christianity, which espouses that human beings are individual, autonomous units, defined by their inner souls, Buddhism describes a lack of inherent essence or soul, predicated on the idea of impermanence. This is termed *anatman*, which literally means "no self." A human represents a being in one of many possible states of existence, which dot a larger "cyclic, potentially eternal, course of existence [with] no beginning and no certainty of an ending" (McDermott 1998, p. 173). Buddhists view life, death, and the transition between them, as recurring components of a continuous series.

There may be a tendency to discount the concept of anatman as nihilistic. This interpretation of its meaning misses the mark. Rather, a powerfully optimistic message is intended: the absence of expectations of an intrinsic human path is freeing. This lack of a "soul" liberates human beings from the limitations imposed by a predetermined human essence, thereby exposing their infinite potential and possibility. Further, the idea of anatman enables growth from past mistakes. While human beings are not forever constrained by fallout from previous indiscretions, their past

decisions play a role in the creation of their current reality. Herein, a connection between pratitya-samutpada and anatman becomes apparent. Pratitya-samutpada expresses the Buddhist belief in accountability and responsibility (i.e., people are products of their past forms), while anatman teaches the potential for endless improvement, encouraging beings to cultivate better versions of themselves from moment to moment (i.e., no human manifestation is permanent or final).

These elements of Buddhist cosmology must be considered when attempting to understand the Buddhist view of abortion. James Hughes, an American bioethicist, offers insight on how this cyclical, impermanent view of existence colors Buddhist interpretations of the practice of abortion. He recounts a Diamond Sangha Ceremony on the death of an unborn child undertaken by the Japanese Buddhist, Robert Aitken Roshi, in his Hawaiian Zen community. Roshi describes the redirected as "neither being nor nothingness, neither emptiness nor form and colour" (Hughes 1998, p. 193). This "bit of being" has not been destroyed, but rather cosmically rerouted, on course to eventually adopt another form. According to Roshi, while undergoing an abortion does not result in a spiritual net loss of existence, it does incur a karmic penalty for mothers and families. The magnitude of bad fortune is determined by maternal intention and situational ethics.

Assignment of Karma

The Buddhist idea of *karma*, meaning "action" or "doing," is an expression of the Buddhist emphasis on cause and effect. Every action activates the force of karma, which leads to the allocation of good or bad fortune. The quality and the quantity of karma ascribed to each action are largely determined by two Buddhist ethics principles: intentionality and situational ethics. Acting with proper moral intent is defined by Buddhists as behavior which is uninfluenced by the Three Poisons: hatred, greed, and delusion. Situational ethics requires that the specific circumstances within which an act was undertaken, be considered when ethically evaluating it.

In his article "Abortion in the Pāli Canon and Early Buddhist Thought," James McDermott describes the assignment of karma in the context of abortion. He states, "the initial act of abortion inaugurates a cycle of karmic retribution" (McDermott 1998, p. 159). The decision to abort unavoidably results in the aggregation of bad karma. However, a mother that acts with proper moral intent—uninhibited by hatred, greed, and delusion—receives a lighter karmic sentence than a woman who acts impetuously.

In addition to the mother's intentionality, the quantity of karma associated with an abortion is determined by the circumstances surrounding the act. Hughes draws parallels between traditional Buddhist dharma and the Western philosophy of Utilitarianism in describing exemplar instances in which the act of abortion could be interpreted as ethically permissible. He claims that a Buddhist, like a Utilitarian, would "consider abortions more moral if the child [were to be] disabled, or lead a painful, unhappy life for some reason, such as poverty, if the mother's life or health is endangered, and if the society or world is threatened by over-population or famine" (Hughes 1998, p. 186). Critical analysis of complex ethical issues, including

abortion, requires a contextual lens. Buddhist emphasis on proper moral intent and its espousal of situational ethics highlight an important feature of a Buddhist mindset: absolute moral standards do not exist.

An American Buddhism scholar William LaFleur articulates one tool he believes Japanese Buddhists employ to navigate the opacity of life and properly address its most challenging situations. He characterizes Japanese Buddhists as "ethical bricoleurs," a term first used by Jeffery Stout in his *Ethics After Babel* (LaFleur 1992, p. 86). Through this characterization, he depicts Japanese Buddhists as people who utilize a combination of available tools to lead ethical lives in a given place at a given time, rather than explicitly condemning or championing abortion based on predetermined ideas about its absolute morality. LaFleur provides an example of Buddhist moral bricolage in action by noting a possible Buddhist interpretation of the First Buddhist Precept, which states "I will not willingly take the life of a living thing." He argues that this strict ethical axiom must be reconciled with the moral realities of everyday life. From these extremes arise negotiated and needed adjustments, which, according to LaFleur, "are, in fact, the tradition" (LaFleur 1992, p. 87). Therefore, the Buddhist idea of karma—the allotment of which is based on moral intent and situational ethics—provides a useful lens through which to continue to construct the Buddhist view of abortion, as a serious, though occasionally permissible act, that is soaked in bad fortune, but immune to absolute moral revulsion.

Separation of Mind from Body

As an alternative to absolute moral standards (i.e., intrinsic moral rightness or wrongness), Buddhists emphasize the human response to lived experience. Worldly events are unpredictable, but sensible responses to them are within human controllable. What defines an informed response can be found in the classical Buddhist belief in separation of mind from body, an idea aptly summarized by the renown dart analogy. The "Discourse on the All" posits the existence of two types of people: the unlearned and the learned. An "unlearned, ordinary person, when touched by an unpleasant feeling, grieves, is wearied, laments, weeps beating one's chest, and becomes confused. Such a person feels two feelings, a bodily one and a mental one, from the darts" (Holder 1960, p. 92). Conversely, a "learned noble disciple, when touched by an unpleasant feeling, does not grieve… Such a person feels only one feeling, a bodily one, but not a mental one, from the one dart" (Holder 1960, p. 93). In these excerpts, the first dart (the bodily dart) represents an event. The second dart (the mental dart) represents the human response to the event. An unlearned individual is limited by her inability to detach body from mind and therefore is vulnerable to bodily and mental darts. A learned person conceives of her body as separate from her mind, therefore protecting herself from mental harm when she experiences physical discomfort. She is pierced only by a bodily dart. This simple analogy demonstrates the Buddhist ideal that people react to experiences with thoughtfully processed responses, not impulsivity.

By mapping the possible experience of an affected mother onto the dart analogy, we see how easily mind and body can become entangled. Aborting a pregnancy

(bodily dart) is an experience with the potential to elicit unimaginable emotional turmoil (mental dart). These associations between mind and body are human constructions and are often referred to, by Buddhists, as attachments. The natural human inclination to attach emotions to physical experiences, is accompanied by the opportunity to practice mind/body detachment through controlled mental responses to corporeal experiences. According to the message put forth by the dart analogy, a learned person resists the tendency to allow the act of abortion to dictate her mentality. By dissociating the physical experience from painful thoughts by taking time to mentally process a physical event, the experience cannot puncture her mind and cause her to suffer. Her measured reaction is guided by her ultimate aim of coping with the aborted pregnancy in a productive way. Furthermore, reacting calmly to lived experience results in attainment of the good karma necessary for eventual enlightenment, or the ultimate procurement of Buddha nature, internal peace, and acceptance.

Classical Buddhist teachings, including continuity and the governing truth of karmic assignment, inform an understanding of how Japanese Buddhists view the practice of abortion. It is a permissible (i.e., no net loss of life as predicated on the Buddhist concepts of dependent arising, impermanence, and lack of an intrinsic self), yet somber and bad karma-ridden (i.e., the magnitude of which is determined by the actor's moral intent and circumstances) act. The Buddhist emphasis on disentangling mind from body when responding to an experience, provides a structure within which people can manage emotional turmoil. Therefore, through the lens of these classical Buddhist ideals, Buddhism presents as neither explicitly pro- nor anti-abortion, opting instead to foster non-binary methods on a path to mitigate the human suffering caused by entanglement of mind and body. The Japanese Buddhist practice of mizuko kuyō manifests this cause.

The Beliefs that Underlie Mizuko Kuyō Rites Practiced in Japan are Consistent with Classical Buddhist Principles

In response to the loss of unborn children, whether from abortion, miscarriage, or stillbirth, Japanese Buddhists engage in fetal remembrance services, collectively called *mizuko kuyō*. These rites are primarily dedicated to a bodhisattva (a spiritual entity that has not yet attained full Buddhahood) originally introduced from China to Japan in the Heian Era (794-1185 BCE) (Wilson 2009, p. 19). In Japan, this spiritual being is called *Jizō*, the patron deity of deceased children and aborted fetuses (LaFleur 1992, p. 8). *Mizuko* (literally "water child/baby") describes an alternate form of an unborn fetus lost through miscarriage, stillbirth, or especially, abortion. *Kuyō* (derived from the verb "to offer") is a memorial rite that focuses on prayers and apologies (Wilson 2009, p. 20). While the exact procedural details differ according to the beliefs of the person or group, they follow several general patterns. After a woman approaches a Buddhist priest and requests the service, a ceremony is held in the main worship hall of a temple. The priest chants sutras, expresses the wish that the mizuko will become a Buddha, and guides the laity to present offerings of toys and food. Often, a mother purchases a small statue of Jizō, dresses it, and prays to

it for forgiveness. Priests accept additional payment for designated prayers to a specific mizuko.

In the preceding sections, I demonstrate how the core Buddhist teachings—continuity, karma, and intentional responses to lived experience—leave space for the practice of abortion by avoiding to explicitly condemn or condone it, and instead focusing on providing a means by which practitioners may act to alleviate the inevitable suffering that accompanies existence in the wake of abortion. Below, I aim to highlight certain aspects of the belief structure underlying the ritual practice of mizuko kuyō (as practiced in Japan) that correspond with each classical Buddhist concept. Further, I note the purported beneficial and dangerous outcomes of engaging in these associated beliefs. I draw on the voices of mizuko kuyō-practicing Japanese Buddhists or renown secondary sources. A unifying message from these sources regarding the hopeful outcome of engagement became clear and was a helpful point of contrast with the Western practice of mizuko kuyō. The version of mizuko kuyō practiced in Japan does not aim to function as a self-help protocol with a direct line to absolution from serious actions. Rather, mizuko kuyō is an expression of the Buddhist emphasis on controlled human reaction, advocating for a deep understanding of Buddhist theological concepts and the strenuous mental training required to mentally detach from physical experiences.

The early Buddhist principles pratitya-samutpada, anitya, and anatman coalesce to explain the Buddhist idea of continuity. These three ideas are at the core of mizuko kuyō in Japan. The word *mizuko* refers to a being between the stages of life and death, a belief that directly recalls the dharmic teaching of anitya. Buddhists believe that a water child will be re-embodied at a later point. Further, this future form will be unique from and yet, only possible because of, the lost form, an idea that echoes pratitya-samutpada. These core Buddhist ideas build on one another: the cyclic nature of life ensures a future manifestation of this being. McDermott writes, "What takes place at conception is the rebirth of a previously existent individual. All conception is thus reconception" (McDermott 1998, p. 173). The event of a lost pregnancy is understood as the cosmic rerouting of a compilation of inert matter, the likes of which may have existed previously in some ever-changing form, human, or otherwise. This explanation reveals the representation of the Buddhist belief, anatman, or the nonexistence of an intrinsic human self. Together, the dharmic teachings of pratitya-samutpada, anitya, and anatman form mizuko kuyō's theological foundations.

The practical benefits of engaging in mizuko kuyō, specifically as a practice that upholds these continuity-aligned beliefs, are numerous. Elizabeth Harrison has argued that practicing mizuko kuyō enables "women to reestablish family ties with beings now in the spirit world," an idea consistent with pratitya-samutpada (Harrison 1998, p. 109). She speculates that, "mothering a mizuko is at least conceptually similar to the way living children are cared for" (Harrison 1998, p. 110). Practicing parents are able to make deceased children part of their lives through spiritual contact. A second productive reason for practicing mizuko kuyō is found in its espousal of impermanence through anitya, which highlights the transience of consciousness, as well as feelings, like despair, experienced by sentient beings. Third, its belief in anatman, may act to lessen the personal nature of loss. One potential danger in

practicing mizuko kuyō with an understanding of the Buddhist idea of continuity, is that such a quality could authorize flippant moral decision making. LaFleur takes issue with this point however, by detailing the reverence Japanese Buddhist have for human existence and its termination.

Second, the origin of mizuko kuyō in Japan is rooted in the Buddhist conceptualization of karma, an assured phenomenon governing all action. As noted above, karmic judgments consider the moral intent of the actor and the circumstances within which an act was executed. Both of these facets of karmic assignment can modify its nature (i.e., whether bad or good fortune) and magnitude. Aborting a fetus results in the acquisition of bad karma, which is clear from the reading of a brochure produced by a temple that specializes in mizuko kuyō: "The mizuko resulting from a terminated pregnancy is a child existing in the realm of darkness. The principal things that have to be done for its sake are the making of a full apology and the making of amends to such a child" (Wilson 2009, p. 26). Notably, mothers and families of unborn children lost by other means were not necessarily assured the same negative karmic sentence: the temple brochure distinguishes between the "child in darkness," a consequence of a selfish maternal decision to abort, and an unborn child lost to "miscarriage of natural death" (Wilson 2009, p. 27). Japanese Buddhists believe however that the dedicated undertaking of mizuko kuyō remembrance rituals enables both the reconciliation of past bad fortune and the prevention of additional acquisition of bad karma (Harrison, 1998). Many Japanese Buddhists believe this bad karma can manifest as spirit attacks (*tatari*). According to its proponents, the "ghost of the aborted fetus may cause harm to the living, especially its mother or her family" (Wilson 2009, p. 26). This belief is driven by the cultural context within which modern mizuko kuyō practices developed. Helen Hardacre has demonstrated that mizuko kuyō was disseminated to the masses in the 1970s via sensationalized tabloid articles. Spiritual entrepreneurs, temple priests, and independent faith healers gave credence to these periodicals by claiming that "any problem in one's life was likely due to an angry mizuko extracting revenge" (Wilson 2009, p. 28). This rhetoric reinforced the Japanese cultural characterization of women as "immoral, sexually depraved, and immature, bringing about trouble for themselves [and] others through the consequences of their selfish, thoughtless actions" (Wilson 2009, p. 29). It also sought to motivate young women to pay for rituals to appease wrathful fetuses.

While the karmic benefits for practicing mizuko kuyō are clear, the dangers of buying into these rites in the name of karma, are worth highlighting. The promise of minimizing bad karma has led to financial exploitation of practitioners by temples and priests. For example, temples have been accused of stoking fears about angering vengeful spirits, ultimately coercing women into making large financial investment in statues to ward off *tatari*. This fearful mindset provides perverse incentives for practicing mizuko kuyō (i.e., to placate vindictive fetal spirits that could retaliate by creating future problems for their families) and detracts from the true purpose of the practice (i.e., to care for the unborn as if they were living children). Importantly, because this rationale for remembering the unborn is mal-intentioned, any action undertaken in its pursuit would not result in the mitigation of bad karma, therefore

sabotaging the function of mizuko kuyō as a method of engaging in fruitful karmic penance.

Finally, the practice of mizuko kuyō in Japan encourages mothers to practice physical detachment from their mental anguish, a classical Buddhist ideal, through modulation of their reaction to worldly challenges. In Japan, the purpose behind this aspect of mizuko kuyō is to "humble women, putting them back into the proper position of submission" (Wilson 2009, p. 22). Women who undergo abortion are portrayed as rejecting their naturally ordained status as mothers, thereby threatening the family—the bedrock of Japanese society. Women who disrupt the family unit through seeking an abortion must atone for this selfish and sinful act by publicly apologizing in the formalized practice of mizuko kuyō. This rationale for participating in such rituals exposes a clear cultural chauvinism.

In sum, aspects of the practice of mizuko kuyō in Japan are consistent with and informed by the three traditional Buddhist principles of continuity, karma, and mind/body separation. The exploration of these aspects of mizuko kuyō also exposes past financial exploitation of patrons by priests and underlying Japanese cultural misogyny. Even still, the benefits—including spiritually contacting and caring for unborn fetuses, making amends with consequences of past actions, and restoring family balance—are hugely impactful in the everyday lives of practitioners.

Personal, Societal, Medical, and Political Utility of Practicing Mizuko Kuyō in America

In the previous section, I discussed how different facets of the mizuko kuyō practice in Japan satisfy classical Buddhist principles. In this section, I will briefly review the observance (or lack thereof) of this practice by various schools of American Buddhists. However, I will largely focus on the representation of classical Buddhist principles in the American non-Buddhist practice of mizuko kuyō.

Numerous Buddhist schools exist in America. They include Sōtō Zen, Nichiren Shū, Jōdo Shū, Shingon Shū, Risshō Kōsei-kai, Jōdo Shinshū, Sōka Gakkai, and Nichiren Shōshū (Wilson 2009, p. 12). Importantly, Jōdo Shinshū and Sōka Gakkai, the largest representatives of Japanese-based Buddhism in America, are opposed to the observation of mizuko kuyō. In his novel *Mourning the Unborn Dead*, Jeff Wilson extrapolates the reasons for the opposition of these schools. He explores the Japanese-American Zen Buddhist practice of mizuko kuyō. Though significant similarities exist between Japanese and Japanese-American mizuko kuyō practices, he notes some important departures. It is important to give credit to the Japanese-American Buddhist practice of mizuko kuyō because it enabled the initial transmission of versions of, and ideas governing, mizuko kuyō to American non-Buddhists. Finally, the following discussion of Buddhist theological tenets in the context of American non-Buddhist mizuko kuyō practice, aims not to champion one side of the American abortion debate over the other, but to highlight the utility of understanding the beliefs that motivate both in order to advocate for an apolitical position concerned only with supporting those who have lost an unborn child.

American non-Buddhist audiences largely refer to mizuko kuyō as water baby ceremonies. While these rituals may not be explicitly noted as having Buddhist origins, they often do espouse the Buddhist ideal of continuity. Specifically, non-Buddhist Americans appreciate that this practice allows parents to establish a relationship with the redirected. In his book chapter "Therapeutic Appropriations of Mizuko Kuyō," Jeff Wilson argues "the Japanese approach is more sensitive to non-economic, intangible dimensions of life, especially bonds and relationships, and is more holistic" (Wilson 2009, p. 176). As in the Japanese practice of mizuko kuyō, Western practitioners appreciate the connection to departed children that these rituals facilitate.

The Western practice of mizuko kuyō also maintains a belief in the ever-acting force of karma. Importantly though, American interpretation of the Buddhist principle of karma, which can also be seen in Western interpretations of the Buddhist idea of continuity, tends toward abstraction as opposed to literalism. In a chapter entitled, "Mystifying Mindfulness," from his novel, *Mindful America*, Jeff Wilson demonstrates this American tendency using a specific example about the reinterpretation of hungry ghosts within the American mindfulness movement, "From frightful, pathetic supernatural entities that crowd about us unseen and slavering, they become metaphoric images of our own mental states of desire and need" (Wilson 2014, p. 47). This Western rendering is a very loose interpretation of a literal Buddhist belief in the possibility of rebirth as a hungry ghost. Wilson claims that this is an example of a larger trend in the West to mystify unfamiliar concepts espoused by Eastern religions "Many feel it is imperative that Buddhism be reinterpreted or presented in ways that are not too challenging to preexisting American norms and mores" (Wilson 2014, p. 46). Non-Buddhist and Buddhist American practitioners of mizuko kuyō engage in a similar restructuring of the traditional Buddhist interpretation of the karma arm of this ritual practice in Japan. For example, Japanese-American Buddhists and non-Buddhists disclaim the notion of *tatari*. Americans interpret discussion about karmic assignment as an allegorical instrument, rather than a possible manifestation of existence.

In this vein, Americans undertake the ritual practice of mizuko kuyō as a framework for families, particularly mothers, to cope with the unimaginable emotional burden associated with abortion on their own terms. This practice allows for personal and contemplative management of a pregnancy loss as determined by the mother in light of her particular situation and social context (Harrison 1998, p. 108). An abortion performed with proper intent and under appropriate circumstances should not make a woman feel negligent, maternally inept, or disgraceful. Rather than vilifying those who have abortions, mizuko kuyō provides a healthy outlet for them to celebrate and remember their children through "public formal services" (Harrison 1998, p. 113). The maternal and familial acknowledgment of a child's death stresses the continued spiritual presence of the child.

More consequential to the discussion of mizuko kuyō though, is the massively different Western interpretation of the purpose behind aiming to separate mind from body. As discussed above, Japanese Buddhists encourage mothers to atone for their sins by praying to their mizukos in order to reunify their families, an objective which assumes that mothers elected to selfishly tear them apart with the decision to have an

abortion. Conversely, the majority of Western practitioners see the value of aiming to delineate mind from body as the possibility of developing a means of emotionally processing an abortion that alleviates personal suffering. In this view, engaging in mizuko kuyō is a hugely productive, though admitedly more self-serving, response to the serious and undeniably painful event that is an aborted pregnancy. It allows mothers and then families to take spiritual care of themselves as well as the unborn, by participating in a formal ceremony soon after death and thereafter through ritual activities. These rituals function to provide comfort to mothers otherwise subsumed in sadness.

Additionally, these institutionalized practices enable the outward acknowledgment of grief, altering the "culture of secrecy and shame around abortion" that in turn perpetuates associated stigma (Wilson 2009, p. 167). In a New York Times Magazine piece "Mourning My Miscarriage" Peggy Orenstein comments "My own religion, Judaism, has traditionally been silent on pregnancy loss" (Orenstein 2002). She goes on, saying that only recently, and at the urging of female rabbis, has the most recent rabbis' manual included prayers to mark miscarriage and some abortions. Christianity, too, has largely neglected to offer spiritual guidance following miscarriage or abortion. Islam is more forthcoming, though still prudent, in its solace package for grieving families. Mizuko kuyō aims to ensure that events of loss are not trivialized, while simultaneously lifting the unproductive cloak of shame that mothers and families can be made to wear in their wake.

A look at the norms that govern Western engagement with the phenomenon of early pregnancy highlights the tremendous impact that enhancing awareness of this goal of intention processing of physical events (derived from the Buddhist ideal of mind/body separation) could have on the psyches of mothers and families affected by pregnancy loss. In the West, women are counseled to avoid formal announcements—or even mental constructions of social personhood for their soon-to-be children—until, at minimum, 8 weeks. In the face of this social expectation, mothers who miscarry, especially before the 8-week mark, are stripped of the space to confront any feelings of sadness they may have. Similar inadequacies of Western societal management of fetal loss are displayed in how we view mothers who undergo abortion. Absurdly, these women are often maligned as weak and anti-woman for having the foresight to know what is personally feasible, despite the incredible mental and physical pain that accompanies abortion. These reactions to loss of the unborn are a-progressive. The Japanese Buddhist-derived practice of mizuko kuyō creates a path forward for women and families. From a Buddhist perspective, the act of confronting despair provides an opportunity for self-improvement and growth in the form of detachment from this gripping feeling. Those who engage in this ritual report it stymies the immediate and consuming sorrow, minimizes long-term trauma, and enhances survivor's future productivity and overall happiness.

In addition to mizuko kuyō's potential to enhance purpose, provide a path for personal growth, and minimize stigma through public acknowledgment of grief, a general understanding of this practice on the part of healthcare professionals could prove meaningful in the medical management of miscarriages and abortion procedures. According to a 2013 Harris Poll, 24% of people believe in reincarnation. Exhibiting even a modicum of awareness for the grieving process could

enhance the cultivation of trust and empathy within the healthcare provider/patient relationship.

The Japanese Buddhist-derived practice of mizuko kuyō could also inform the current Western politicization of abortion. The current American political debate over the morality of abortion is a hostile. Moreover, it constitutes an unproductive form of attachment. Wilson states, "In attempts to achieve social unity, the two sides cause further breakdown in the social fabric" (Wilson 2009, p. 169). The dialogue would better serve society if it was stripped of political motivations and became grounded in the real circumstances of human existence.

This statement brings me to my second point about the current political debate surrounding abortion: it is binary in nature, a fact which causes it to ignore the fundamental complexity of the human experience of losing an unborn child. Wilson notes that mizuko kuyō rituals "represent pro-choice, pro-life, and undecided viewpoints. Though the sources are varied, the lament is the same: the United States is worse off than Japan because Japanese Buddhists have recourse to mizuko kuyō, whereas American Christians and others have no widespread post-pregnancy loss rituals" (Wilson 2014, p. 209). Introducing wider cultural engagement in mizuko kuyō could incite a welcome change in this political bifurcation that prioritizes the experiences of the people directly affected by abortion. Mizuko kuyō upholds a more human-centric, fluid approach to which is currently a mortality-based and binary abortion debate. Japanese Buddhists accept both the existence of abortion and the idea that an aborted or miscarried fetus is a form of life. Reconciling, what to the Western ear, sounds to be two mutually exclusive viewpoints, would be fruitful. This change in attitude toward and reaction to abortion could "mend the rift between pro-choice and pro-life Americans" by leveraging a set of universal and predictable human emotions in the event of a lost pregnancy (Wilson 2009, p. 170). Orenstein examines an experience presenting toys to a statue in Tokyo following her own miscarriage. As a Westerner, she "hadn't expected, coming from a world that fights to see life's beginnings in black and white, to be so comforted by a shade of gray" (Orenstein 2002). However, she had not experienced a full life or a full death, but certainly had felt real loss. She writes, "Maybe my mizuko will come back to me, or maybe it will find someone else. Surprisingly, that thought was solace" (Orenstein 2002). This anecdote offers the potential power of acknowledging an aborted or miscarried fetus. One American mizuko kuyō participant, Ali Smith, offers her experience following several miscarriages. She wrote the to-be names of her children on pieces of paper and laid them on an altar. Reflecting, she says "'I remember looking up and seeing there were so many little pieces of paper, with so many names on them. It was impressed upon me the enormity of the pain that people go through" (Prichep 2015). Smith expresses a clear sense of gratitude and feeling of unity for mizuko kuyō-instilled compassion and empathy "for the loses we suffer, for everyone around us, and for the lives all of us are living" (Prichep 2015). Without explicitly condemning or vindicating women who have lost unborn children, but rather allowing them to heal proactively, openly, and together, mizuko kuyō offers an opportunity for greater socio-political harmony by celebrating the nuances and idiosyncrasies of the human condition.

Conclusion

Buddhist views of abortion are purposefully noncommittal. The Western-imposed choice between pro- and anti-abortion is not posited by Buddhists because they do not see championing life and the practice of abortion as mutually exclusive. A close inspection of the classical Buddhist principles—(1) continuity (inclusive of pratitya-samutpada, anitya, and anatman), (2) karma, and (3) practicing mind/body separation—explains the theological foundation on which this lack of mutual exclusivity rests. Mizuko kuyō, a fetal remembrance practice indigenous to Japan, pays homage to each of these three traditionally Buddhist ideas. Since its inception in 1970s Japan, mizuko kuyō has been adopted and transformed by American Buddhists and non-Buddhists. These Western practitioners report the benefits this practice has imparted on their lives following incidents of abortion and miscarriage. Their personal reasons for partaking in these rituals—including the opportunities to act as caring mothers, to engage in a set of actions that holds the potential for forgiveness through accountability, and to process their guilt in a productive manner—overlap with those of Japanese Buddhists. The practice of various forms of mizuko kuyō throughout the West, particularly in America, holds promise for a future Western conceptualization of abortion whereby the act is seen as a non-binary, fluid (liquid, if you will) action that requires dedicated introspective processing, not societal or political judgment.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This manuscript does not contain any studies with human participants or animals.

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