

Mizuko Kuyo - Buddhist Ritual for Stillborn, Miscarried, or Aborted Fetus

In Japan, the mizuko jizo Buddha takes care of and represents stillborn, miscarried and aborted fetuses. Unique to Japan, the ceremonies surrounding the jizo were created and developed by women. Over the centuries, the image of the mizuko jizo has changed, from a dignified, adult figure, to a serene looking monk-child with a Buddha smile. The jizo has a double purpose. The image both represents the soul of the deceased infant/fetus, and is also the deity who takes care of children on their otherworld journey. The ritual of honouring the fetus or stillborn is called mizuko kuyo. The word mizuko means "water child," or "deceased infant/fetus," and kuyo means "memorial service."

In Japan, water is both an acknowledgement of death and an expression of faith in some kind of rebirth. When the fetus or newborn dies, it goes from the warm waters of the womb to its former liquid state, in which it prepares itself for an eventual rebirth. Historically, mizuko were buried beneath the floorboards of houses, where they were thought to mingle with the water of natural springs, which then carried them to larger bodies of water beneath the surface of the earth, which held special significance as receptacles of life.

The most common days for mizuko kuyo are during the three traditional holidays when offerings are made to ancestors: bon in the summer, and at the spring and summer equinoxes. The mizuko kuyo can be performed in different ways. Many Buddhist temples in Japan have special sections where a woman who can afford to may buy a tomb for her mizuko. The tomb consists of a stone, on top of which stands a carved figure of a jizo, generally wearing a red bib, and carrying a staff with rings or a stick with bells on top (which he uses to help the mizuko who can't yet walk). On the stone is written a kaimyo - a name given to a person after death.

These sites are not somber graveyards. In fact, they are often quite "happy" places. Some of the cemeteries are equipped with playgrounds for children. While the children play, women (and sometimes men) bow, observe moments of silence, and ladle water over the mizuko jizo in an act of ritual cleansing. At times they may light a candle or a few sticks of incense, decorate the tombs with flowers, pinwheels and other toys, drape garments over the jizo, and even erect umbrellas over his head to keep off the rain.

Another type of memorial service for fetuses involves the use of ema. Ema are wooden plaques, often with roof-shaped tops, that are hung by string in special areas of temples and shrines. Many ema carry prayers for, and messages to, aborted fetuses. These prayers and messages often take the form of Yasuraka ni nemutte kudasai (please sleep peacefully), or Gomen ne (please forgive me). Most of them are signed haha (mother), but sometimes the father, or the entire family, will sign as well.

The oldest form of memorial is maintained by women in communities, who tend to jizo shrines on street corners and roadsides. Women take turns putting out flowers, offering food, washing the statue(s), and lighting incense. Women passing them can stop for a short act of kuyo, or simply bow to the jizo.

Women can also perform the mizuko kuyo at home, in front of their ancestral shrines. First they buy a kaimyo from a priest, who will write the name on anihai, a mortuary tablet. The tablet is then placed in the ancestral alcove of the family, and given memorial services along with other ancestors. The fetus will be honoured with reverential bows, and, in pious Buddhist homes, a prayer will be recited. This prayer, perhaps the Heart Sutra, the Kannon Sutra, or the Lotus Sutra, is made to both jizo and the fetus at the same time.

In Japan, abortion is seen as a necessary sorrow, a painful social necessity, and a means for protecting what are felt to be "family values." Some Buddhists worry that abortions could become trivialized, which would lead to a hardening of people's hearts. The mizuko kuyo serves a positive, therapeutic role, keeping people in touch with their emotions and their loss.

For more information: *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan*, by William R. LaFleur.

Goat-in-the-Road 1821 Shoreline Highway, Muir Beach, CA 415.388.5572
www.goatintheroad.org/Jizo.html

“Goat-in-the-Road” is a Place for Buddhist Practice providing retreats in Buddhist meditation, teaching the Buddha Dharma and offering ceremonies, including A Ceremony for Children Who Have Died. The Ceremony for Children Who Have Died (Jizo, Jizo Ceremony, Gizo, mizuko kuyo) offers an opportunity to address issues such as abortion, SIDS, miscarriage, stillbirth, death after birth, life-threatening illnesses, death and dying, loss, grief, and grieving. Yvonne Rand, a lay householder priest, is the resident teacher.

Great Vow Zen Monastery P.O. Box 368 Clatskanie, OR 97016 USA 503-728-0654
www.greatvow.org

Remembrance Ceremony for Those Who have Died

To help families and friends in their process of grief, we honor lost loved ones with a ceremony in the Jizo Remembrance Garden. Jizo Bodhisattva is regarded as a guardian of women, travelers, and children who have died. We will spend time making a personal memorial for our child, by writing a message, making a simple toy or necklace, or sewing a small garment. There will be materials available, but you may wish to bring scissors, thread and needle, and a small piece of red cloth. Many people also bring a picture of the loved one or other personal token of remembrance which are left on the Jizo statues. The ceremony is very simple, and done in silence. Open to people of any religious affiliation. Families and friends are welcome to revisit the garden any time.