

*Tricycle Talks*

“The Buddhist Ethics of Abortion”

Episode #114 with Katy Butler

November 13, 2024



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**Katy Butler:** I think the fundamental meaning of all five basic lay precepts is to not harm, is to do no harm. The world is complex. So my feeling is that the way I and everybody else works with the precepts in their lives is taking the north star of where you're trying to head, which is in the direction of not harming, and seeing how you can do your best within the circumstances of your life.

**James Shaheen:** Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Katy Butler. Katy is a Buddhist journalist and a longtime *Tricycle* contributing editor. In her article in the November issue of *Tricycle* called “Abortion and the First Precept,” she discusses her own experience of abortion and how she has come to view abortion in the context of the Buddhist precepts. In my conversation with Katy, we talk about the stigmas and hurdles she encountered in her experience of abortion, why she believes abortion can be a wrenching, sacred, and even morally necessary act, how the realities of women's lives have long been overlooked by Buddhist teachers and communities, and how she thinks about Buddhist ethics in terms of harm reduction. Please note that this conversation includes descriptions of abortion and mention of sexual abuse. So here's my conversation with Katy Butler.

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**James Shaheen:** OK, so I'm here with journalist and longtime *Tricycle* contributor, Katy Butler. Hi, Katy, it's great to be with you.

**Katy Butler:** Hi, it's really nice to be with you again, James.

**James Shaheen:** So Katy, we're here to talk about your article in the November issue of *Tricycle* that discusses the ethics of abortion from a Buddhist perspective. But to begin, can you tell us about how Buddhism has traditionally viewed abortion from your layman's view?



**Katy Butler:** Well, I was quite disappointed when I started to just do web research when I was thinking of writing this article by how absolutist a lot of the opinions that I read online were, which is, “Killing is one of the five precepts, abortion is killing, therefore abortion is a violation of the precepts.” I don't know, I was disappointed because I guess I thought, maybe from my American perspective and my friends who are Buddhists, that there would be more flexibility or understanding of the complexities of suffering or the understanding of women's difficult situations in life. So I was extremely sorry to see how absolutist the opinions on the whole that I saw. The Theravada opinions were very clear, a lot of Buddhist opinions also very clear, and to me, very unaware of the experience of women's lives. Very unaware. And of course, most of what I was reading was written by men, including many, many celibate men. So, again, I started to feel like, “Wait a minute, why are these standards being set by people with absolutely no experience of the consequences of giving birth to a child?”

I'm a follower of Thich Nhat Hanh. He was the man who changed my life more than anybody else. I will never stop being grateful for my connection with Thich Nhat Hanh. But when I read the very few statements that I could find online by him, it was that this has to be a decision by the whole sangha, and that even in cases where a young girl had been impregnated by a rape by a sea pirate, he and his community had also tried to help the woman see and have compassion for the nascent being and, if possible, not have an abortion.

**James Shaheen:** We're going to talk more about Buddhist ethics, the precepts, and the morality of abortion. But before we do, as you often do, you frame the issue within your own personal experience. So can you talk about that experience and what led you to write the article?

**Katy Butler:** Yes, I think what led me to write the article is obviously the current politics, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the tremendous suffering, especially in the South, that is occurring with poor women who are now not able to access abortion where they are and very often don't even have the resources to fly to another state or drive to another state or get childcare while they drive to another state. So that is what really lit the fire under me—that and being 75 and feeling



like there's no need for me to have any secrets from anybody anymore, and if there's any help that can come out of me being honest about my true life experience as a person in a woman's body in the 20th and 21st centuries, if there's any good that can come out of forgetting about shame and being honest, I want to do it before I die, really, and to have compassion, which I think I can have now at this age, for who I was and my circumstances for both of my two abortions.

The first abortion, I was barely 21. I was a very confused and I would say depressed college student. I had in fact been sexually abused once as a child, and that had set up a pathway for a lot of destructive sexuality in my 20s and 30s, not being able to protect myself in various ways or choose or have agency. I had had a boyfriend who'd gone off to France for six months, and I really didn't want to continue the relationship, but in some ways I didn't really have the guts to be honest about it and really clear. At the end of the summer, I invited him to go camping with me in Maine, which was a long drive, and I hitchhiked to meet him alone, which, again, tells you how confused a young person I was.

And so we go to Maine, and I think it's clear to him that we're not in a relationship anymore. We're just friends. We get there and we set up the tent and he says, “What do you mean? Why did you bring me all this way if you don't want to continue this relationship?” He was hurt, understandably, and I don't have any good answer now for why I was so emotionally reckless, both with him and with me. In that feeling of feeling incredibly guilty about what I had just done, I had sex with him. It wasn't a rape by any means. It wasn't coerced, but I did it completely out of guilt and obligation and not because I wanted to sustain a relationship with him like that. I hadn't brought my diaphragm because I thought we were just friends. I hope this just gives some picture of who I was and how incapable I would have been of raising a child at that point in my life.

So we came back, and within two or three weeks I had already gotten involved with another man, another boy, another student, and then I discovered I was pregnant. I was pregnant in a state, Connecticut, where abortion was still a felony. It was right on the cusp of *Roe v. Wade*. It



was a couple years before *Roe v. Wade*, and New York State, thank God, had legalized abortion three months earlier. So I was in a position where I could go over the state line and get a legal abortion, but in the very, very early days of legal abortion. So it was not by any means a pleasant experience. I think the kinds of supports that women got later when *Roe v. Wade* was legal, they evolved over time, but it was pretty much like a cattle call, unsympathetic, uncompassionate experience.

**James Shaheen:** Well, you say you went from Connecticut to New York, but actually it wasn't that simple. What were some of the stigmas and hurdles you encountered in your experience of this abortion?

**Katy Butler:** Well, there was a great deal of internal stigma for me. I hadn't really thought about abortion, I don't think. It was really the early days of the feminist revolution. I hadn't really thought about abortion that deeply. I'd had a close Catholic friend who told me abortion was murder, and I'd sort of thought, “Yeah, I guess it is.” And so until I was confronted with my own situation, I really didn't have a deeply held moral opinion about it.

The decision was very much a survival decision at the time. I mean, when I look back on it, I think it was a moral decision, but at the time it was a survival decision. I didn't have much money. I didn't dare tell my parents because I felt I was already a big disappointment to them. I first went to a gynecologist in New York that I'd seen before, and he told me an abortion would cost \$1,200. I had worked all summer waitressing and doing other jobs, and I didn't even have that money. So I went to a group called Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, which had been active, it was liberal clergy prior to the legalization of abortion, and he helped guide me to a clinic, a low-cost clinic that they had set up in New York, where I would only have to pay \$350. And that I could afford. I got the ex-boyfriend to contribute, although he was quite unwilling at the start, and I just kind of hunkered down emotionally. I think I had a female roommate at the time who I must have told, but except for two friends of mine who sheltered me in New York overnight when I was getting the abortion, I got almost no support from anyone out of my own



shame. I felt like I was doing something immoral, and it was something I absolutely had to do. That's really, I would say, that that's how it felt inside at the time.

**James Shaheen:** You know, you mentioned some of the depictions of abortion or single motherhood that came to mind as you were deciding what to do, including *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the Thomas Hardy novel, and “The Ballad of the Cruel Mother.” Can you say more about the literary tropes and cultural narratives that influenced your perception of unplanned or unwanted pregnancies?

**Katy Butler:** You know, it's really interesting looking back and thinking, *How were my views shaped at the time as, in some ways, a fairly naive young woman?* There were three things that came to mind. One was I had found a copy in the woods once of *True Confessions*, which was this pulp magazine, and it had an account of a young girl seduced and abandoned and pregnant. And then there was *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which is a very sympathetic novel of a young woman being coerced into a relationship, a sexual relationship with a richer man and then being abandoned by the man who wants to marry her when he finds out that she is “ruined,” so the whole idea that losing your virginity was being ruined and being exposed as a nonvirgin was being ruined was really very active in my mind.

I mean, I now think about it also in Buddhist terms, where if you think about abhidharma, we're all seeing through a very small lens. We're not seeing all of reality; we're seeing through a small keyhole that's shaped by these influences.

And then the big one was Judy Collins had sung this song called “The Ballad of the Cruel Mother,” and it describes a woman who's been impregnated by her father's clerk and gets pregnant, goes off into the woods, gives birth to two bonny boys, and then stabs them to death with her penknife. Later, she sees two boys playing ball, and she says, I think out loud, “Oh boys, if you were mine, I would dress you both in silks so fine,” and they turn to her and they



say, “Mother, mother, when we were thine, you dressed us not in silks so fine. You took out your wicked knife and you deprived us of our life.”

Probably the most horrible part of the abortion itself was that we were halfway through, and I had my eyes shut, and I heard the door open, and I heard this other male voice say, “You haven't got it all. She has twins.” And I think he might have said that they're boys, although I actually don't know if that's just something I've added later because of the ballad. But I definitely had this experience of, Oh my God, this is not an embryo. This is not an acorn that might become an oak. These are beings. These are children. These are babies. And it was just heartbreaking. And at that point, I started to cry, just like tears oozing out of the side of my face because, again, I was trying to be so stoic and go through with all of this and shut out the fullness of what this experience was. And this just really brought it home to me.

I mean, the complexity of how women feel about abortion is so, so seldom really addressed because people feel on both sides that they have to be very polemic and very black and white and clear. But it's clear to me from some of the things I've read that in my experience of the complexity of it, I'm not alone. I was also extremely relieved when it was over and I could leave and go spend the night with my friends in Old Westbury. I was relieved to go home and feel like my life was no longer mortgaged to this disastrous future, because, as I say in the piece, I felt like I was looking at four doors and there was a tiger behind every door. I couldn't have married the guy. I don't think he would have married me. It would have been a disaster if I had. I don't think I was emotionally, to say nothing of financially, capable of handling being a single mother, especially if I'd had twins. I didn't come from one of those supportive, large families where people take in and cope and help raise children who were born without married parents.

So really, abortion felt like the only choice that was going to allow me to have a life and me to have a future, and I suppose internally I kind of balanced that against, I mean I really do feel now



that it was actually a very strong moral choice because I don't believe in bringing children into the world who cannot be well supported. out of some abstract idea of what virtue is.

**James Shaheen:** Katy, you get at the complexity of this that you were just describing by referring to abortion as a wrenching, sacred, and morally necessary act. Can you say more about that?

**Katy Butler:** Yeah, I found myself when I was writing this piece and thinking about the morality, thinking of the tension between absolutist moral standards and harm reduction. There's one way you can look at a moral issue and say, here's the absolute moral standard, here's the situation. How does it fit? Therefore, what should you do? But then there's another way of looking at it, which is, What is the situation? What are going to be the consequences of the various choices? Who's going to be harmed? How much are they going to be harmed? And what degree of suffering is going to result from this decision?

I think by doing the piece, I moved a lot further into the harm reduction area. It's like, yeah, you might make yourself feel really good by doing what you think is virtuous. But if the results of your so-called virtue are to amplify the suffering of yourself and others, maybe it's not as virtuous as you would like to think.

I also did a fair amount of research into who gets abortion when I was writing the piece, and there's an amazing book that everyone should read called *The Turnaway Study* from 2020. To read these first person accounts from women, so many of whom already had children, so many of whom were poor, for whom one more child would have completely sunk a boat that was already possibly sinking, it just made it so clear to me that difficult as it is, I really think it is as sacred as a and we should be treating it as a sacrament, just like the death of a fully born child. The act of making such a difficult life and death decision should be honored as sacred, and I even think we should be dealing with the remains of abortion in the same way we would be dealing with the remains of a fully grown child, or a child that is stillborn, and that the depth of what the woman



is experiencing, or the woman and the man are experiencing should be honored on a very deep level.

I mean, for me, it was an absolutely wrenching experience, and it was I think absolutely necessary. I think the suffering of everyone would have been so immense if I had decided to knuckle down or knuckle under to some abstract moral ideas of other people would have been horrendous. And I really don't know what it would have become of my own life.

**James Shaheen:** So you say that when you committed to the Buddhist precepts, it didn't occur to you to think about your abortion. So how have you come to think about abortion in light of Buddhist ethics and the first precept, for instance?

**Katy Butler:** I think the fundamental meaning of all five basic lay precepts is to not harm, is to do no harm. The world is complex. I'm not a vegetarian. You could perfectly well argue that all Buddhists should be vegetarian according to the precept of not taking life. So my feeling is that the way I and everybody else works with the precepts in their lives is taking the north star of where you're trying to head, which is in the direction of not harming, and seeing how you can do your best within the circumstances of your life.

I think, obviously, if I look back and I had been a different 21 year old, and I had been a Buddhist, and I had been meditating, and I had been practicing the precepts, I would not have violated the precepts by dishonestly and exploitatively going on a camping trip with that boy. I wouldn't have harmed myself by being sexual with him. But this is all in long, long retrospect, and the reality is that many, many things get set in motion in people's lives that they then have to deal with.

**James Shaheen:** You know, you're still a Buddhist, but you write that you no longer “give obeisance to abstract moral systems” that rely on absolutes without an understanding of women's





experience. Can you say more about this? How have patriarchal cultures, say, shaped Buddhist ethics?

**Katy Butler:** Well, it goes back a long way, and it's kind of sad to me, but the Buddha himself, the original historical Buddha, wonderful and meaningful as he was, would not take on as a student the woman who had raised him. She had to walk two hundred miles barefoot with her followers to get him to agree to teach women, and the women had to face a whole different line of precepts and restrictions, including being served last before even the youngest novice male. And I tell that just because it's an indicator of how much women have been totally left out of the conversation in years and years of dharma history.

So, you know, if you regard it as kind of an afterthought and a little bit of a problem that needs to be addressed, there just hasn't been a huge amount of room for women to come forward with their real life experience. I realize, of course, in the Tibetan tradition, there are many traditions where you do have powerful, mythic women figures. I don't want to overstate this. But the experience of ordinary, lay, fertile women capable of childrearing, only in the last twenty years have those kinds of experiences been brought forward and talked about as part of a path of dharma.

My friend Anne Cushman is an example of someone who really, she's written several books about the dharma of being a mother raising a child, that too is a spiritual path and a spiritual experience, not just being a monastic, or not just being Pema Chödrön, or the woman who invented chöd whose name is now passing me by. So I just feel like the fullness of what it's been like to be a human being in a human body, and especially a female human being in a female body, it just hasn't been part of the, I don't know, part of the mix, part of the context.



**James Shaheen:** Right, well, you know, this absence of women's voices results in the realities being overlooked. So talk to us about how this silence has informed the debates around the morality of abortion. Who has the claim on the moral imagination, as you say, of what a fetus is?

**Katy Butler:** Well, yes, exactly, because, again, until the last twenty years max, the teachers, especially the teachers in American convert Buddhism, have been male. You know, it was males who came over from Tibet or Japan, and their top disciples in America tended also to be male. So it came from these sort of patriarchal cultures. So, again, here's someone I admire greatly, -Reb Anderson, who was really, when I was at Zen Center, the person I probably looked up to the most when I became a student. Reb has written a very beautiful book on the precepts, but when it came to the section on abortion, it basically says, “I've never counseled anybody that it was a good idea to have an abortion.” And then he went on to say, “But if we're not going to allow abortion, we should have a society that's more supportive of women and women with children.”

But I felt like, I mean, I babysat when I was a kid, and I think that a lot of the people, the men, who were talking and thinking very deeply about precepts and their meaning in relation to the absolute and in relation to the relative, they were people often who had never raised a child or babysat a child. If you're a celibate guy like Thich Nhat Hanh, the likelihood that you have raised children or really aware of what it's like to be pregnant or to give birth, it's unlikely. And again, I don't want to overstate it. I mean, Thich Nhat Hanh was wonderful with children. I don't want to sound like I'm going too far with this, but I just felt like I had never heard anybody who was sitting on a cushion in front of the room talk about my lived experience as a young pregnant woman in a way that I could have related to.

**James Shaheen:** You know, Katy, you've mentioned harm reduction in terms of the first precept, and I'm wondering if there are other Buddhist teachers you've found who have supported this view of harm reduction. in the case of abortion, or has it been rather lonely in this regard? You



mentioned Anne Cushman, who's also contributed to *Tricycle*, and things that she's written from a woman's perspective. Have there been other teachers?

**Katy Butler:** The one I was most aware of was the one I just found online who had been part of a Lion's Roar interview of several women and male Buddhist teachers on abortion and how would you counsel a woman who wanted to get an abortion or felt she needed an abortion.

So, I want to read this quote from this Tibetan Bon and Dzogchen master, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche. “Bringing someone into the world under unfavorable circumstances without the necessary supports for the child to grow and be nourished only increases suffering. This is equivalent to dying not just one time but many times in one lifetime for both the mother and the child. Even though it is against Buddhist precepts to take a life, it is also not virtuous to give birth under circumstances that would increase suffering for oneself or another, a suffering that seems greater than ending a pregnancy that is unwanted.”

What I love about this quote is that he puts yourself and another in the same moral category. It's not just about sacrificing yourself for another. It's also about holding yourself and cherishing yourself equally with another. I just thought it was a really, really beautiful statement, and it's a really beautiful thing to me that it comes from a man and that women are not the only people who can articulate something very, very meaningful from a moral point of view about this issue. There's no virtue in bringing a child into the world who is not wanted and cannot be well supported out of some abstract clinging to a notion of virtue and that sometimes in the case of abortion, less suffering is created by an abortion would be created by bringing a child to term for whom there are not adequate resources, emotional and financial. We're not just talking about money; we're talking about love, connection, somebody who's capable of being there and raising a child.

**James Shaheen:** So, Katy, in the article you describe, and this is one of the key points of the essay that I keep coming back to, you describe how the fetus somehow has more claim on



people's moral imaginations than that of the mother. So why do you think that is? I think we can go back to who created the parameters for the discussion, but why don't you say something about that?

**Katy Butler:** Well, and again, this isn't in the article, but I think it goes back to the incredible *Life* magazine photographs of the fetus in the womb that I remember seeing at probably 12, 13, and they're kind of miraculous pictures, but they are super, super narrow focus. All you see—you don't see the womb, you don't see the mother, you don't see the connections, you just see this isolated bubble with this nascent strange looking being developing in there. And it is miraculous. I mean, it's miraculous. But this super, super narrow focus on a being devoid of context—every context, social context, financial context, practical context—gives you the strange luxury of oversimplifying a moral dilemma. And if you widen the lens and you start including the physical body of the mother and then the situation in which she finds herself, her family, her society, the way her society supports or doesn't support, like ours, very well young mothers and young children, then the moral dilemmas become so, so much more complex.

I think we like to oversimplify things. There's this oversimplifying, this absolutism, and this narrowing down of focus so that the only being whose feelings and suffering matter is this nascent being, and the feelings and suffering of the woman who is being asked to bring this being all the way through to becoming a baby and to term, she's somehow blotted out.

Of course if you're the person who's pregnant, you can't blot out your own experience. You are, in some way, primary to yourself. And so there you are, and you're holding this dilemma that the culture is not helping you hold at all, which is both your moral obligations to others, including beings in your womb, and your moral obligations to yourself and perhaps your existing family, your existing children. And so if you're male and you're not involved in pregnancy, it's maybe easier to just think very abstractly and to narrow way down. But if you're in a female body, you actually don't have that choice.



**James Shaheen:** But even thinking practically, if we go back to what Reb Anderson was referring to, yes, we place this high evaluation on the fetus, and, yes, the mother doesn't or hasn't traditionally figured into the equation as much. Even if her life were at stake, it was still this high valuation placed on the fetus, and yet once that fetus becomes a baby and is born, what do we really do to support that, and obviously, the baby needs its mother, so what do we do to support the mother? So there's the real conundrum there of why so much focus on the fetus but not even on the baby, let alone the mother.

**Katy Butler:** I know, and there is a strand within feminist anti-abortion women who really are trying to advocate for better support for women who do give birth, and some of them are feminists. Some of them are liberals. So I don't want to, again, oversimplify. But because of the way politics has broken down in our culture, on the whole, conservative religious people also tend to be Republicans, and the Republican mix right now is anti social services, pro tax cuts for the wealthy, and forget about women and children. And again, I mean, I hate to say it, but there is also a punitive strand within some forms of Christianity, which is if you get pregnant out of wedlock, it's your fault, and it's on you to suffer. So that is playing into the mix as well, unfortunately.

I think as a culture, even among liberal people who are pro-abortion, I would still like to see huge amounts more frontloading young kids, especially young kids who are from vulnerable families, whether it's Head Start or all kinds of programs that we could use to better support people who are vulnerable when their kids are up to five years old. Years ago, there was a satirical group in the Bay Area, and one of their songs went, “I am a friend of the fetus right up to the moment of birth,” and I really had to think about this hard when I was writing the piece and to think an acorn is not an oak, an egg is not a chicken, an embryo is not even a fetus, and a fetus is not an unborn child until it's viable.

In my opinion, which is what the courts are saying and a lot of the referenda that are on the ballot are saying, at the moment that a baby becomes viable outside the womb, I think we're talking



about an unborn child. But up until that point, we're talking about something that is a potential. It's very easy to romanticize the purity and innocence of a potential life, and it's a lot harder to have empathy and love for confused women, like the woman I was at 21, who you could look at and say, “Katy, what were you thinking? How did you get yourself into such a mess?” It's a lot easier to be sympathetic to something that is pure potential. And so I can understand the rhetorical strength of an image of a view like “Life begins at the moment of conception, and therefore life equals personhood and personhood equals we should protect this potential being at all costs.” I can understand the force and power of that argument for some people.

**James Shaheen:** You know, viability is tricky because they become ever more viable earlier on because of science, so I think the more ontological approach like what is this is probably one that is more effective. But aside from the politics of it, you do address the issue of care in the article, when you suggest that abortion is widespread in part because we live in a culture that prioritizes individualism and denigrates caregiving. We can see that caregiving is denigrated in how we reward caregivers. But anyway, could you say something more about that?

**Katy Butler:** Yeah, I said in the article that we live in a culture that's highly individualistic, and it denigrates all forms of caregiving across the board: elder care, women sacrificing to look after elderly parents, the people who we pay to look after the elderly and to do childcare. It's such a kind of winner-take-all society that the vulnerability that women have economically and socially makes it very hard for some women to choose to have a child, even if it's a child that they actually would want or love or welcome.

I talk in the piece about this moment I had when I first realized I was pregnant where I felt just this rush of warmth and energy through my entire body because I thought, “This is wonderful. I can get pregnant. I am fertile. I'm not going to be a barren woman.” And, you know, in the right circumstances with the right supports, many women would like to have children who do choose abortion now, I think, because of the paucity of the support that they're going to face.



**James Shaheen:** Katy, you also write in the article that years later you had a second abortion, which you describe as a “sacred and intimate experience, a necessary sorrow.” Can you tell us more about that?

**Katy Butler:** Yeah, I was married to a wonderful man, but it was kind of doomed from the start as a marriage. I don't think it was ever like a really good fit, and a year or so in, I became pregnant. I had abandoned the IUD because there had been horrific health scandals involving badly designed IUDs. I'm a big fan of IUDs now for everybody. I feel like every 17-year-old or earlier ought to get offered one. So we became pregnant, and almost without discussing it, we both agreed that an abortion would be a good idea. I felt the timing was bad. It was too early in the relationship. My husband was just starting out setting up his own business and could not have been the single breadwinner, so I was the breadwinner. I was working as a newspaper reporter and had good benefits, and I just couldn't see how I was going to raise a child in a way that I thought was worthy and also work full time. And also, I think, under the surface, I think both of us knew that this marriage was probably not going to survive. So I kind of comforted myself with the idea that, “Well, I'm not saying no to all children forever. I'm just saying no now. Maybe in a couple years we'll be in a position where we could have a child.” So that's how the decision was made.

And again, I look back, I think, boy, was that the right decision. And the abortion was such a different experience because now *Roe v. Wade* had been legal for something like twelve years. I went to a women-run clinic. My husband was there. He was holding my hand on one side. A nurse or another assistant was holding my hand on the other side. They were both looking into my eyes. I was crying, which felt totally appropriate, but I felt loved and held. And I didn't feel the degree of guilt and stigma that I had felt the first time. You know, I wasn't alone. The society had said, “This is an OK thing to do.” It was early. I'm sure it was very early. So it was a very different experience, and it made me realize, I mean, abortion goes back to like ancient Egypt. Women have been trying their best, forcing themselves to miscarry in some very dangerous ways



since they became capable of knowing they were pregnant, as far as I can tell, you know, so it's not like this is going to go away. It's more a question of how can this be done with the least harm possible? How can this be done with the most support possible for the people who are suffering the most in the middle of it? So abortion as an option, I just feel is a moral necessity.

**James Shaheen:** Katy, you now describe yourself as not pro-choice and antiabortion but as proabortion. So what do you mean by that? It's a strong statement.

**Katy Butler:** It is a strong statement, and it's partly that I feel the stigma against abortion has been perpetuated by statements like, “I'm prochoice, but I'm antiabortion,” or “Abortion should be safe, legal, and rare.” There's an implied stigma that this is a bad thing, and I don't think it's a bad thing, and I don't think that calling it a bad thing helps anybody. I just think it layers another level of stigma.

And at the same time, as I said earlier, I'm into harm reduction now, so I do believe that we should be frontloading contraception with no moral judgments about it whatsoever, no matter how young the person is who is becoming sexually active. I'd also like to see a society where young women are not raped by their stepfathers and not pushed into sexual relationships when they're too young. I'd like to see a lot of things change that could reduce the harm and reduce the likelihood that very young women and young women are going to get pregnant or are not going to face the fact that they're pregnant until late in the gestation of the fetus.

I mean, there's so many things we could do, but they're all these little tiny things, right? They're little tiny things that add up to something really, really big, which is, it's almost like the flipside of the abortion debate, where we see things in these super broad black and white terms. I mean, I feel as a culture, we've gotten to such an extreme polemic view, not only of abortion, but of so many other things. It's really hard to see a way forward. I mean, clearly I'm saying things that are provocative to some people, to actually say I think sometimes abortion is the good thing or the least harmful thing in a particular context. And there are people who are going to be really



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Episode #114 with Katy Butler

November 13, 2024



shocked by this, you know, and ask where is my sense of the sanctity of all life. And yet I feel it is so important to not leave the view on the table that a woman who has had an abortion is sinful and has done something she's ashamed of or should be ashamed of.

**James Shaheen:** Katy Butler, it's been a pleasure. Thanks for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to check out Katy's article in the November issue of *Tricycle*. Thanks again, Katy.

**Katy Butler:** Thank you very much, James. This was a pleasure. I mean, it was deep. It was harrowing, but it was also a pleasure.

**James Shaheen:** Absolutely. Thank you.

**James Shaheen:** You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Katy Butler. To read Katy's article in the November issue of *Tricycle*, visit [tricycle.org/magazine](https://tricycle.org/magazine). Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at [tricycle.org/donate](https://tricycle.org/donate). We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!