

Chapter 1

BEHIND THE GREAT BUDDHA

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Abortion and Buddhism in Japan (1992)

When kitsch becomes this grand, it becomes art.
(Donald Richie, *The Inland Sea*)

THE CROWD OUT BACK

THE QUIET, hill-nestled, seaside city of Kamakura, only two hours from Tokyo by train, is a natural stop for tourists. It combines beauty with history. During the thirteenth and much of the fourteenth centuries, it served as the de facto headquarters of the Japanese government, precisely at a time when a new wave of Buddhist influence from China was having a profound religious, aesthetic, and architectural impact on Japan. The beautiful temples of Kamakura are well maintained and remarkably intact. They, as well as a number of important Shinto shrines in Kamakura, can be reached on a walking tour—although most tourists nowadays make their visits by piling in and out of buses that make the temple rounds.

Tourists in Kamakura, both Japanese and foreign, are virtually certain to stop to see what is commonly referred to as the “Great Buddha” at Kōtokuin, a 37.7-foot high cast-iron image of Amida Buddha seated outdoors in a pose of tranquil contemplation. A good number of people are invariably found there—strolling the enclosed plaza to admire the image, squeezing through a narrow door into the interior of the icon for an inside view, and taking snapshots of individuals or groups in front of the very photogenic, always accommodating, giant figure in seated meditation. The Great Buddha of Kamakura is, many would claim, one of the “wonders” of East Asia, and for that reason it is on the itinerary of most Europeans and Americans touring Japan.

Only two blocks away, however, is a Buddhist site that relatively few non-Japanese will include on their guided tours. Having once seen the Great Buddha, you must follow a back street to find it, a temple named Hase-dera. Like much in Kamakura, it has a history reaching back to the medieval period. Japanese with a special interest in medieval history or art go there to see the wooden image of Kannon, the figure who is considered by Buddhists to be a cosmic source of compassion.¹ The wooden Kannon at Hase-dera Temple is an image about which a good deal of lore has accumulated over the centuries, much of it of historical interest to some tourists.

If you are not Japanese, you will probably never get beyond the Great Buddha, and in the event you do go down the side street to see Hase-dera, you will more than likely return after a quick view of its Kannon. But that is unfortunate because, as a matter of fact, one of the most interesting and revealing scenes in today's Japan consists of what is taking place in the cemetery that is "out back," behind the Kannon of Hase-dera. The Buddhist cemetery there stretches in tiers up the slope of the hill behind the temple. And the careful observer will note that it is to that cemetery, not the Kannon image, that the majority of Japanese visitors to Hase-dera now throng. Many of them will spend more time there than anywhere else in Kamakura—in spite of the fact that tour books and guides make only a passing reference to the cemetery.

Today one can obtain a small leaflet of information about the Hase-dera in English. Bearing a 1983 date, it tells about the Kannon image, tries to correct the impression—easily gained from the image itself—that Kannon is female, and gives a fair amount of legendary detail about its history. Then, in what is little more than a note appended at the end, there is reference to activities taking place in the temple's cemetery. It reads:

MIZUKO JIZŌ

The Kannon is a Buddhist deity whose special task is to help raise healthy children. Many people come and set up small statues, representing their children, so that he can watch over them. More recently, parents have set up statues for miscarried, aborted or dead-born babies, for the Kannon to protect. These are called Mizuko-jizō and in the Hase-dera there are about 50,000 such Jizōs. Mothers and fathers often visit the Mizuko-jizō to pray for the souls of the children they have lost.

It is this casual, almost passing, reference to "aborted babies" that tells why there is a constant stream of people to the cemetery tucked behind a temple that is itself much less well-known than the nearby Great Buddha.

At one time, what was remembered here were mostly miscarried or stillborn infants; now, however, it is certain that the vast majority are the results of intentionally terminated pregnancies. At Hase-dera in 1983 the tally of the miscarried, stillborn, and aborted was already about fifty thousand; since then it has risen much higher.

Hase-dera, however, is only one of a growing number of Buddhist temples in Japan that offer such services. Many of these temples began by offering other kinds of services to their parishioners. In recent years, with the rise in the number of abortions, their priests found that more and more people were looking for some kind of religious service specifically attuned to the needs of parents who had had abortions, such religious service being a rite through which such people obviously seek to assuage the guilt or alleviate the distress they are feeling about abortion. These

temples have responded with the provision of *mizuko kuyō*, the now-common name for such rituals, which have recently shown phenomenal numerical growth. For temples such as Hase-dera, it appears that the provision of rites for aborted fetuses was an additional service that was at least initially subordinate to the more traditional rituals of the temple. In recent years, however, this augmentation has progressively become a major service of the temple, and people come from all over the greater Tokyo metropolitan area to Hase-dera because they feel somehow compelled, rightly or wrongly, to "do something" about the abortions they have had. The *mizuko kuyō* of Hase-dera meet a certain public demand.

PURPLE CLOUD TEMPLE

There is another kind of temple, however, for which the *mizuko kuyō* is the original and only reason for the temple's existence. Such temples are relative newcomers to the scene and have been the object of most of the public criticism of *mizuko kuyō* in Japan—for reasons described in a later chapter. There are some striking differences. Unlike Hase-dera, the place described below began its existence as a memorial park to provide rites almost exclusively for deliberately aborted fetuses. It occupies ground dedicated for that purpose, advertises itself as such in the public media, and provides no other observable public service.

A good example of this kind of institution is a place named Shiun-zan Jizō-ji, on the outskirts of the city of Chichibu in Saitama Prefecture, approximately two hours from Tokyo by train. Its name rendered into English is "The Temple of Jizō on the Mountain of the Purple Cloud." This institution also has a branch office in the city of Tokyo. The main temple in the Chichibu mountains—here abbreviated to "Purple Cloud Temple"—can best be understood if I describe what I saw on my own visit there.

Although a bus passes by it, the temple is most easily reached from the city of Chichibu by car or taxi—approximately a thirty- or forty-minute drive. There is no mistaking the place once it has been reached. It occupies a sequence of adjacent hillsides, all of which are carefully tiered and set with narrow walking paths and row upon row of nearly identical, small, stone images—statues of Jizō. These are very similar to the ones seen in the cemetery at Hase-dera, except that virtually all those at Purple Cloud Temple are newly chiseled and carefully installed. Their gray granite is still precise in outline and shiny on the surface, not worn down by the elements—that is, they do not have the Buddhist image's famed reputation for showing the attractive signs of great age or antiquity.

There is something very striking about the scene—but also perplexing,

perhaps even disturbing, to someone who does not know exactly what is going on there. Unlike most Buddhist institutions which have a prominent, architecturally impressive temple building as the center of focus, the “temple” on this site is a diminutive, modern building and almost insignificant in the midst of the carefully honed hills with their multitude of Jizō images. Inasmuch as the images constitute a “cemetery,” it is clear that here the ordinary pattern for temples has been reversed. That is, although in most Buddhist institutions—Hase-dera, for instance—the temple building itself stands forth prominently and has a cemetery “out back,” Purple Cloud Temple immediately presents itself as in fact a cemetery, and its “temple,” by contrast, serves much more as a kind of business and promotion office. Although it calls itself a “temple,” in layout and architecture it is really what the Japanese call a mountain *bochi*—a cemetery or memorial park.

Also striking to the first-time visitor is the uniformity of the stone Jizō images on this site. Row upon row upon row—they are the same in basic shape. They differ only very slightly in size; most are approximately two feet in height. The stone is cut so as to suggest that each image wears the foot-length robes of a Buddhist monk, who is also tonsured. There is no cut in the stone to suggest even a hint of a hairline or hair; these figures are perfectly bald. Their eyes are almost completely shut, in the manner found in most Buddhist images, a manner that denotes the meditation and tranquillity into which the figure has become absorbed. To anyone able to recognize the signs, there can be no doubt that these figures are, at least in some sense, monks who are aspirants to the highest goals of Buddhism. The robes, the tonsure, and the eyes closed in meditation all combine to make this clear.

At the same time, however, something else comes quickly to mind. These are diminutive figures—child-sized. The visage they present, while that of tranquillity, could also be seen as one of perfect innocence. And even their lack of hair connotes something of childhood, if not infancy. The statue, which on first sight may have suggested a monk, now prompts something of a double take; the monk is really a child. More precisely, it is *also* a child.²

The figure’s accoutrements make this certain. Virtually every one of the stone Jizō images wears a large red bib—of the type usually worn by an infant or a young child. Then, as if to push the identification with childhood beyond doubt, Jizō images are frequently provided with toys. Whole rows of them at Purple Cloud Temple are provided with pinwheels, whose brightly colored spokes spin audibly in the wind. But individual statues are given individual toys as well—for instance, the kind of miniature piano a child might play with. For some of the images, sweaters or even more elaborately knitted garments and hats are provided. And, of course, flowers are placed by each one.



Weather-exposed images are often covered with knitted garments and festooned with inexpensive jewelry. (Chichibu.)



Images are protected too by umbrellas; pinwheels are children's toys and also replicas of the Wheel of the Dharma, a Buddhist symbol. (Chichibu.)

The double-take effect—seeing in the figures both monk and child simultaneously—is important, because the image is meant to represent two realities at the same time. For the visitor to Purple Cloud Temple who does not understand such things, there is a readily available guide sheet, which says:

A Jizō image can do double service. On the one hand it can represent the soul of the mizuko [deceased child or fetus] for parents who are doing rites of apology to it. At the same time, however, the Jizō is also the one to whom can be made an appeal or prayer to guide the child or fetus through the realm of departed souls. [See Appendix for translation of entire document.]

Jizō is quite remarkable in that it is a stand-in for *both* the dead infant and the savior figure who supposedly takes care of it in its otherworld journey. The double-take effect—one moment a child and the next a Buddhist savior in monkish robes—is intentional.

Visits to places such as the temple at Purple Cloud are in no way limited to adults. In fact, one finds there a surprisingly large number of children. They join their mothers—and sometimes fathers or grand-

mothers—in putting flowers in front of the Jizō images, in washing down the granite stone with water carried over from a nearby faucet, and in saying simple prayers before the sculptured stones. At Purple Cloud Temple there is even a small playground in the middle of the cemetery where children can be seen enjoying themselves.

To note the presence and play of these children is also to call attention to the relatively “happy” mood in this kind of place. The atmosphere is far from lugubrious. The red-bibbed images on the hills, the gentle whirring sound and bright appearance of the thousands of upright pinwheels, the presence and play of well-dressed children—all these combine to provide a lightness of feeling that would probably be totally unknown, even incongruous, in the cemeteries of Europe and America. In the garb provided for some of the images, in the toys they are given, and in the pins and medallions attached to them there is a playfulness—even a gentle levity. In fact, the notion that Jizō is a savior who very much enjoys playing with children goes back some centuries in Japan's religious history.³

The non-Japanese who might chance to visit such a place would probably at first have their perplexity compounded with the feeling that all of this is a type of religious kitsch or, at least, is rather “inappropriate” for a place dedicated to memorializing the departed dead. An hour spent walking around the stones and carefully observing the Japanese and their activities might, however, bring the visitor to quite different conclusions—especially if the intent of the activities were explained.

The sense of kitsch arises because two things are conflated here that we in the West usually want to separate as much as possible—that is, the cemetery and the nursery. But such temples are, after all, cemeteries not for adults but for children—children who, even though dead, are assumed to be, in ways explained below, still “alive” and related to this place. Consequently, a sense of play is deemed entirely appropriate, as are the toys that make that possible. These cemeteries are the concrete embodiment of human imagination directing its attention to beings who, while no longer in the same world with us as they once were, still are present in our memories and projections. In the minds of most Japanese, the cemetery is the place par excellence that links this world with the “other” world; it is the node of contact between the metaphysical and the physical. And when it is the departed children or aborted fetuses that are being remembered, it is the Jizō image and cemeteries such as these that provide such a tangible, empirical contact point with the “other” world in which they are thought to reside.

Levity, it is worth noting, is not altogether absent from the cemeteries of the West. The inscriptions on occasional tombstones and even the designs of some memorial architecture show that clearly. However, what reinforces the tendency of the Japanese to make their Jizō cemeteries

places of lightness and play is the sense that the deceased children “on the other side” are, if anything, eager to enjoy a few happy moments with the family members who come out from their otherwise busy lives to visit them. The promotional literature provided by Purple Cloud Temple makes it clear that most of the time spent by such children in the “other world” is far from happy; since they are quite miserable there, the visit from their families is especially appreciated. Thus, the whole experience is modeled after that of reunion rather than separation and, as such, the proper thing is to demonstrate the joy rather than the sorrow of the occasion. Loving attention to the dead is shown by washing down the memorial image—an ancient Buddhist practice—providing fresh flowers, and bringing the occasional new toy or garment. These activities and the recitation of simple prayers are expected. But beyond these there is the sense of an active *communication*, emotional if not verbal, between the living family and the departed child.

“Child” is the term used, but there can be no doubt that the overwhelming majority of children memorialized at Purple Cloud Temple are fetuses whose progress in the womb was terminated. The assumption throughout, however, is that in the other world such fetuses are fully formed; they are not so much infants as children and are able to react as a child of at least a year or two might to the attention they receive from parents and siblings in this world.

THE FIRST PRECEPT

All this is not to say that places like this, even in Japan, are free of controversy. Purple Cloud Temple, as I will show, has been the object of considerable public suspicion.

It is first necessary, however, to pay attention to more general criticisms of Japanese Buddhists for what some see as their failure to level a stern condemnation of the abortion practices now widely accepted in their society. Not only observers from the West but also a good number of non-Japanese Asians—Buddhists among them—tend, at least at first sight, to find something terribly odd and incongruous in the Japanese Buddhist temples’ practice of providing guilt-relieving rituals for persons who have had abortions.

Isn’t it, such observers will ask, the responsibility of a religious body to bring abortion itself under control? What possible justification could there be for lending abortion what is all but a religious seal of approval? Isn’t there something fundamentally unscrupulous about a religious organization that collects monies from people for providing a mass, Buddhist in this case, for an aborted fetus?

Some Buddhists, especially if they are not Japanese or have no acquaintance with the cultural factors involved in this way of handling abortion, are likely to find a flat contradiction between abortion and what is universally called the “First Precept” of Buddhism—a vow of moral behavior that states, “I will not willingly take the life of a living thing.” This commitment to not killing is not found somewhere at the end of the Buddhist equivalent of the Ten Commandments but at the very top of the list. Its priority in the Buddhist moral code is certain; Buddhist teaching includes a very strong statement against the taking of life. In the rules of the early Buddhists, this proscription had clear implications: “As far as the human being is concerned, even the abortion of an embryo which was just conceived is regarded as a crime.”⁴

One way around this, at least in theory, would be to define the unborn fetus as “nonlife,” as some kind of mere stuff or relatively inert matter. If that were so, we can imagine how the Japanese Buddhist might conceivably find a way out of his or her dilemma. As a matter of fact, however, Japanese are for the most part much less ready than persons in the West to refer to an unborn fetus in terms that suggest it is something less than human or even less than sentient. The Japanese tend to avoid terms like “unwanted pregnancy” or “fetal tissue.” That which develops in the uterus is often referred to as a “child”—even when there are plans to abort it. Many Japanese Buddhists, committed by their religion to refrain from taking life, will nonetheless have an abortion and in doing so refer to the aborted fetus as a child, one that clearly has been alive.

Perplexed as to how this could possibly be, we rightly wonder what prevents such persons from feeling they have been split in two by the gap between their religious principles and their real practice? How are the two reconciled? One answer to these questions, of course, would be to claim that these Japanese—or at least those morally compromised in the above fashion—are not, in fact, Buddhists at all. This would be to judge that they carry the name without a real right to do so; it would be to see the conflict between principle and reality as simply too great. This judgment that Japanese Buddhism is inauthentic, we should note, is quite often made both inside and outside of Japan, by both non-Buddhists and Buddhists alike. It is tantamount to saying that Japanese “Buddhism” is really a thin veneer over a mind-set or religious view that is, in fact, non-Buddhist, perhaps even anti-Buddhist.⁵

Clearly, to move to that judgment closes the whole discussion from the outset. As a matter of fact, however, most of the religions of the world would fare miserably if measured against the emphatic demands and commands of their founders. Few are the Christians who take the command of Jesus literally when he requires that they sell all their possessions in order to follow him. Likewise, both Jews and Christians have felt the

necessity of “interpreting” the command in the Decalogue that they not kill; everything from allowances made for capital punishment to theories of the “just war” have turned up as ways, for better or worse, in which religious persons and communities in the West have accommodated the proscription against killing to what they see as clear, realistic needs. Lay Buddhists in Southeast Asia as well have found their way clear to serve in armies. Likewise Buddhist kings and presidents have dispatched armed troops into battle. The “interpretation” of seemingly unambiguous commands and precepts goes on all the time in religion.

There are, in fact, a lot of adjustments between the strict ethical axioms that are laid down at the base of a tradition and the moral realities of everyday life in the present. There have to be. And these adjustments that take place “in between” *are*, in fact, the tradition. It is from within this tradition that today’s person takes what is needed to put together for himself or herself a script for making moral decisions.

Our moral lives and our moral reasoning are, in fact, very much as Jeffrey Stout describes in his *Ethics after Babel*; that is, in finding our way through moral dilemmas—especially relatively new ones—we have no alternative but to “draw on a collection of assorted odds and ends available for use and kept on hand on the chance that they might someday prove useful.” Stout’s important study takes Claude Lévi-Strauss’s notion of the *bricoleur*, an odd-job expert who can create something impressive and eminently useful out of leftover bits and pieces, and goes on to show how what we call “ethical thought” is almost invariably just that—namely, moral *bricolage*.⁶

With respect to how most Japanese Buddhists today think about abortion, this book will attempt to show that Stout’s notion of doing ethics by putting together bits and pieces into an acceptable—and *useful*—assemblage describes the process exactly. An effort will be made to fill in what those bits and pieces are and explain why many Japanese today take them to be “traditional.” It is this that allows them the freedom to avoid being hemmed in by Buddhism’s early proscriptions against abortion and, at the same time, to act responsibly still *as Buddhists* in key ways. The intention is to describe the intellectual and cultural bridgework between early Buddhism’s precept against killing and the conscience of the contemporary Japanese woman who has an abortion and still wishes, in spite of that, to think of herself as a “good” Buddhist.

Stout’s claim, one that seems clearly right, is that “great works of ethical thought” are often brought into being when people “start off by taking stock of problems that need solving and available conceptual resources for solving them [and] proceed by taking apart, putting together, reordering, weighting, weeding out, and filling in.”⁷

In much of their history, the Japanese have, it seems almost as if by a clear preference, carried out moral reasoning in this fashion. In ethics they have long been bricoleurs, very skilled ones in fact. This, then, is why a close look at how their thinking about abortion took shape is likely to reveal an aperture through which to take a deeper look into Japanese society as well.