

From a Disconnected Society to an Interconnected Society

Rev. Toshihide Shunei Hakamata

Red = direct dukkha

Blue = structural dukkha

Green = cultural dukkha

Rev. Toshihide Shunei Hakamata was born in 1958 in the town of Noshiro, in Japan's northern region of Akita prefecture. He graduated in 1981 from the faculty of Buddhist Studies at Komazawa University, affiliated with his Soto Zen sect, in Tokyo. In 2000, he founded the Association for Thinking about Mind and Life, a suicide prevention group, in his town of Fujisato-cho in Akita. In 2010, he became the Chairman of the Board of the Akita Prefecture Flower Bud Movement, which was the first prefectural level suicide prevention movement in Japan. At present, he is the abbot of Gessho-ji, a Soto Zen temple in Fujisato-cho. He also serves: on the Tohoku regional board of directors of the Japan Association of Euthanasia, as the Vice President of the non-profit suicide prevention network Ka-ze, and as a part time lecturer at the Japan Red Cross' Akita Nursing University.

My home town village of Fujisato-cho in Akita Prefecture serves as the entry point to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Shirakami-Sanchi mountain range. Yet with a population of only 4,000, Fujisato-cho is also part of the nationwide social problem of suicide. According to a report by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, every year over 30,000 people commit suicide in Japan.¹ Within this number, Akita—with a total population of 100,000—had until recently the highest suicide rate in Japan for 15 years running. The suicide rate in Fujisato-cho is twice that of the rest of Akita, indicating that our people are holding a deep sorrow within themselves.

Depopulation, the Aging of the Population, *Hikikomori*, and Dying Alone (*koritsu-shi*) in Akita Prefecture

I believe that the problems of suicide, the elderly, and dying alone all are due to the increasing isolation of people. I also believe that isolation is an illness of modern society. It's a vast and deep problem. Its fundamental solution is about restoring the population and reviving the community as well as other concrete measures that I think are at present extremely important.

Firstly, I would like to look at the problem of the aging of the population. The situation of **severe depopulation, lower birth rates, and fewer children is happening all over Japan**. In terms of the transitioning of Japan's population, if depopulation continues at this rate, it is estimated that by **the year 2055 the entire population of Japan will fall to around 90 million, compared to the present population of 126 million**.

In Akita, which has some of the highest rates of elderly and suicide in Japan, the population is in transition and depopulation has been very severe. In 1980, the population of Akita was 1,250,000, and now in 2012 it is a little more than 1,000,000. The population of the city of Akita at 300,000 hasn't changed, but the environs have gradually depopulated. In 2012, the depopulation rate in Akita was the highest in Japan. This situation does not only pertain to Akita. As the population decreases, the age of the population advances. At present, Shimane prefecture has the highest rate of elderly, but Akita will soon become the highest.

The depopulation situation in Fujisato-cho has also become quite severe. Our population is 4,000, but it is continuing to get smaller. In about five years, it will be around 3,789. Although the number of households is not decreasing, we can discover that the aging of our community is also advancing. This is because when young people get married, they leave the home and establish a

¹ In 2012, the official number was 27,766, marking the first time since 1997 that the suicide rate had been under 30,000. The 2013 official rate was 27,276.

separate household. The number of these cases is quite high, so while the number of elderly households is increasing the total number of households is not changing. In this way, elderly people live on the edges of the community by themselves while the young live in the center of the village.

On top of all this is the growing problem of poverty. Compared to all 47 prefectures in Japan, **Akita last year had the 4th lowest level in average annual income. Fujisato-cho has the lowest wages of any town in Akita with an average annual income of ¥1,462,000 (\$15,000), which is considered “working poor”.** As the aging of the population continues, the elderly community becomes further marginalized, which leads to a **declining situation in the public services** around them. For example, snow removal services for such a small group of elderly become administratively cost inefficient. In this way, the elderly can only continue to have a life in the village by **moving away during the winter and returning in the Spring to begin farming.**

Usually, the elderly must live amongst each other. In the worst cases, when they have a physical break down, they have no means to contact someone. So I have developed concerns about the problem of what is called **“dying alone” (*koritsu-shi*)**. It would be best if the elderly community could be properly interdependent and help each other out. However, farming communities have lost their tradition of community labor and mutual support because of the mechanization of agriculture. Each household now uses machinery and works their rice paddies by themselves. In the past, a household could not farm without the help of others in planting, weeding, and harvesting. However, this kind of cooperative work has all but been lost. In this present situation of individual households doing their own agricultural work, the population continues to age and decrease, while the community stops noticing what is going on. So **when an elderly person’s health breaks down, they usually end up dying alone**. Of course, some people have been rescued but they still end up dying by stroke or heart failure.

This kind of situation is happening more and more. For example, one year ago, an elderly woman, who is my temple member, fell in a ditch and died, right in front of her house. This 89 year old woman was living with her 86 year old husband. The husband had been working very hard out in the fields and didn’t know what had happened until he came upon her body. Then, finally, others in the community noticed what had happened. This is the first time such a thing happened in my community. This society of the elderly is not really a properly functioning community. Since the community has become dispersed, the elderly have become socially handicapped. In urban areas, you can get communal apartments for the elderly. That seems to be the way to create a safe place when people become old. However, I don’t think you can create such a place where depopulation is occurring, which is advancing in every region in Japan.

At present, I am serving a four year term working at the Soto Zen denomination’s Akita regional office. I have invited various people to think about the problem of depopulation in Akita and how it relates to Buddhist temples. The aging of communities and their depopulation is having a major effect on Buddhist temples which are shutting down in these rural areas. The official research institute of the Jodo Pure Land denomination has done a recent study and held a public symposium on this issue. However, it seems that the headquarters of many Buddhist denominations have not considered how to confront it at all. They have not put any funding into working on it, because they cannot see any way to resolve it.

Along with declining population, there are also the problems of dying in isolation and ***hikikomori* – those that shut themselves inside their homes and avoid all social interaction.** On the surface, this appears to be a problem that hasn’t existed until just recently. The Japan National Council of Social Welfare performed a study in Fujisato-cho and found that among those of **working age from 18 to 55 years old, 113 have cut off social and cooperative exchanges; in other words, they are *hikikomori*.** A *hikikomori* is someone who does not reach out or call out for their own support system. The problem of *hikikomori* is related to the one of dying alone or in isolation. If one’s parents are active, then a person can live the lifestyle of a *hikikomori*. However, when something happens to the parents, who have provided for all their needs, and they become ill and die, the *hikikomori* will also just die as they are.

It was surprising to me to find out that 113 people in our village have become like this. We

could discover this situation through the Japan National Council of Social Welfare's study but not from our own local government's efforts. The reason why is that the **parents were hiding the situation and would respond to the local government** by saying, "There is no such *hikikomori* child at this house." However, the local branch of the Japan National Council of Social Welfare first created a plan for rehabilitating these *hikikomori* back into society before conducting the study. Thus, when they asked people if there is someone like this in your household, there was a plan already in place for support. In this way, I also agreed to come by and inform them about anything I knew in my community.

I believe the *hikikomori* problem as well as the depopulation and aging of society issues can all be traced back to the core issue of isolation. The suicide issue also became a related one when the country went into economic crisis in the late 1990s and the suicide numbers went over 30,000 per year nationwide. When businesses turned sour and many experienced economic failure and bankruptcy, then suicide began to increase. While the current suicide rate in Akita is very high, we can see that 1965 was a turning point. Something happened in 1965, which was the beginning of modern agriculture and mechanized farming.

Rapid Structural Change to the Village Community

In Japan, 1964 is marked by the hosting of the Olympics Games in Tokyo. The Prime Minister at the time, Hayato Ikeda, began a **national drive to double personal incomes**. He kept pounding the **message of how we must improve our economy**. Out of this distorted over emphasis grew the **economic gaps between the urban areas and the farming towns as well as the development of environmental pollution problems**. His successor, Eisaku Sato, tried to lessen this over emphasis on pure economic growth by pushing through policies for **"social development"**, but this ended up making a basis for the modernization of agriculture and mechanization of farming. The call was made, "Let us raise up the farming communities by raising up their economies." Japan's large corporations provided the basis for this raising up, so the policy **abandoned any management of environmental pollution created by factories in order to compete at an unrestrained level**.

The modernization of the community started with the modernization of the household. As investment in mechanization increased and money poured into the farming communities, people were encouraged to remake the thatched roof villages where they lived. Houses at that time had straw thatch roofs, kitchens with dirt floors, and bathrooms located outside near where the farming work was done. This kind of system was very unhygienic, and in the case of Akita, many people died of strokes from going outside in light clothing or pajamas to the toilet in the middle of winter. To avoid this, people began getting modern housing.

Under the name of "social development", various kinds of modernization policies were pursued. However, as people began to **buy farming machinery and rebuild their houses, debts also accrued**, which had to be repaid. For a small farming household, it was not possible to repay these debts by only engaging in traditional farming. They had to mechanize and then **work at other jobs for further income**. In this way, villagers used machinery to work in the peak farming seasons of spring and autumn, and then in other seasons left home to find work. **They came to only live in their brand new homes during planting, harvesting, summer Obon festival, and New Year's; some not even coming home for Obon or New Year's.**

A basic principle of capitalism is the need to concentrate people, material resources, and capital. Japan used to consist of mostly farming hamlets in which the people were not separated from each other. The Meiji Restoration in 1868 brought the drive to modernize the nation, but the **collectivizing of people as a work force in order to build the modern nation state** hadn't yet started. Japan was also a resource poor nation, so in the Meiji Era (1868-1912) Japan was still in an immature stage of capitalism. You couldn't do anything if the human resources weren't collectivized, so in order for Japan to truly embark on the path of success in global capitalism, it required the initial power of these migrant laborers. In this way, everyone eventually moved to the cities, and Japan developed into the second largest economy in the world. The **speed of economic development was quite incredible** at this time, and **an ideology of the supremacy of economy** also

spread throughout the country. I think this is really where the **true cause of isolation** lies.

The year 1965 is unmistakably the point at which the village community begins to collapse. Originally, village community was based on cooperative labor. The periods of planting and harvest bound or fastened the community. In mutual association, everyone brought together their energy for work. The bonds of the village were its rules or conventions, and if they were violated, there were penalties, such as being ostracized. The only exceptions were at times of funerals and fires. In such times, even if a household had broken numerous community rules and sanctions had been imposed upon them, they were helped. In this way, the village community sustained itself. One main rule was that everyone participated in communal labor. Such communal labor could muster great energy to preserve agricultural tradition and method. However, **as communal labor began to decline, the village became increasingly dispersed**, and so we have arrived at this present situation.

Akita is a region with heavy snow. The snow covers and compresses the fields, so domestic animals like cows and horses were used to till the fields. If you did not have such animals, then you had to do it by hand. Only then could planting begin. When using communal labor, not every field was planted at the same time as families would rotate through the community helping one another. However, it seemed much easier and convenient when it could be done all at one time. Certainly, farmers were happy with this more convenient way of doing things. When the spring came, they tilled the fields by machinery and then the rest of the time returned to work for cash incomes by which they could build new houses. In this way, we came to ignore the **miserable aspects of having to be a seasonal laborer leaving home on dark trains**.

At the time I was a university student, people in my region were still engaged in this kind of migrant labor. I remember there was an express train called the Tsugaru, which took 12 hours to get to Tokyo, as opposed to the bullet train today which takes just 4 hours. It was an overnight train, but there were no sleeping berths. Migrant laborers would board the train with a supply of unrefined *doburoku* sake and take the usual hard seats. *Doburoku* is fermented at a high temperature, so when you pop the cork it tends to spurt out, and people tended to use straws for drinking it. They would spread out some newspaper to lie down on while they chatted with each other and got drunk. On their return, they would be loaded up with presents for their families and friends that would fill up the aisles as they drank heartily again.

The point I want to emphasize here is that I don't think this was a rich life for everyone. Truthfully, there was something lurking behind the new materially pleasant lifestyles and the new ways of farming that people weren't noticing. If you look at the data, you will see that the suicide rate in Akita became the highest in the nation during this period. From 1930 to 1965, the suicide rate in Akita was below the national average, and in 1955 it was well below the growing national rate of 25.2/100,000 at 20.2. However, in 1965 it began to exceed the national average. **By 1970 it was 4.5 suicides/100,000 more, and from 1983 begins a period that has not abated in which it is over 10 more suicides/100,000 than the national average, peaking in 2003 at 44.6 to the national average of 25.5/100,000.** This increasing suicide rate was the negative side of things, and no one wanted to speak about it.

The Effect of Structural Change on Local Culture

As mentioned earlier, one of the exceptions to community ostracizing was in the event of the death of a member of the community and the need for a funeral. No matter what was going on, when anyone died, the community all gathered together to help out. In so many regions funeral homes now do everything. In my region, however, the funeral homes have not yet entered. Funerals are run by what is called "*dami* helpers". *Dami* is local dialect for "cremation". They are people from the community who come to help and to inform everyone when there has been a death. Men get together and prepare for the funeral procession as well as prepare for the funeral by gathering straw thatch and smoothing down pieces of wood for the casket.

The women break into squads: one to make food and bring it to the house of the bereaved and another to prepare embroidered clothes for the funeral. The former begins with making a soup of tofu and boiled mountain vegetables. They cook not only the normal food for the family and

guests but also the special food made as offerings during the ceremony. The embroidering work involves making traditional ceremonial garb, like a *haori* coat and *hakama* skirt for the chief mourner. Then they would make white cloth to cover the hair of the women of the mourning family and white collars for the men of the mourning family. However, it was not allowed to make any funeral preparations beforehand, nor say things like, “They’ll need to perform a funeral at that house pretty soon, so we should get everyone together and prepare.”

At my temple, there are still such helpers who go around and inform the community of the death of someone. Two men per group go around the village doing this, and then everyone comes together to begin the preparations I have mentioned above. I have seen that when a funeral company enters into this process, you start hearing things like, “Does the chief mourner wear a size S or L?” Of course, these clothes have already been made beforehand. Traditionally, we understand this to be very ill mannered.

“Someone has just died in this house”; “A baby has been born in that house”; “The bread winner in that house has fallen ill”; “That old woman has become senile and someone needs looking after.” In times like these, people in the community would make food and bring it over or help with the farm work. This was just natural or normal, and this is what was called *shigoto*. *Shigoto* was the “work” of the community, and it was a duty. On the other hand, the term we used as employment or the work you did to earn an income was called *kasegi*. Both terms are important, but in the era when there was still communal labor, *shigoto* was uttered more frequently. Whether you were taking a break from *kasegi* or happened to be free, it was established that *shigoto* took priority.

However, this culture has all died off now. *Kasegi* has become the ultimate priority, and now the common term for “work” especially in the urban areas is *shigoto*. The basic rule of the company is that whatever is happening, one cannot take a break from *kasegi*. If there was a rule for employees to take breaks for community duties, it would cause problems for the companies. Therefore, doing things like helping out with funerals has gradually become impossible. A funeral is performed now only by a particular household. In this way, I feel that when funeral homes began enter into the process, it was a sign that communities were breaking down. I really don’t know how much longer the *dami* helper system in my village can last.

The prioritization of *kasegi* is deeply connected with the issue of the efficiency of the market economy. Economics is without question a big issue here. In making a living today, one has to have money whether wants it or not. If I look at my own family’s finances, recently we have a regular payment for our cell phone and internet use. If we don’t pay at the fixed time, then we cannot enjoy the service. In this way, things that we need keep increasing, so we need more and more money. We use electricity, and then water, heating, and air conditioning. This all involves having money. We must use money to be able to redeem these things. In order to live a comfortable life, *kasegi* has become essential. Whatever is going on, we still must go to *kasegi*. If we have no *kasegi*, than we cannot live our lives. It has come to the point where we should not think or say that we have enough or are satisfied. If there is something more convenient or more comfortable that comes out, then we are gradually induced to buy it. This seems to me to be the logic or principle of market economics.

In terms of the rural village, nowadays, people are actively pursuing *kasegi* rather than the mutually agreed upon conventions of communal labor that connected people with each other. One of the core foundations of this communal labor system was the management of water. Japan is an island nation with steep mountains, few open plains, and a monsoon bringing plenty of rain. In my village, in the days when everyone was doing agriculture, there was never a shortage of water. Our village is at the entry of the mountains with a river running through it that is always flowing with water. Since *kasegi* has become essential for everyone, however, farming is only done on Sundays. In this way, everyone plants their rice paddies at the same time and draws water for them at the same time. When this started happening, for the first time water did not reach the paddies at the end of the river. This forced the people at the end of the river to install water pumps. An old person in the village remarked, “We never once had a situation in the village where there wasn’t enough water for the fields.” There was never a cause for not having enough water. In the end, since *kasegi*

is the most essential thing, this kind of situation arises. Because of the demand for a convenient and comfortable lifestyle, the bonds of our village have been destroyed.

Another aspect of communal water management revolved around security. When the rains come, it enters the river system quickly and creates strong river currents that often result in flooding. In order to protect the village, it was not possible to think of oneself. Everyone had to participate in building bridges, which dealt with these rising swells and protected against overflowing. Everyone in the area around the village would gather to build these bridges. The utmost priority was the “security” of the village. **This value system, like that of *shigoto*, was eventually applied to the company.** The “security” of the company came to be thought of as the “security” of oneself, and the logic of the village society was adapted into modern corporations. Protecting the lifestyle of the people was also adopted, and lifetime employment and a seniority system based on length of service was created. **If you look at the American economic model, these concepts are considered a real obstruction or barrier.** Thus, in the spread of the global market economy over the world, the Japanese business model has died off. Now in Japan, money has now become the primary thing.

I think that prioritizing money making is not something to be admired. In conducting business, it is very important to achieve a sense of trust among parties. Trust is the most essential thing. This was also true in the way people talk about what remains of the village society. When capitalism entered Japan, it seems that for a period it did not infiltrate the economic world of village society. Yet the global market economy continues to advance today. I think the reason is that in the economic world, religion has already been abandoned. **In order for the economic world to continue to turn, it is better for people’s wants and desires to develop freely as they are. This is the better way for money to revolve and be used. In order for this to develop, the bonding of the people leading to their solidarity and then to their cooperation needs to be severed; and then a process of atomization can occur.** It is said that because of the existence of bonds in the village, the people hesitate a bit in using money. If the son of a household dissipates its savings, the parents will surely stop him. In the case the parents do not, an uncle will come by and scold them. You see this kind of story in comic books all over the world.

In village society, there is a sense of the control of desire. There was no concept that it was good to allow desire to develop freely. In order for bonds within the family and the community to remain strong, it was necessary to control desire. In the same way, religion was used to restrain human desire. The market economy, which has created globalization, is where the problem lies, because it revolves around the optimization of human desire. Perhaps humans are becoming more immature, or perhaps we have been infantilized, made to be immature. **We have been encouraged to quickly raise our hands if we want something. Nowadays, we can see children throw tantrums at department stores if they are not bought what they want. While repressing desire is not good, the free development of desire is the engine for turning the economy. For this to take place, it is better for people to remain childlike in terms of desire.** The thing I have come to notice is that in the end, people become atomized within these mechanisms of economics.

The Religious Roots of the Global Economy

Indeed, there are academics who have called this process “the atomization of Japanese society”. They explain that when people develop individual desires, seek for comforts, and gradually become “obese”, then isolation occurs. In Fujisato-cho, we have day care centers for infants at which babies from the age of two months are looked after. These children, who are still breast-feeding, are left behind to be looked after. Also, for the elderly who get sick, basically every household now uses a nursing service. In any event, people tend to use day care services for the elderly in their households and leave them with specialists at nursing facilities. Even before they become ill, they are already being completely cared for by these people. It seems that families have basically stopped taking care of their elderly members. This is true even for my home. We now completely depend on experts. The most important thing for families now is “work”; *kasegi* has become *the shigoto*, the duty.

Yoshi Nakagawa is an economist who has acted as an advisor to the Japanese government on

economic issues and promoted global economics. However, he began to notice that something in global economics was making people unhappy, and in 2008 he had an about face and wrote a book called *Why Does Capitalism Self-Destruct: A Proposal to Revive Japan*², a section of which reads:

In the thinking of Neo-liberalism, we are divided into individual units living in a society, and the utmost respect is afforded to the freedom of “atomized” individuals. Therefore, the values of a communal society—such as security, safety, trust, equality, solidarity and so on—have no importance placed upon them. It is a “dangerous concept” to think that the social connections of fellow humans will be unavoidably dismantled in the face of the great cause of the pursuit of profit. In contemporary society, the monster of global capital, which itself is a dangerous concept, has come to freely lord over the planet.

I would like to consider more deeply why Neo-liberalism and global economics has swept across the world and come to lord over it to such an extent.

Max Weber, the famous German sociologist, made the claim that Christian thinkers, especially Protestant ones, gave birth to the basic concepts of capitalism and market economics. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber wrote about the doctrine of Predestination espoused by John Calvin (1509-1564), an influential French theologian and pastor of the Protestant Reformation. Predestination is the idea that God has already decided or “predetermined” the salvation of each individual. In this way, no matter how much effort one gives to live a life of self-discipline and purity, there is the possibility that one will still not be saved. I find this to be a very frightening idea. While it seems to be a fatalistic one, the people who have followed it have not chosen to sacrifice themselves through suicide bombing or decided to give up finding a way of good living. Actually, the opposite seems to be true.

The fundamental thinkers of Protestantism seem to have had a different kind of logic. If you are a person who has already been saved by God, you will naturally come to enjoy a life of rewards granted by the will of God. It is not that you will become saved, because you do good. Rather, because one is already saved by God, one must live a life in accordance with and not against the will of God. In this way, Protestants have been taught to live lives of great abstinence and self-denial.

Capitalism was born from this spirituality. According to it, one is to live a frugal life of self-denial, apply oneself diligently to one’s own vocation or occupation, and not speak of dissatisfaction. This is the “holy work” that has been bequeathed to one by God, and a life of diligent service is what one must pursue. This kind of thinking certainly seems to lead to the creation of “capital”. Since once must live a life of abstinence, one must save one’s money. The most important concept is that the money earned, the money gained from one’s own hard work, is seen as a reward that comes from God but not to be enjoyed through luxurious living.

The United States, as the leader of the global economy, is a nation founded on the principles of Puritanism, the Puritans being mostly Calvinist followers who emigrated from England. The United States is a country of many races and religions, but Puritanism forms the fundamental ideology of the state and way of thinking. Every four years when a new President is inaugurated, he takes an oath of service while putting his hand on a Bible. There are no priests present at this ceremony, just the Bible before which he takes the oath of office. This is said to be a unique feature of Puritanism.

In the thinking of Puritanism, it’s not true faith in God if the person has been coerced into it by anyone. They must enter this faith by free will. This is what is thought of as proper faith. Humans relying on such free will is an important expression. In this way, one should establish an independent lifestyle by oneself. It must not be a coercive situation in which your means of living and money is dependent on anyone else. One must engage in work to properly establish personal

² *Shihon-shugi-ha naze jikai shitanoka? Nihon saisei-he no teigen* 資本主義はなぜ自壊したのか? 日本再生への提言(Tokyo: Shuei Publishers, 2008).

and economic independence as well as being free of any political coercion. In such a situation of freedom, one must then enter into faith. At the same time, one must also not coerce others into faith. In this way, freedom for Americans is very different in temperament from the Japanese conception of freedom.

In the particular American understanding of Protestantism, the income that comes from one's hard work based on faith is evidence or proof of that faith. **However, because of the freedom and independence of faith and lifestyle, this money can then be used freely without worrying what other people think.** Looking at a TV show from America after World War II, Japanese thought, "Americans have an incredible lifestyle." They have cars, refrigerators, and televisions. At that time, not all Americans had such a lifestyle, of course, but this lifestyle was portrayed as ideal. In America, people do not hide or worry about how they use their money. It is thought that if money is not used, then the economic world does not turn around. In this way, capitalism has become larger and larger. However, the feeling that profit is the reward given by God is something that Japanese cannot understand. Japan has also become market capitalist. However, **the people of the old style Japanese economic world thought like the early Calvinists that it was better for people to live a frugal life.** It seems to me they hesitated to use money or to carry money in the way Americans do. In this way, American capitalism seems to me to be rather odd or eccentric in terms of capitalism in general.

The Association for Thinking about Mind and Life & the *Yottetamore* Initiatives

As the abbot of a Soto Zen temple, I developed a sense of unease about the problem of suicide in my area. Thus in 2000, I gathered together a group of volunteers and created the Association for Thinking about Mind and Life. One reason I set up this association has been to examine how to better understand death by suicide. Suicide is a type of death in which the surrounding environment is being rejected. We learned through our study that the chief cause of suicide is depression and issues related to it. We developed various activities, such as inviting speakers to our study sessions, so that a wide number of local citizens came to know about the suicide issue.

However, there is a strong sense that suicide is an individual issue, even amidst the high rate here in Fujisato-cho. Furthermore, **even though many citizens here have been connected with someone who has committed suicide, there is still a taboo about discussing the issue.** Still, we continued to hold our study sessions and meet as an association over the next three years until 2003. However, just holding study sessions among our members did not reduce the suicide rate. In reality, it involved each of us deciding to do what we could to prevent suicide.

As a result, we set up a weekly community café called *Yottetamore*. We promoted it through the cooperation of people in the community in order to reduce the number of people committing suicide as well as to prevent people from becoming isolated. We opened the *Yottetamore* Café every week on Tuesdays using a building owned by the local government. The members of the association put on yellow aprons and welcomed other citizens from Fujisato-cho. The meaning of *Yottetamore* is "**to welcome others to drop by anytime.**" **We have only one rule, which is to always listen to what others have to say.** The coffee, which is brewed using the beautiful water from the Shirakami-Sanchi mountains, provides a lubricant for our conversations. In our town, casual conversation had gone out of fashion, and superficial ways of speaking became predominant. **At our café, conversation is reborn and so are new connections amongst the people of our community. Just to casually drop by and simply chat. What is the mystery in that?**

The small connections born from the café seemed to have an effect, and no suicides occurred in Fujisato-cho the following year. In evaluating the activities of our association, we saw the tendency towards a small reduction after we started our work, and we were happy about this. However, in the following year, five people committed suicide in our town. They were all men. Since the suicide rate among men is high, we decided to start a new kind of *Yottetamore* that would be easy for men in the community who work all day to join. Thus, members of the association will also sometimes gather at our community meeting place in the evenings and engage in conversation while having a drink, sort of like a *Yottetamore* Bar. Through the *Yottetamore* Bar, we have been

able to further spread connections in the community. Through discussing our troubles together, listening to one another, and coming to a recognition of each other, community can be reborn. The year after those five people committed suicide, we again recorded no suicides at all in Fujisato-cho.

In 2009, in recognition for confronting head on the difficult problem of many suicidal people by [creating a cooperative space to prevent suicide, giving birth to community connections, and stimulating the reduction of suicide](#), the Association for Thinking about Mind and Life received a commendation from the Japanese Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications. There are still today many people who are coping with mental problems. However, if you have community connections, you can prevent isolation and suicide, so our association is continuing today to have conversations with everyone and to actively spread community connection.

Conclusion: Buddhism Can Develop New Community

I have been thinking about how to best bring people together who have become atomized and how to best build the human connections in our village that have become dispersed. There are a number of different ways of thinking, but in my case I think we are doing only what we can. This is the *Yottatamore* café. Every Tuesday afternoon from 1:30 to 4:00 is really very little time. However, it is a rewarding one that we put time and sweat into. At this place that we have created, conversations are taking place. Thinking in terms of efficiency or in terms of economic prioritization, it would be better to be at work. People who work in the rice paddies should be in their paddies; people who work in the fields should be in their fields; and people who run their own businesses should be selling things. Yet for other people, or perhaps for our own selves, [we take a little break from *kasegi* time. I think this is the kind of thing that is needed.](#)

These days a system that entrusts everything to experts is expanding. It is a system in which one doesn't need to take time for others, because working professionals will do the childcare and nursing. There is no need for conflicts, and desires can develop freely. One can contribute through *kasegi*, which maximizes desire and seems to lead to no suffering amongst people. We have created a system that rejects entanglements. [We have paid attention to a society that rejects them, thinking this will be the end of all entanglements.](#) We have thought this would be a comfortable and convenient society. However, in reality, haven't we become atomized and isolated?

For myself, I think that humans can mature through the process of entanglement and that it is very important to [create a society that makes us mature. A new community should create relationships through which people can become mature.](#) In the new community, there will probably be some uncomfortable things and perhaps some entanglements will arise. However, I think human connection will be the important thing. [I believe that Buddhism can be one main pillar for the construction of this new community.](#)

Translated by Jonathan Watts with Rev. Jin Sakai from Rev. Hakamata's Japanese language talk, "From a Disconnected Society to an Interconnected Society" (*Muen shakai-kara yuen shakai-he* 「無縁社会」から「有縁」社会へ), given to the Rinsho Buddhism Chaplain Training Program on June 19, 2013 at the Tokyo University Young Buddhist Association Hall and subsequently published in *An Introduction to Rinsho Buddhism* (*Rinsho Bukkyo nyumon* 「臨床仏教」入門 Kyoto: Hakubasha, 2013).