



Abortion

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This article looks at the complex issue of abortion from the viewpoint of Buddhists.

Buddhism and abortion

There is no single Buddhist view on abortion:

...Most Western and Japanese Buddhists come away believing in the permissibility of abortion, while many other Buddhists believe abortion to be murder.

James Hughes

Buddhists believe that life should not be destroyed, but they regard causing death as morally wrong only if the death is caused deliberately or by negligence.

Traditional Buddhism rejects abortion because it involves the deliberate destroying of a life.

Buddhists regard life as starting at conception.

Buddhism believes in rebirth and teaches that individual human life begins at conception. The new being, bearing the karmic identity of a recently deceased individual, is therefore as entitled to the same moral respect as an adult human being.

Damien Keown, *Science and Theology News*, April 2004

Modern Buddhists, however, are more divided about the morality of abortion.

It's personal

Buddhists are expected to take full personal responsibility for everything they do and for the consequences that follow.

The decision to abort is therefore a highly personal one, and one that requires careful and compassionate exploration of the ethical issues involved, and a willingness to carry the burden of whatever happens as a result of the decision.

The ethical consequences of the decision will also depend on the motive and intention behind the decision, and the level of mindfulness with which it was taken.

Buddhism and killing

According to the teachings of Buddha, five conditions must be present to constitute an act of killing.

- the thing killed must be a living being
- you, the killer, must know or be aware that it is a living being
- you must have the intention to kill it
- there must be an effort to kill
- the being must be killed as the result

Here's an example of how an abortion might constitute an act of killing:

- When a baby is conceived, a living being is created and that satisfies the first condition. Although Buddhists believe that beings live in a cycle of birth death and rebirth, they regard the moment of conception as the beginning of the life of an embodied individual.
- After a few weeks the woman becomes aware of its existence and that meets the second condition.
- If she decides she wants an abortion that provides an intention to kill.
- When she seeks an abortion that meets the fourth condition of making an effort to kill.
- Finally the being is killed because of that action.

Therefore the First Precept of Buddhism - not to kill - is violated and this is tantamount to killing a human being.

Lives in the balance

Buddhists face a difficulty where an abortion is medically necessary to save the life of the mother and so a life will be lost whether there is or isn't an abortion.

In such cases the moral status of an abortion will depend on the intentions of those carrying it out.

If the decision is taken compassionately, and after long and careful thought then although the action may be wrong the moral harm done will be reduced by the good intentions involved.

Abortion for the sake of the baby

There are cases where not having an abortion may result in the birth of a child with medical conditions that cause it to suffer.

Traditional Buddhist thinking does not deal with these cases, but it has been argued by some Buddhists that if the child would be so severely handicapped that it would undergo great suffering, abortion is permissible.

The Dalai Lama has said:

Of course, abortion, from a Buddhist viewpoint, is an act of killing and is negative, generally speaking. But it depends on the circumstances.

If the unborn child will be retarded or if the birth will create serious problems for the parent, these are cases where there can be an exception. I think abortion should be approved or disapproved according to each circumstance.

Dalai Lama, New York Times, 28/11/1993

Karma

While it's pretty obvious why abortion is considered to generate bad karma for the mother and the abortionist it may not be so obvious why it generates bad karma for the foetus.

The foetus suffers bad karma because its soul is deprived of the opportunities that an earthly existence would have given it to earn good karma, and is returned immediately to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Thus abortion hinders its spiritual progress.

Japan

Japanese Buddhists have had to make significant efforts to reconcile abortion with their religion, as abortion is common in Japan, and has been used as a form of birth control.

Some followers of Japanese Buddhism who have had an abortion make offerings to Jizo, the god of lost travellers and children. They believe that Jizo will steward the child until it is reborn in another incarnation.

They do this in a *mizuko kuyō*, a memorial service for aborted children that became popular in the 1970s. (The service can also be used in cases of miscarriage or stillbirth.) The ritual includes elements of folk religion and Shinto as well as Buddhism.

The writer William R. Lafleur has pointed out some difficulties with this tradition:

...within the Japanese Buddhist community the discussion of abortion is now limited largely to criticisms of those temples and temple-like organizations which employ the notion of 'foetal retribution' to coerce the "parents" of an aborted foetus into performing rituals that memorialize the foetus, remove its 'grudges,' and facilitate its rebirth or its Buddhahood.

Many Buddhists find repugnant such types of manipulation of parental guilt - especially when expressed in the notion that a foetus in limbo will wreak vengeance (*tatari*) on parents who neglect to memorialize it.

William R. Lafleur, Contestation and Consensus: the Morality of Abortion in Japan, Philosophy East and West Vol. 40, 1990

Find out more

- **Ethics of abortion**