

Book review

***Journal of Global Buddhism* 11 (2010): 47-50**



Mourning the Unborn Dead: A Buddhist Ritual Comes to America

By Jeff Wilson. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 260 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-537193-2 (hardback), \$35.00.

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B o o k R e v i e w

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"My hopes for this book," writes Jeff Wilson in the introduction to his *Mourning the Unborn Dead: a Buddhist Ritual Comes to America*, "are broad; I hope that it can contribute not only to the fields of Buddhist studies and American religious history, but also to women's studies, ritual studies, and the study of Christian practice in an increasingly pluralistic American society" (4). In this short but richly engaging book that focuses on the Japanese-Buddhist derived post-pregnancy loss ritual, *mizuko kuyō* (literally, "water-baby ritual"), Wilson has, in my view, lived up to his hopes. Through historical and ethnographic portraits of primarily, though not exclusively, so-called "convert" American Zen communities, Wilson convincingly argues for a rethinking of the traditional narrative of acculturation in American religious history. That is, by viewing religious traditions as moving from something definitively "traditional" on one end of a spectrum to something definitively "American" on the other, this narrative obscures cultural-historical processes that are considerably more complex and nuanced, transcending individual communities and continually moving back and forth across the Pacific. This study sheds valuable light not only on the ritual practices of both Japanese- and non-Japanese-American Buddhists, but by placing this ritual and the persons performing it within the larger context of American religiosity, the author demonstrates how *mizuko kuyō* has impacted American religious culture more generally.

The Introduction opens with a brief overview of both *mizuko kuyō* as practiced in Japan and the history of abortion debates in the United States. This overview is extremely useful for readers who may be unfamiliar with both Japanese Buddhism and the contours of the American abortion debate and pro-life/pro-choice movements.

Chapter One provides a discussion of *mizuko kuyō* within various Japanese-American Buddhist communities. While pointing to the limitations of the "two Buddhisms" typology (23), Wilson also demonstrates the complexities and diversity within the Japanese-American Buddhist community. Whereas the *mizuko kuyō* ritual is definitively Japanese, it is not a ritual that is practiced within the Jōdo Shinshū community which constitutes the clear majority of Japanese-American Buddhists living in the United States. Thus, Wilson provides valuable research on non-Pure Land Japanese-American Buddhist communities (including the Japanese new religious movement Risshō Kōsei-kai), a demographic largely overlooked in the literature on American Buddhism.

Chapter Two presents a detailed overview of how *mizuko kuyō* came to be practiced within convert Zen communities, beginning with a smattering of quasi-*mizuko kuyō* or Jizō-related

rituals performed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Wilson notes that these earlier rituals were somewhat different from what has become the standard "water baby ceremony" performed at many Zen centers across the United States since the 1990s (59). This history is followed up with a more detailed ethnographic sketch of a water baby ceremony in Chapter Three. It is here that Wilson makes his strongest case for how the water baby ceremony has been adapted to suit (largely non-Japanese) American sensibilities and how much the ceremony differs from the both the Japanese-American and Japanese forms of *mizuko kuyō*.

In Chapter Four, perhaps the strongest and most insightful chapter in the book, the author "rethinks" American Buddhism in light of *mizuko kuyō*. Wilson questions the usual treatments of American Buddhism and specifically American Zen as anti-ritualistic, going so far as to suggest that elements of the convert Zen tradition are better described by the language of new religious movements theory than as simple continuations of Japanese Zen (see 108-110 and especially note 2 on page 220). He notes that a later generation of convert Zen Americans have begun to incorporate more ritual or more explicitly religious or even Japanese aspects of the tradition "that were ignored or excluded in the early period of assimilation to America" (114) and labels this *Reconstructionist Zen*. While this term will no doubt need some vetting in more detailed future studies of American Buddhist communities (Zen or otherwise), I would not be surprised to find eager young students of American Buddhism using Wilson's work as a source book and quoting this chapter in their term papers with as much frequency as they do the work of Charles Prebish, Richard Hughes Seager, or Paul David Numrich.

Chapters Five and Six contextualize American Buddhism within the larger milieu of American religious discourse, specifically the ways in which non-Buddhists have rhetorically appropriated *mizuko kuyō*. In Chapter Five, this refers specifically to how non-Buddhist Americans on either side of the abortion debate have used *mizuko kuyō* to support their positions on the morality or legal status of abortion. Chapter Six looks at those in the middle of these two extremes, particularly women who have found comfort within the language of *mizuko kuyō* to contend with their experiences of abortion or miscarriage. And while I appreciate, especially in Chapter Six, Wilson's use of online forums to gather valuable and insightful information on this topic, arguably these two chapters could have been condensed into one as they make largely the same argument.

My primary complaint about *Mourning the Unborn Dead* is actually something of a compliment: I wanted Wilson to go *further*. The aforementioned assertion that convert Zen communities seem to have more in common with new religious movements such as Risshō Kōsei-kai or Sanbōkyōdan than they do with traditional Japanese or even Japanese-American Zen communities is a fairly radical charge -- and one most clearly articulated in a footnote! The evidence that Wilson has presented here in support of this argument more than supports this claim which, coupled with a detailed treatment of ritual practices within the supposedly anti-ritualistic convert Zen community, suggests more than a mere "rethinking" of American Buddhism. Much of this book seems to be a challenge to future researchers to question commonly held assumptions about American Buddhism, about how scholars study American Buddhism, and about the processes of acculturation, adaptation, and Americanization in both of the "two Buddhist" communities -- points that Wilson hints at but never firmly states. The data he presents in this work certainly affords him the luxury of a more forceful voice.

Furthermore, I would argue that Wilson is not noting an adaptation to a traditional Japanese Buddhist ritual but in point of fact a wholly new ritual form that merely points to its Japanese ancestry. Whereas there are clearly trans-Pacific connections to be made between the Japanese and American forms of these rituals, Wilson gives us more divergences between them than similarities. As mentioned above, early in the book Wilson alerts us to a change in ritual language, i.e., non-Japanese American Zen communities do not refer to the *mizuko kuyō* ritual but instead to the *water baby ceremony*. On the one hand, this reflects a literal translation on the part of English-speaking American Buddhist ritualists. On a deeper level, however, it reflects the sense that we are no longer talking about *mizuko kuyō* at all. Whereas *mizuko kuyō* is a decidedly personal and private ritual conducted between a single priest and a single family who have experienced a pregnancy loss and is intended, in part, to appease the lost baby's spirit, the water baby ceremony is a communal affair and has more in common with Western forms of group therapy than Japanese Buddhist ritual. These do not seem to me "adaptations," as he describes them in Chapter Three, or changes to the *mizuko kuyō* ritual; they seem to me two completely different rituals both in form and intent.

I have a few minor quibbles with this work. As this book is about *mizuko kuyō*, and to the extent that Wilson rightly acknowledges that researchers have given scant attention to non-Shin Japanese-American Buddhists (23), it is regrettable that he devotes twice as much space to convert Zen groups. I would have appreciated the same level and depth of research applied to Japanese-American groups in lieu of the protracted conversation on the appropriation *mizuko kuyō* rhetoric by non-Buddhists covered in the final two chapters. Moreover, despite his awareness of the limitations of the terms commonly employed in the "two Buddhisms" typology (and none-too-subtle critiques of this typology in a half-dozen footnotes and the postscript), Wilson perpetuates the dichotomy by continuing to use the terms "convert" and "American Buddhism" to refer to specifically Euro-American communities. Finally, while I think it is admirable that he attempted to compare American versions of *mizuko kuyō* with their Japanese equivalents, this sort of cross-country comparison is always difficult. For example, in highlighting the difference between Japanese *mizuko kuyō* and American water baby ceremonies, Wilson states that "presumably few Japanese Zen participants would state that they are only praying to or getting in touch with their 'inner Jizō'" like their American counterparts (101). Yes, *presumably*. But we don't *know* this, at least not from any evidence presented in this volume. In other words, whereas he's presented a wealth of ethnographic data from this side of the Pacific, he has not presented the same level of evidence from the other side.

But these are minor and largely methodological quibbles, to be sure, and certainly do not detract from what will no doubt prove to be a valuable addition to a rapidly maturing subfield of American Buddhist studies. By placing the *mizuko kuyō* and water baby ceremony into the context of American abortion debates and post-pregnancy loss rituals, he is able to coin a new term, a cousin to Thomas Tweed's "Buddhist sympathizers": *Buddhist appropriators*, those people who do not necessarily self-identify as Buddhists but who nevertheless appropriate certain Buddhist ideas, practices, or beliefs. While I'm not totally convinced that Buddhist appropriators is an apt term (the more cumbersome "appropriators of Buddhism" seems to better describe the phenomena both Wilson and Tweed are noting), it seems obvious that

appropriators and sympathizers alike tell us volumes not only about Buddhists in America but about American religious life more generally.