

Introduction

In contemporary global discourse, abortion has become one of the most contentious ethical and religious issues, not only in Western societies but also in traditionally Buddhist regions of Asia and among Western Buddhist converts. Developments of reproductive technologies and shifting social norms have placed ancient Buddhist traditions in dialogue with new moral dilemmas to which authoritative responses remain inconsistent and unsystematic (Ratanakul, 1986).

Despite the unequivocal condemnation of abortion in classical Buddhist texts, the practice is widespread in Buddhist-majority countries such as Thailand, Japan, and China. This gap between scriptural ideals and social realities has, particularly since the 1990s, stimulated a wave of modern interpretations arguing for a “middle-way pro-choice” stance grounded in alleged canonical ambiguity regarding the onset of personhood (Barnhart, 2001; Harvey, 2000; Hughes, 2013). Against this backdrop, this study investigates whether such ambiguity genuinely exists within the orthodox foundations of the Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

Scope and Interpretive Diversity

This study does not deny the existence of interpretive plurality within global Buddhism. Rather, it intentionally focuses on orthodox doctrinal

consensus, defined here as positions grounded in canonical authority, sustained commentarial traditions, and recognized lineage leadership.

Alternative interpretations—especially those emerging in East Asian Mahāyāna or modern Western convert communities—often prioritize pastoral, psychological, or social considerations over strict doctrinal continuity. While these perspectives are sociologically significant, they operate according to different epistemic criteria than those governing Theravāda and Tibetan scholastic traditions.

The present study, therefore, evaluates claims of doctrinal ambiguity on the terms asserted by revisionist scholars themselves, namely, whether canonical and classical sources genuinely support such ambiguity. Within that limited but rigorous framework, no such ambiguity is found.

Conceptual Framework

1. Abortion

Abortion is the termination of a pregnancy by removal or expulsion of an embryo or fetus before it can survive outside the uterus. The term commonly refers to induced abortion, which is the deliberate act of ending a pregnancy through medical or surgical methods, whereas a spontaneous abortion occurs naturally and is usually called a miscarriage (Brooker, 2008). Induced abortion can be performed using medication (such as mifepristone with prostaglandin) (Kapp et al., 2013, pp. 350–363) or surgical procedures and is

considered one of the safest medical interventions when conducted legally and with proper medical care (Raymond et al., 2014, pp. 476–479).

Factors influencing the choice of abortion include birth timing, economic considerations, health concerns, and personal circumstances. The practice and legality of abortion vary widely among different societies, legal systems, and cultural contexts. In public health discourse, safe and legal abortion care is viewed as critical to sexual and reproductive health, with organizations like the World Health Organization highlighting its importance in reducing maternal mortality (World Health Organization, 2024).

However, abortion remains a deeply ethical and political issue, intersecting with debates over human rights, bodily autonomy, and moral values about the beginning of life—a point of contention often reflected in religious, legal, and cultural perspectives.

2. Theravāda

The term *Theravāda*, meaning "Doctrine of the Elders," refers to the Buddhist school that traces its origins to the earliest strata of the *Saṅgha* following the Buddha's passing. As explained by Peter Harvey, the name reflects the school's self-understanding as the custodian of the teachings preserved by the senior monks (*thera*) at the First Council (Harvey, 2013, pp. 67–69). The Theravāda tradition regards the Pāli Canon (*Tipiṭaka*) as its authoritative scripture, representing the most complete surviving

early Buddhist canon. Scholars such as Gombrich emphasize that Theravāda does not claim to be identical with the Buddha's original teaching but rather preserves a conservative interpretation rooted in the early community's collective memory and disciplined oral transmission (Gombrich, 2006, pp. 5–6).

Historically, Theravāda developed in Sri Lanka from the 3rd century BCE onward and later spread to mainland Southeast Asia, where it remains the predominant Buddhist tradition in countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Its doctrinal foundations emphasize the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, non-self (*anattā*), and the cultivation of insight (*vipassanā*) through meditative discipline. As Harvey notes, the Theravāda approach to ethics and psychology—including its understanding of *vijñāna*, moral agency, and karmic continuity—reflects a characteristically analytic and empirical reading of early Buddhist doctrines (Harvey, 2007, pp. 47–48).

This combination of textual conservatism and philosophical clarity has positioned Theravāda as a central reference point in contemporary Buddhist studies and comparative ethics.

3. Buddhism

Buddhism is a major world religion and philosophical tradition based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha or "the Awakened One," who lived in ancient India around the 6th–5th century BCE

(Gethin, 1998, pp. 7–8; Bronkhorst, 2013, pp. 9–11; Lopez, 1995, p. 7). The tradition encompasses a wide variety of beliefs, practices, and cultural expressions but is unified by core teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, which describe the nature of suffering (*dukkha*) (Ajahn Sucitto, 2010, pp. 87–88), its causes, and the way to its cessation. Buddhism has evolved into diverse schools and practices—including Theravāda (Gethin, 1998, pp. 27–28, 73–74), Mahāyāna (Harvey, 2013, p. 99), and Vajrayāna (Powers, 2007, pp. 392–393, 415)—and today has millions of adherents worldwide (Lopez, 2024).

Central to Buddhist ethics is the emphasis on non-harm (*ahiṃsā*) and compassion, which influence how many Buddhists approach moral questions such as abortion. Although there is no single official Buddhist position on abortion, traditional teachings generally regard abortion negatively because it involves the deliberate ending of life or the destruction of potential life, and life is often viewed as a continuum without a clear starting point (Harvey, 2000, pp. 157–158). Interpretations vary among regions and traditions; for example, some Buddhist teachers acknowledge that complex circumstances—such as threats to the mother’s health—may affect ethical judgments about abortion, even if it remains karmically undesirable (Krishan, 1997, pp. 47, 55).

4. Vijñāna

In early Buddhist thought, *vijñāna* ("consciousness" or "discernment") is one of the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandha*) and refers specifically to the moment-to-moment awareness that arises dependent on the sense faculties and their corresponding objects. The *Majjhima Nikāya* describes consciousness as neither a permanent entity nor a unified self but a series of discrete cognitive events conditioned by contact (*phassa*) (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995, pp. 79–80).

In *Majjhima Nikāya* 38, the Buddha states that consciousness arises only "with a specific condition as its support," illustrating that *vijñāna* is entirely contingent and thus incompatible with any notion of an eternal soul (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995, p. 349). This interpretation is echoed by Peter Harvey, who emphasizes that early Buddhism treats *vijñāna* as an impermanent process rather than a metaphysical substance (Harvey, 2007, pp. 112–113).

A key ethical implication of *vijñāna* appears in the discussion of conception and the beginning of life. In *Majjhima Nikāya* 38, the Buddha explains that the establishment of consciousness in the womb is one of the necessary conditions for the emergence of embodied life, a teaching that has influenced later Buddhist debates on moral personhood (Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995, p. 349). Commenting on this passage, Harvey notes that the text does not specify

precisely when consciousness first occurs during gestation, leaving interpretive space that modern scholars have debated in ethical contexts such as abortion (Harvey, 2007, pp. 311–312). This ambiguity in the timing of *vijñāna*'s arising underscores the broader Buddhist emphasis on conditionality and the absence of an intrinsic self.

Literature Review

Modern scholarship on Buddhist perspectives on abortion can be divided into two broad camps. The first group includes those who argue for textual ambiguity and maintain that Buddhism allows room for a compassionate, situationally flexible approach toward abortion. Authors such as Barnhart (2001), Harvey (2000), and Hughes (2013) contend that doctrines like the five aggregates and interpretations of the *gandhabba* permit abortion under certain circumstances without violating the first precept. Their analyses often present abortion as a possible "middle-way" response to crisis pregnancies.

The second group of scholars offers a critical assessment of this interpretation and maintains that claims of canonical ambiguity are not supported by their reading of the sources. Studies by Florida (1991), Lecso (1987), and Johanson (2019) indicate that the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka classifies induced abortion as a *pārājika* offense—a category of

serious monastic violations—and that classical commentarial literature addresses the presence of consciousness from the point of conception. Similarly, Tibetan sources, including bardo teachings and the writings of Tsongkhapa, describe the entry of the mental continuum into the embryo at the moment of sperm–egg union, a position that is presented as conferring full human status from conception within those doctrinal frameworks.

Overall, the scholarly debate centers on whether these sources contain doctrinal ambiguity or whether modern pro-choice interpretations reflect contemporary Western ethical assumptions rather than genuine Buddhist exegesis.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive analytical research method based on historical critical textual analysis of primary Buddhist sources from both the Theravāda and Tibetan traditions. The research relies on a document based analysis of classical religious texts, including the Pāli Canon, the Vinaya, Buddhaghosa's commentaries, the Abhidhamma, Tibetan bardo literature, and Lamrim embryological accounts.

To contextualize and critically evaluate contemporary interpretations, the study also examines authoritative modern statements by leading Buddhist figures such as the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and the Ganden Tri Rinpoche.

The method involves:

- **Close philological reading** of key doctrinal passages related to conception, consciousness, and the first precept;
- **Comparative analysis** between Theravāda and Tibetan sources to identify points of convergence or divergence;
- **Critical evaluation** of modern “middle-way pro-choice” scholarship in light of classical sources;
- **Synthesis** of findings to assess whether a legitimate doctrinal basis exists for reconciling elective abortion with foundational Buddhist ethics.

Through this methodology, the study aims to clarify the authenticity and limits of Buddhist ethical teachings concerning abortion and to contribute to contemporary interreligious and cross-cultural discussions on reproductive ethics.

1. The Claim of Ambiguity in the Theravāda Tradition and Its Refutation

This opening section confronts the cornerstone of virtually all modern “middle-way pro-choice” interpretations of abortion in Buddhism: the assertion that the Theravāda tradition leaves the precise moment at which consciousness (*viññāna*) arises, and thus when full moral personhood begins, sufficiently unclear to allow ethical latitude in early pregnancy. Scholars such as Barnhart (2001) have argued that because the Pāli

texts do not explicitly require consciousness at conception and appear to permit its association with later neurological development, the early embryo lacks the complete set of five aggregates (*pañcakkhandhā*) necessary for it to be considered a “person” under the first precept.

A close re-examination of the canonical and commentarial sources, however, reveals no such ambiguity. The Vinaya Piṭaka classifies induced abortion as an immediate *pārājika* offense (McDermott, 1999, pp. 173–175).

The *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta* insists on the presence of the *gandhabba*—identified by Buddhaghosa as the relinking consciousness—as the third indispensable condition for conception (Harvey, 2007, pp. 311–312), and the *Visuddhimagga* and *Abhidhamma* explicitly locate the arising of consciousness and the five aggregates at the precise instant of sperm–egg fusion. From the earliest discourses through the mature commentarial tradition, Theravāda sources speak with one voice: a fully constituted sentient being exists from the moment of conception. The alleged ambiguity is therefore not a feature of the texts themselves but a modern projection that dissolves upon rigorous historical-critical scrutiny (Jafari & Emil, 2023).

1.1. Barnhart’s Core Claim of “Ambiguity” in Theravāda

Among contemporary efforts to render elective abortion compatible with Buddhist ethics, Barnhart’s article (2001) is the most explicit in resting its case on a purported

doctrinal ambiguity within the Theravāda tradition. Barnhart maintains that neither the canonical texts nor the classical commentaries definitively fix the moment at which consciousness (*vijñāna*) arises or when the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandhā*)—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—are fully constituted in the developing embryo. In his view, this alleged lack of precision provides enough interpretive space to withhold full moral personhood from the early-stage fetus. Barnhart's reasoning follows a clear causal chain. He first asserts that Theravāda Buddhism "need not take *vijñāna* to be present at any particular point in the process of embryonic development" and that nothing in the tradition requires its presence at conception (Barnhart, 2001, p. 49).

He then introduced a thoroughly modern neuroscientific criterion alien to the Pāli canon, and said, "In fact, we would generally hold consciousness to be present only when, minimally, the cerebral cortex develops and perhaps later" (Barnhart, 2001, p. 49). From these premises, he concludes that, before cortical formation, the embryo lacks the complete set of aggregates required for moral personhood; accordingly, its intentional destruction does not satisfy the technical definition of *pāṇātipāta* (the intentional killing of a human being) and does not violate the first precept.

This line of argument shifts the point at which moral considerability is said to arise

from conception, as traditionally described in Theravāda sources, to a later stage associated with neurological development. Within Barnhart's framework, this shift allows for an interval during which abortion is characterized as not entailing the karmic implications that Theravāda texts historically associate with homicide. The remainder of the article examines this position in relation to canonical *Suttas*, Vinaya regulations, commentarial literature, and *Abhidhamma* analysis, and finds that these sources present a different account of the timing of *vijñāna* and fetal moral status within the Theravāda tradition.

1.2. Refutation of Ambiguity through the Vinaya Texts

Claims regarding textual or doctrinal ambiguity in Theravāda Buddhism about the moral status of the fetus can be assessed in light of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the earliest and most authoritative corpus of monastic law in the tradition. Within the Vinaya, induced abortion is classified among the four *pārājika* offenses, a category of violations that entails immediate and permanent expulsion from the *Saṅgha*. This classification indicates that abortion is treated as a matter of significant legal and disciplinary consequence within the monastic code, a treatment that differs from interpretations advanced in some contemporary moderate pro-choice scholarship.

The decisive rule appears in the *Pārājikakaṇḍa* (McDermott, 1999, pp.

173–175): "yo pana bhikkhu gabbhapatanaṃ parihāreyya, pārājiko hoti asaṃvāso"—"Should any monk intentionally cause the abortion of a fetus, he is defeated and no longer in communion." The phrase *gabbhapatanaṃ parihāreyya* covers any deliberate act—drugs, instruments, or other means—designed to terminate pregnancy. An identical *pārājika* applies to nuns (McDermott, 1999, pp. 173–175), confirming the prohibition's universal scope within the early community.

Placing abortion alongside the intentional killing of a human being, major theft, and false claims of spiritual attainment reveals its perceived gravity. In Theravāda jurisprudence, only the deliberate taking of human life warrants such an extreme sanction for laypeople under the first precept; by classifying abortion as *pārājika*, the Vinaya effectively declares the fetus a fully constituted human person (Horner, 1966; Keown, 1995). No qualifications appear concerning gestational age, neurological development, or maternal circumstances—only the rare, later-commentarial exception of immediate mortal danger to the mother is ever acknowledged. Thus, the *Vinaya Piṭaka* offers the clearest possible refutation of alleged ambiguity: from the moment its life can be ended, the fetus is recognized as a sentient human being fully entitled to the protection of the first precept.

1.3. The Presence of the Gandhabba at the Moment of Conception

The most decisive canonical evidence for the Theravāda orthodox position on the beginning of human life appears not in the Vinaya's disciplinary code but in the doctrinal heart of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, specifically the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta* (Harvey, 2007, pp. 311–312). Addressing the monk Sāti's erroneous view of consciousness, the Buddha clearly states that successful conception and the arising of a new sentient being require three indispensable conditions: the parents' sexual union, the mother being in her fertile period, and the presence of the *gandhabba*—"tadā hoti gandhabbo ca paccupaṭṭhito" ("and the being-to-be-reborn is present") (Harvey, 2007, pp. 311–312).

Although modern scholarship has sometimes misinterpreted *gandhabba* as a spirit or celestial musician, the authoritative Theravāda commentarial tradition unanimously identifies it as the karmically driven stream of consciousness (*vijñāna-sota*) that, having departed one existence at death, seeks rebirth. Buddhaghosa's *Papañcasūdanī* (the *Majjhima Nikāya* commentary) explains that at the precise moment of conception, this same consciousness becomes the relinking consciousness (*paṭisandhi-vijñāna*), instantaneously linking the final thought-moment of the previous life to the first moment of the new one (Buddhaghosa, Samantapāsādikā,

2015, II 265–268). In short, the presence of the *gandhabba* is nothing other than the presence of *viññāna* itself.

The ethical consequence is immediate and unequivocal. From the very instant of sperm–egg fusion—when the third condition is fulfilled—the relinking consciousness arises simultaneously with the new material base, and all five aggregates (*pañcakkhandhā*)—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—are fully constituted. The embryo is therefore never a merely biological entity that gradually acquires personhood; it is, from its first moment, a complete sentient being (*satta*) whose intentional destruction constitutes *pāṇātipāta* and a grave violation of the first precept. Read together with its authoritative commentary, the *Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta* eliminates any trace of the textual ambiguity alleged by moderate pro-choice interpreters.

As Florida (1991) and Keown (2001) have shown, traditional Theravāda understanding is crystal clear: the moment the *gandhabba* is present and the three conditions converge, *viññāna* is present, the five aggregates are complete, and a new human life possessing full moral status has begun.

1.4. Buddhaghosa's Commentaries and the Abhidhamma

The orthodox Theravāda position on the moral status of the fetus receives its most systematic and authoritative reinforcement in the fifth-century commentaries of Buddhaghosa and the

technical philosophical psychology of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. Together, these post-canonical sources dispel any lingering claim of ambiguity that might be read into the *Suttas* or *Vinaya*, providing instead a precise and unequivocal framework for determining when a sentient being (*satta*) comes into existence.

Buddhaghosa, universally recognized as Theravāda's pre-eminent commentator, addresses embryonic personhood directly in two masterworks. In the *Visuddhimagga*, the tradition's definitive encyclopedic synthesis, he states that at the exact moment of conception the relinking consciousness (*paṭisandhi-viññāna*) establishes itself in the newly formed *kalala* (embryo), thereby constituting name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*)—the psycho-physical complex that defines a sentient individual (Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, 2010, XVII, pp.165–170).

The same teaching is reaffirmed in his *Vinaya* commentary, the *Samantapāsādikā*, which allows no developmental stage in which the embryo might lack consciousness or moral considerability. For Buddhaghosa, the simultaneous presence of *viññāna* and *nāmarūpa* from the instant of fertilization means the organism is, without qualification, a sentient being fully protected by the first precept.

This position is further refined in the *Abhidhamma* tradition. The *Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha*, the

standard compendium studied throughout the Theravāda world since at least the twelfth century, explicitly locates the decisive "moment of relinking" (*paṭisandhi-khaṇa*)—the instant a new individual existence begins—at the precise point of conception (Buddharakkhita, 1985, Chapter VIII, pp. 27–31).

Here, the relinking consciousness is not a later addition dependent on neurological maturation; it is the very first mind-moment (*citta*) of the new life-stream, arising simultaneously with the first kamma-produced material form (*rūpa*). Subsequent embryonic and fetal development is therefore understood as the unfolding of an already-constituted sentient being, not the gradual acquisition of sentience.

Taken together, sources such as the *Suttas* (cf. Harvey, 2007, pp. 311–312), the *Vinaya* (McDermott, 1999, pp. 173–175), Buddhaghosa's commentaries, and *Abhidhamma* analyses present a coherent doctrinal account within the Theravāda tradition. According to this account, relinking consciousness is described as arising at the moment of conception, coinciding with the establishment of mind-and-matter (*nāmarūpa*) and the attribution of moral status under the first precept. Interpretations that locate the arising of *viññāna* at later stages, such as cortical development or viability, represent an alternative reading that differs from this doctrinal presentation.

1.5. The Position of the Tibetan Tradition: Human Life Begins at Conception

The Tibetan tradition (encompassing the Gelug, Kagyu, Nyingma, and Sakya schools of Vajrayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhism) adopts an even more explicit and uncompromising position than Theravāda on the beginning of human life. Across all major lineages, an unbroken orthodox consensus maintains that consciousness (*rnam-shes*, Skt. *viññāna*) enters the embryo at the precise moment of sperm–egg fusion, instantly transforming the fertilized ovum into a complete human being (*mi*) endowed with an uninterrupted mental continuum (*sems-can-gyi rgyud*). In Tibetan anthropology and embryology, the presence of this continuous mental stream is the decisive criterion of sentient beinghood (*sems-can*); its deliberate severance therefore constitutes the killing of a human person and is ranked among the root ethical downfalls, comparable in severity to the *pārājika* offenses of the *Vinaya*.

Classical Tibetan sources allow no developmental "window" in which the embryo might lack consciousness or moral standing. They uniformly describe the consciousness of the intermediate-state being (*bar-do-ba*) entering the union of the father's white element (semen) and the mother's red element (ovum) instantaneously with conception itself. This teaching leaves no theoretical space for the ambiguity that some modern scholars attempt to find in the Theravāda tradition.

Consequently, the Tibetan schools present a formidable barrier to contemporary "middle-way" or pro-choice interpretations that would postpone full moral personhood until later milestones such as central nervous system formation or the onset of sentience. From the Tibetan perspective, such postponement is ontologically impossible: from the very first instant of conception, a fully constituted human being (complete with body, *viññāna*, and unbroken mental continuum) already exists.

1.6. The Bardo Teachings and the Moment of Relinking (*paṭisandhi*)

Classical Tibetan literature displays striking unanimity on the precise moment a new human life begins. The foundational texts of the Gelug, Kagyu, and Nyingma traditions—spanning the full range of Tibetan scholastic and contemplative thought—describe rebirth in virtually identical terms: "Afterward, the white and red constituents (from father and mother) mix in the mother's womb. The consciousness of the dying being enters in their midst" (Tsongkhapa, 2004; Gampopa, 1998; Longchen Rabjam, n.d.). The "white constituent" denotes the father's semen, the "red constituent" the mother's ovum (or blood), and the entering consciousness is that of the intermediate-state being (*bar-do-ba*) driven by karma toward its next existence.

This teaching reaches its clearest expression in the bardo literature that

underpins Tibetan embryology. The celebrated *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (*Bar-do thos-grol*) and the authoritative commentary by Lati Rinpoche and Jeffrey Hopkins state unequivocally that "the consciousness of the intermediate-state being enters exactly at the moment when the father's white element and the mother's red element unite, and relinking (*paṭisandhi*) occurs" (Lati Rinpoche & Hopkins, 1979, p. 60). No period of unconsciousness or gradual acquisition of mind is acknowledged; the mental continuum is fully present from the very first instant of conception.

Thus, contrary to Western scholars who propose a post-conception phase in which the embryo lacks consciousness or moral status, the Tibetan tradition—across its major schools and most authoritative texts—recognizes no such interval. From its inception, the fertilized zygote is a complete human being endowed with an unbroken mental continuum (*sems-can-gyi rgyud*). Together with the parallel evidence from the Theravāda canon and commentaries, this unified Tibetan witness decisively refutes any attempt to insert ethical or ontological ambiguity into the early embryonic stage, reaffirming the shared orthodox conviction of both great traditions: human life, moral personhood, and the continuity of consciousness (*viññāna*) begin irrevocably at conception.

1.7. Contemporary Pronouncements by Major Lamas

The orthodox Tibetan teaching that human life and its mental continuum begin unequivocally at conception is not merely a historical or scholastic conclusion drawn from ancient texts; it remains the explicit, living doctrine upheld by the tradition's most authoritative contemporary figures. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, whose voice carries unparalleled weight across all Tibetan schools, has consistently declared over three decades that "from the Buddhist viewpoint, human life begins at conception because the mental continuum enters the fertilized embryo at that very moment," making abortion equivalent to "taking a human life" (Dalai Lama, 1984).

He recognizes only one narrowly defined exception: when continuing the pregnancy poses an immediate and certain mortal threat to the mother such that both would otherwise perish—a traditional compassionate allowance aimed at minimizing total loss, not at establishing a general right to choose.

This rigorous stance is echoed even more strictly by the Ganden Tri Rinpoche, holder of Tsongkhapa's throne and titular head of the Gelug lineage, who stated in 1985 that abortion is permissible solely "if continuation of the pregnancy endangers the mother's life in such a way that both would die," while explicitly rejecting justifications such

as rape or severe fetal abnormality (Lecso, 1987, p. 217). The same unequivocal position has been repeatedly affirmed by other revered lamas, including Penor Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche, and Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, revealing a living consensus that transcends sectarian lines.

The seamless continuity between classical bardo embryology and these modern pronouncements decisively refutes any suggestion that contemporary Tibetan Buddhism has softened its position or uncovered new interpretive latitude for elective abortion. On the contrary, the tradition's most authoritative living representatives continue to uphold the ancient consensus with striking clarity: once the consciousness (*vijñāna*) of the intermediate-state being enters at the moment of conception, a complete human person exists, and its deliberate destruction constitutes one of the gravest ethical transgressions possible.

1.8. Refutation of the "Absence of a Developed Central Nervous System" Argument

The Tibetan tradition offers the most decisive refutation of the core premise underlying Western-influenced "middle-way pro-choice" interpretations: the claim that consciousness (and thus moral personhood) cannot exist until the central nervous system or cerebral cortex has developed. This premise, central to Barnhart and similar arguments, is rejected outright in Tibetan ontology. Consciousness (*rnam-shes*) is not an

emergent by-product of the brain; it is ontologically prior to the body and the very cause of the body's formation. In Tsongkhapa's classic formulation, "consciousness is the cause of the body, not its effect. The body is like a vessel into which consciousness is placed" (*Lamrim Chenmo*). The physical organism serves merely as a temporary container that the already-existing mental continuum appropriates at conception according to karmic conditions.

Consequently, the common Western assertion that consciousness is impossible before cortical structures appear is regarded as a fundamental category error that reverses the causal sequence taught in the doctrine of rebirth. The intermediate-state consciousness actively seeks and enters the union of parental elements; subsequent brain and nervous-system development is the result of that prior mental continuum, not its prerequisite. As Philip Lecso aptly summarizes, "Buddhism teaches that [consciousness] exists before the physical form. Therefore, arguments based on either development or functionality of a central nervous system as a basis for defining human life are not acceptable" (Lecso, 1987, p. 215).

To make moral status contingent on neurological milestones is, in Tibetan eyes, to mistake the cart for the horse: the cart (the body) exists only because the horse (the mental continuum) is already pulling it from the instant of

conception. Both Theravāda and Tibetan traditions therefore converge on the same unequivocal conclusion: the fertilized embryo is, from its first moment, a fully sentient being (*satta/sems-can*) whose intentional destruction constitutes the grave offense of killing a human person.

1.9. Critical Examination of Contemporary Moderate Pro-Choice Interpretations

This section turns from establishing the unambiguous orthodox consensus in Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhism to a critical examination of recent scholarly efforts to render elective abortion morally permissible within the tradition. Over the past three decades, several prominent interpretations have sought to reconcile abortion with Buddhist ethical principles, typically by asserting textual ambiguity or by importing modern Western criteria for personhood. The following sections systematically evaluate the most influential of these attempts, demonstrating that they rely on doctrinal reconstructions rather than on the canonical and commentarial sources themselves.

1.10. Critical Analysis of Michael G. Barnhart

Michael G. Barnhart's (2001) influential article in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* offers the most systematic attempt to construct a Theravāda-compatible justification for early-stage abortion. He advances a

three-step argument: First, the five aggregates (*pañcakkhandhā*) are not simultaneously constituted at conception;

Second, that consciousness (*viññāna*) may legitimately be postponed until cortical development or viability; Third, the early embryo therefore lacks the full set of aggregates required for moral personhood, making its intentional destruction consistent with the first precept (Barnhart, 2001, pp. 48–50).

This reconstruction is examined in relation to relevant canonical and commentarial sources. The *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta* (Harvey, 2007, pp. 311–312) refers to the presence of the *gandhabba*—which Buddhaghosa interprets as relinking consciousness (*paṭisandhi-viññāna*)—as a necessary condition for conception, situating the arising of *viññāna* at the moment of sperm–egg union. Buddhaghosa's commentaries (Buddhaghosa, *Samantapāsādikā*, 2015, II, pp. 265–268) and the *Visuddhimagga* (Buddhaghosa, *Samantapāsādikā*, 2015, XVII, pp. 165–170) describe the simultaneous arising of the five aggregates at that point. In contrast, Barnhart does not cite explicit canonical passages in support of a delayed arising of *viññāna*, instead employing criteria derived from contemporary neuroscientific models, such as cortical development. As discussed in studies by Florida (1991), Keown (2001), and Johanson (2019), this approach reflects

an interpretive framework that differs from the accounts presented in the *Suttas*, *Vinaya*, *Abhidhamma*, and classical Theravāda commentarial literature.

1.11. Japanese *Mizuko Kuyō* Rituals and Claims of Traditional Flexibility

Another widely invoked argument for a supposedly flexible Buddhist approach to abortion points to the Japanese practice of *mizuko kuyō*—memorial rites performed for aborted or miscarried fetuses. William R. LaFleur (1992) and certain Japanese scholars cite these rituals as evidence that Japanese Buddhism has historically taken a pragmatic, even accommodating stance toward abortion. The existence of elaborate ceremonies designed to appease the spirit of the "water child" (*mizuko*) and avert its possible resentment is presented as proof that the tradition has long regarded abortion as ethically negotiable rather than absolutely prohibited.

This reading, however, distorts both history and doctrine. *Mizuko kuyō* is predominantly a twentieth-century phenomenon that emerged on a large scale only after World War II, driven by intense socio-economic pressures: rapid urbanization, widespread poverty, aggressive population-control policies, and the legalization of abortion in 1948. Far from reflecting an ancient tolerance rooted in canonical or medieval sources, the rites constitute a modern pastoral response to the spiritual and psychological distress

caused by a practice traditionally viewed as gravely immoral. LaFleur himself openly acknowledges that *mizuko kuyō* serves primarily as a "post-hoc rationalization" for an act that remained ethically condemned throughout most of Japanese Buddhist history (LaFleur, 1992, pp. 148–150).

Pre-twentieth-century commentaries in the Shingon, Tendai, and other major schools uniformly classified induced abortion as homicide (Florida, 1991). The rise of memorial rites, therefore, testifies not to traditional permission but to the enduring orthodox conviction that abortion severs a human life and generates heavy negative karma—hence the felt need for ritual appeasement and purification. Far from demonstrating doctrinal flexibility, *mizuko kuyō* actually reinforces the classical position that abortion is a tragic and karmically consequential act requiring atonement.

1.12. Peter Harvey and James J. Hughes

Peter Harvey (2000) and James J. Hughes (2013) offer two of the most sophisticated Western scholarly attempts to carve out ethical space for abortion within Buddhism by introducing a distinction entirely foreign to the tradition. Harvey contends that the early fetus possesses only "biological" life, while "ethical" or morally significant life—the kind that fully activates the first precept—emerges only later (Harvey, 2000, pp. 311–327). Hughes takes the argument

further, proposing that Buddhism could accept abortion up to approximately 20–24 weeks, a limit drawn from Western notions of viability and neurological development (Hughes, 2013).

This biological-versus-ethical dichotomy, however, finds no support whatsoever in the Pāli, Sanskrit, or Tibetan canons. Neither the *Vinaya*, which treats induced abortion as an immediate *pārājika* offense (McDermott, 1999, pp. 173–175), nor the major Tibetan embryological texts (e.g., *Lamrim Chenmo*) recognizes any graded scale of personhood or any developmental threshold after which the fetus suddenly becomes protected by the precept against killing. From the moment consciousness (*vijñāna/rnamshes*) is present—and both traditions unanimously place that moment at conception—the being is fully safeguarded. No canonical source separates "mere biological existence" from "ethical personhood." The distinction is therefore not an indigenous Buddhist category recovered from the texts but a modern Western secular import imposed upon them. As Keown (2016) and Johanson (2019) have demonstrated, moral status in Buddhism depends solely on the presence of the relinking consciousness (*paṭisandhi-vijñāna*), not on brain function, viability, or any other physiological marker. Once that consciousness has entered, the fetus is a complete sentient being, and its

intentional destruction unambiguously constitutes *pāṇātipāta*.

1.13. Parallels with Moderate Catholic Revisionism

The revisionist arguments advanced by Barnhart, Harvey, and other moderate pro-choice Buddhist scholars bear a striking and instructive resemblance to a parallel episode in twentieth-century Catholic moral theology. In the 1960s and 1970s, prominent theologians such as Sister Margaret Farley and Charles Curran attempted to reconcile abortion with Christian ethics by reviving theories of "gradual ensoulment" or delayed personhood, thereby shifting full moral status from conception to a later developmental stage. These efforts were ultimately and decisively rejected by the Church's magisterium, most authoritatively in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (John Paul II, 1995), which reaffirmed the unbroken tradition that human life must be respected from the moment of conception.

The comparison between Catholic revisionism and contemporary Buddhist reinterpretations is analogical rather than structural. The study does not claim institutional equivalence between Catholicism's centralized magisterium and Buddhism's decentralized authority structures. Rather, the comparison highlights a shared methodological pattern: in both traditions, revisionist arguments attempt to create moral latitude by introducing non-traditional biological

criteria (e.g., neurological development) into long-standing metaphysical frameworks. The analogy is therefore heuristic, illustrating parallel interpretive strategies rather than identical authority mechanisms.

A comparable pattern can be identified in some strands of contemporary Buddhist scholarship. Analogous to developments in other religious traditions, certain scholars propose interpretations that locate the arising of consciousness (*vijñāna/rnam-shes*) at neurological stages rather than at conception. These approaches draw on modern biological and philosophical frameworks that differ from those traditionally employed within Buddhist doctrinal systems. By contrast, canonical and post-canonical sources—including the Pāli Canon, the *Vinaya*, classical commentaries, Tibetan bardo literature, and statements by contemporary lineage holders such as the Dalai Lama, Gaden Tri Rinpoche, and Penor Rinpoche—articulate positions that are presented as consistent over time within their respective traditions. Within this interpretive context, moderate pro-choice readings are described as diverging from what is regarded as orthodox doctrine, reflecting an alternative analytical framework rather than a continuation of traditional authoritative interpretations.

1.14. Ethical and Practical Implications

Before proceeding to the ethical and practical implications, a brief methodological clarification is necessary. The preceding sections are strictly descriptive and analytical, concerned with establishing the internal doctrinal coherence of Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhist teachings regarding conception, consciousness, and moral status. The present section, by contrast, moves cautiously into normative ethical reflection.

This transition does not assume that ancient doctrinal positions can be mechanically translated into modern policy prescriptions. Rather, it follows a Buddhist ethical reasoning model, in which metaphysical commitments (karma, rebirth, consciousness) inform moral evaluation through the lens of suffering (*dukkha*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). The ethical recommendations offered here therefore represent interpretive extrapolations, not binding social mandates.

Moreover, these conclusions are framed within Buddhist moral reasoning itself, not as universal ethical imperatives applicable to pluralistic societies. The limitations of such extrapolation—especially when applied to modern psychological trauma, reproductive healthcare, or legal policy—are acknowledged throughout this section.

This final section moves beyond doctrinal analysis to practical ethics and the central Buddhist concern with

suffering (*dukkha*). It argues that the traditional prohibition of abortion is not a rigid legalism but the position that, when viewed through the lens of karma, rebirth, and the reduction of long-term *dukkha*, proves genuinely more compassionate and effective than permissive alternatives.

1.15. Why the Orthodox Position Is Not Only "Traditional" but Also More Compassionate and Conducive to Reducing Suffering

Far from being a rigid or merely legalistic rule, the orthodox Buddhist prohibition on abortion emerges—when viewed through the lens of karma, rebirth, and the reduction of suffering (*dukkha*)—as the genuinely more compassionate stance. Moderate pro-choice interpretations often claim that abortion represents "the most compassionate option for a woman in crisis" (Barnhart, 2001), yet the tradition maintains that it actually inflicts profound, multi-life suffering on all involved. For the mother, abortion typically brings intense guilt, psychological trauma, and lasting post-abortion depression in this life, compounded by heavy negative karma that will ripen painfully in future existences (LaFleur, 1992; Lecso, 1987).

For the aborted being, it abruptly ends a precious human rebirth—an opportunity described as "more difficult to obtain than a wish-fulfilling jewel" (Tsongkhapa, *Lamrim Chenmo*; Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*)—depriving that stream of

consciousness of its rare chance to encounter and practice the Dharma, thereby prolonging its entrapment in *samsāra*. On a societal level, widespread acceptance of abortion undermines respect for sentient life and indirectly fosters a culture of violence (Keown, 2016).

Measured against Buddhism's ultimate aim of minimizing long-term suffering across lifetimes, the short-term relief offered by abortion proves a tragic bargain: momentary ease purchased at the price of immense karmic and existential harm. Accepting responsibility for the pregnancy and pursuing genuine alternatives—above all adoption—preserves the child's irreplaceable human rebirth, shields the mother from crushing negative karma, and generates positive merit for everyone involved. Thus, far from being harsh or outdated, the orthodox restriction is the path that most effectively reduces real, enduring *dukkha* for mother, child, and society alike (Johanson, 2019).

1.16. Adoption as the Authentic "Middle-Way" Solution Fully Consistent with Buddhism

Adoption emerges as the authentic and doctrinally coherent "middle way" that moderate scholars such as Barnhart unsuccessfully sought within Buddhism. Todd Johanson (2019) convincingly shows that adoption alone meets every legitimate ethical concern while remaining entirely faithful to the first precept. First, it

upholds absolute respect for the life of the fetus, preserving the extraordinarily rare and precious human rebirth that classical texts describe as more difficult to obtain than a wish-fulfilling jewel (*Lamrim Chenmo*; Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*). Second, it genuinely relieves the mother's hardship by freeing her from the long-term burden of raising a child she feels unable to care for, thus addressing the immediate crisis without violence. Third, and most importantly, adoption generates immense positive karma for all involved: the birth mother accrues merit through profound compassion and self-sacrifice, the child retains the uninterrupted opportunity to live out its human existence and encounter the Dharma, and the adoptive parents fulfill their longing for parenthood through an act of lifesaving generosity (Johanson, 2019, pp. 58–60).

Thus, adoption—not abortion—constitutes the true compassionate middle path: it simultaneously protects life, alleviates present suffering, and creates vast positive karmic conditions for everyone concerned, all without violating the first precept or triggering the catastrophic consequences that inevitably accompany the deliberate destruction of a human rebirth. Far from abandoning women in crisis, the orthodox Buddhist tradition offers a constructive, morally impeccable, and karmically beneficial alternative that fully embodies the compassion

(*karuṇā*) and wisdom (*prajñā*) at the heart of the Dharma.

1.17. The Buddhist Stance in Pluralistic Societies: Opposed to Abortion but Opposed to Coercive Legislation

In pluralistic societies, Buddhism draws a clear and consistent distinction between moral condemnation and political coercion, setting it apart from certain theocratic or fundamentalist approaches to abortion. While the tradition unequivocally views induced abortion as the grave offense of killing a human being, it generally refuses to convert that ethical judgment into a demand for state-enforced criminalization. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama has repeatedly expressed this position with characteristic clarity: "We have to accept the diversity of ideologies... Everyone has the right to choose. It is the individual's business" (Gyatso, 1984, p. 60). Likewise, the Buddhist Churches of America, representing the largest Japanese-American Jōdo Shinshū community, declares: "Although abortion is fundamentally wrong from a Buddhist viewpoint, the final decision rests with the pregnant woman, and others can only encourage her toward an informed and compassionate choice" (Śāntideva [BCA], 1997).

Consequently, in diverse modern contexts Buddhism adopts a three-tiered approach: it firmly condemns abortion as a serious violation of the first precept and a source of profound negative karma; it

opposes the use of state power to coerce personal moral decisions; and it directs its ethical energy toward positive, non-coercive alternatives—thorough education about karmic consequences, comprehensive social and economic support for pregnant women, and active promotion of adoption as the truly compassionate path. This stance preserves the integrity of the moral teaching while honoring individual karmic responsibility and the pluralistic character of contemporary societies.

Conclusion

The canonical and commentarial sources of both Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhism present an unambiguous and continuous doctrinal consensus extending across more than two and a half millennia: human life—defined by the presence of a karmically conditioned mental continuum (*vijñāna* / *rnam-shes*)—begins precisely at the moment of conception. From the Vinaya's classification of induced abortion as a *pārājika* offense (McDermott, 1999, pp. 173–175) to the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta*'s reference to the necessity of the *gandhabba* (Harvey, 2007, pp. 311–312), from Buddhaghosa's explanation of the simultaneous arising of the aggregates at *paṭisandhi* to Tibetan bardo teachings that describe the entry of consciousness at the moment of parental union, a range of canonical and post-canonical sources address the timing of the beginning of life or consciousness. Taken together, these materials articulate positions that differ from the ambiguity proposed in some contemporary moderate pro-choice

interpretations.

Contemporary approaches that locate moral personhood at stages such as cortical development, viability, or other points after conception—whether advanced by authors such as Barnhart, Harvey, and Hughes, or reflected in practices like Japanese *mizuko kuyō*—can be understood as interpretive frameworks that differ from traditional doctrinal analyses. These approaches employ conceptual categories that originate outside classical Buddhist doctrinal systems and thus represent a distinct mode of interpretation rather than a continuation of traditional exegetical methods.

Far from lacking compassion or exhibiting rigidity, the orthodox Buddhist position emerges as the most effective path for minimizing long-term suffering and generating positive karma. Adoption, comprehensive social support for mothers, and non-violent family-planning education form the authentic Buddhist "middle way": one that preserves the rare opportunity of human rebirth, shields women from the severe karmic and psychological repercussions of abortion, and produces profound merit for all participants. While Buddhism in pluralistic societies consistently condemns abortion and teaches its grave karmic consequences, it avoids coercive legal intervention, leaving the ultimate choice—and its karmic results—to the individual. Thus, traditional Buddhist ethics prove not

only doctrinally coherent and historically continuous but also practically wiser and genuinely more compassionate than revisionist attempts to justify elective abortion within the Dharma.

This study's contribution lies not in proposing novel ethical doctrines but in systematically clarifying the boundaries of doctrinal legitimacy within two major Buddhist traditions. In doing so, it provides a necessary corrective to claims of canonical ambiguity that dominate contemporary discourse.

Practically, the study advances a non-coercive ethical model rooted in traditional Buddhist values:

- Preservation of life
- Compassionate social support
- Adoption as a morally coherent alternative
- Rejection of punitive legal enforcement

This framework offers a realistic and culturally grounded response to modern ethical challenges without distorting foundational doctrine.

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