

# The Problem of Suicide in Japan & Buddhist Priests Confronting the Situation

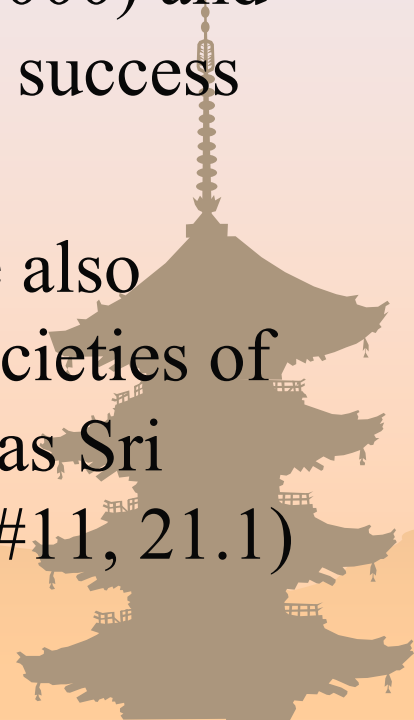
Jonathan S. Watts - Keio University, Tokyo, Japan



# It's a World Wide Suicide

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- ❁ Declining levels of well-being in the so-called highly developed countries of the world.
- ❁ Suicide and a wide variety of forms of mental illness are not only plaguing Japan today (#17, 18.5/100,000), but have taken hold in South Korea (#2, 28.9/100,000) and other East Asian societies, where the drive for success coupled with self-sacrifice is so strong.
- ❁ The pressures of modern industrial society are also trickling into the so called lesser developed societies of Asia that have become rife with suicide, such as Sri Lanka (#3, 28.8), Nepal (#7, 24.9) and India (#11, 21.1)



# The Situation of suicide in Japan

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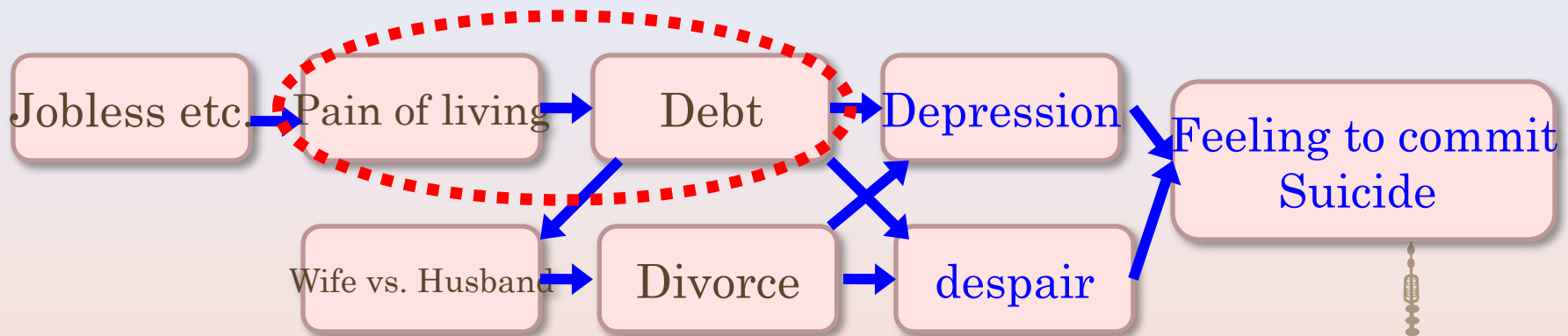
- Japan is a principle example of this when its suicide rate skyrocketed in the late 1990s as a still ongoing economic recession started to take root in society. 1997: 24,391, 1998: 32,863; 2003: 34,427; 2011: 30,651; 2012: 27,766; 2016: 21,897; 2017: 21,321; 2018:20,840
- Suicide is first in the cause of death of people in their 20's and 30's (17.2-17.8/100,000), but highest risk is middle aged men (22.3+), but women are 3<sup>rd</sup> highest rate in the world. Also common among the elderly (20.7). *The rate is actually increasing for teenagers from 4.7 to 5.3 since 2009.*





# The Feeling to Commit Suicide & Law of Causes and Conditions

- ❁ one common scenario among businessmen

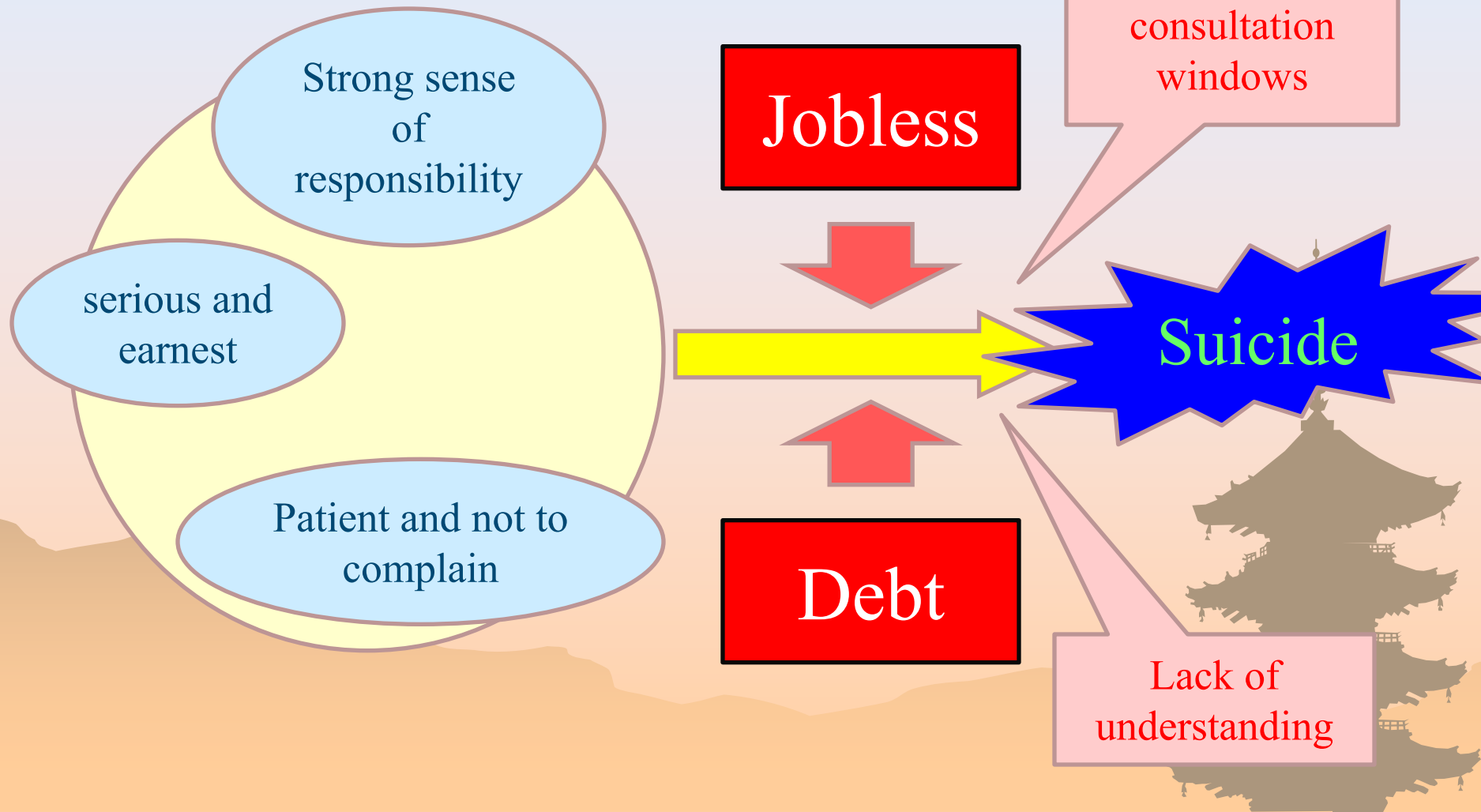


According to the Buddhist Theory of Causality (*paticca samuppada* 縁起) outcomes arise through causes and conditions. With the arising of this, that then arises; with the cessation of this, that then ceases. This is true for not only the direct cause but also the original cause and condition



# Various Conditions, Causes and Results in Japan

## Character & Personality



# Wider Structural Factors

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- Breakdown of communities & social networks (urbanization)
- Government dependency on businesses and families to provide safety nets
- Corporate restructuring, layoffs, part-time benefit-less work
- Technological dispersion
- “dormitory family” & divorce
- Elderly ignored, seen as burden (*meiwaku*)



# Wider Cultural Factors

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- Human relationships vs. Materialism & consumerism
- Collision of:

Community values of harmony(*wa*) with others, self-sacrifice for the group (*mushi*), repaying the benefits of elders (*hō-on*), and dependence on others for support and care (*amaeru*) AND

Neo-classical economic values of self-determination (*jiko ketei*) and self-responsibility (*jiko sekinin*).

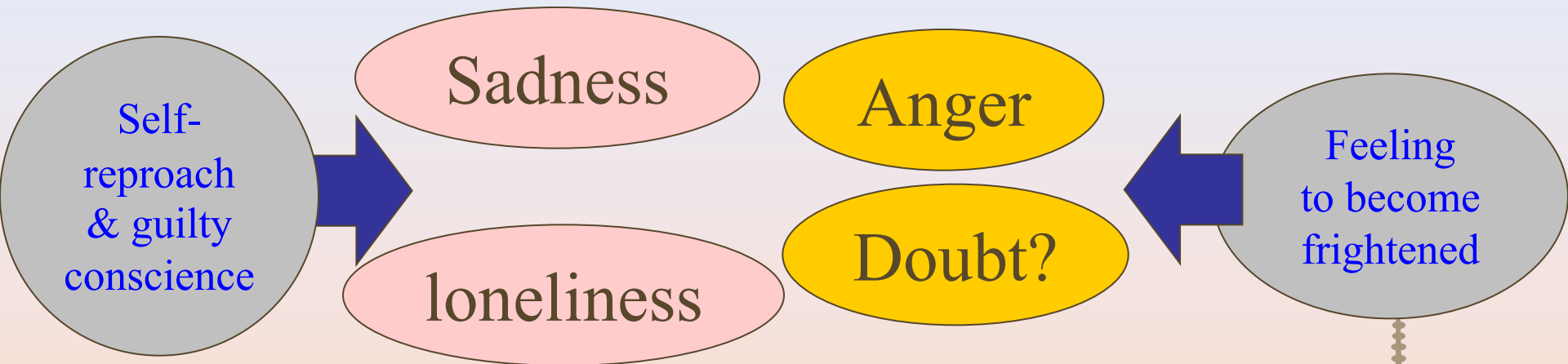
- thick, intimate, and closed community → communication is vague and nuanced → without such structure, alienation and withdrawal ensues





# Feelings & the state of mind of **the bereaved** towards the person who committed suicide

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- ◆ The situation that one cannot tell though one wants to speak about it.
- ◆ One cannot grieve calmly in peace.

# How should we be concerned with the issue of suicide?

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## 1. To wipe out indifference and prejudice

- The opposite of love is **indifference** not hatred
- See reality and know it; hear the story of **the person concerned**

## 2. Offer a safe place where everybody can share feelings without being disturbed by anyone, and we receive the feeling and accept it

- **Getting intimate with feelings.** Accept the feeling as is.
- × You must not die. **○ I do not want you to die.**

## 3. Think together; act together

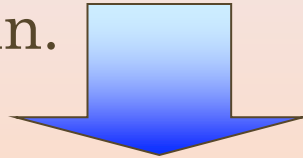


# The activities that even a priest can do

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## ❁ What can **even** a priest do?

- Listener (Counselor)
- Offer places to share the feeling of the bereaved
- Act as a go-between (“Gatekeeper”) to other forms of support, like financial consultant, health care provider, social worker for areas the priest is not experienced in.



## ❁ What can priests **especially** do?

- Show the way and guidepost of life
- Help to find the meaning of life





# Rev. Eichi Shinohara

## Sōtō Zen, Chiba



- While most people in Japan, including priests, feel counseling can only be done by licensed professionals, Rev. Shinohara encourages other priests to confront the problem of alienation even if they do not have a license by using listening skills and a concern for others.
- Rev. Shinohara sees the potential of the priest as counselor, rather than as ritualist. The Buddhist priest offers an alternative means of therapy and cure based in developing an intimate relationship as a “spiritual friend” *kalyāṇamitra* (zenchishiki善知識), who is in turn connected with an authentic temple community.

# Rev. Yūsen Maeda

## Sōtō Zen, Mita in Tokyo

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- ❁ one of the founding members of the Association of Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem, has also emphasized this approach over the non-subjective approach of modern psychotherapy.
- ❁ Although trained as a conversational therapist, he eschews psychoanalytical models and methods, because he feels they create a wall between the clinician (as ‘well adjusted’) and the patient (as ‘disturbed’ or ‘neurotic’). Instead, using a process he says is inspired by the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, he encounters the person as a fellow comrade in suffering in which together they search for a resolution to their collective suffering.

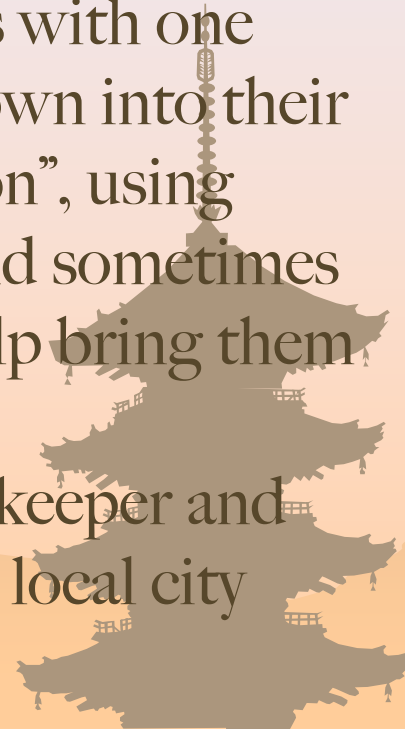
# Rev. Soin Fujio

## Rinzai Zen at Kencho-ji, Kamakura

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- Born in a temple, son of a priest but worked as a banker in Tokyo, New York, Singapore and Bangkok for almost 20 years.
- He spends hours with one person “going down into their level of depression”, using deep listening and sometimes meditation to help bring them out
- Works as a Gatekeeper and Counselor at the local city hall.





# Rev. Eka Shima

## Jodo Pure Land, Tokyo

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- Young priestess and vice-abbot of a temple in Tokyo
- Works at an important NGO called the Center to Support Measures Against Suicide, commonly called Life Link, as a telephone counselor and trainer of other counselors
- She is also one of the main representatives of the Association of Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem



# Rev. Jotetsu Nemoto

## Rinzai Zen, Gifu



- Not born into a temple. Keio University drop out. Trained in a very strict Rinzai Zen temple for 6 years. Then worked in a MacDonald's in Shinjuku and began cyber counseling.
- Performs Death Workshops and various outdoor events.

The moment of desperate madness when the ego finally gives way before the experience of enlightenment is quite similar to the suicidal's experience of desperate madness before committing suicide. With education, support and meditation practice, they can find perhaps quickly find a new life.



# Maintaining bonds through community building

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- ❁ Ittetsu Net, “a network for building friendships and for holding workshops for mental and physical health, emphasizing self care and outdoor activities.”
- ❁ Rev. Nemoto is working on getting deeper at the roots of the suicide working with groups of people sharing a wider range of anxieties and then working to build back communities of connection based around healthy living.
- ❁ Through his years of work, he has found the prevalent model of volunteers and counselors working in a one-way relationship with the mentally ill and disturbed just does not work. In Ittetsu Net, Rev. Nemoto seeks to build a more dynamic framework of interaction in which a variety of different groups are united in the central ideal of “self-care”. Within this dynamic container, Rev. Nemoto recounts, counseling will take place naturally at these events.



# Rev. Shunei Hakamata

## Soto Zen, Akita

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- From the most northern area of Akita where suicide rates and depopulation are among the highest in the country
- He analyzed how industrialization systematically destroyed the community structures and culture of his region
- Has created a café and a bar for local people to come together and openly discuss their lives and problems



# The Association of Buddhist Priests Confronting Self-Death & Suicide 自死・自殺に向き合う僧侶の会



# The Association of Buddhist Priests Confronting Self-Death & Suicide

## 自死・自殺に向き合う僧侶の会

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【 position and reason for creating the network】

- Priests **with the will to go** beyond the denomination
- **Act** as well as study
- **Not** invite only specific denomination and religion
- **Cooperate** positively with not only the Buddhist group but also the other groups mutually
- At first, they wanted to achieve results in Tokyo area and then want to send various messages & information to the whole country in the future





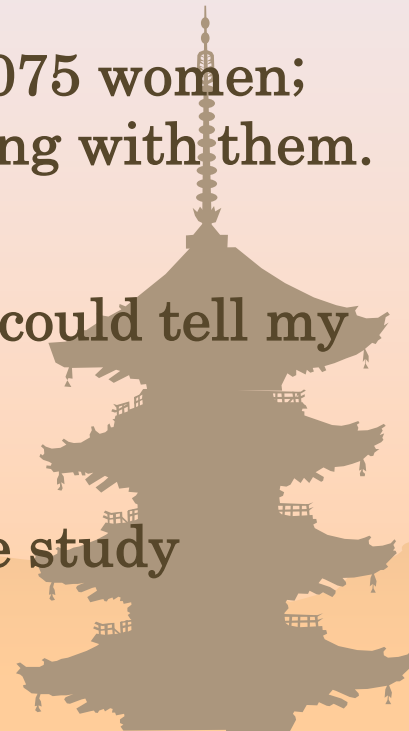
# Activity Example①:

## Counseling by letter writing

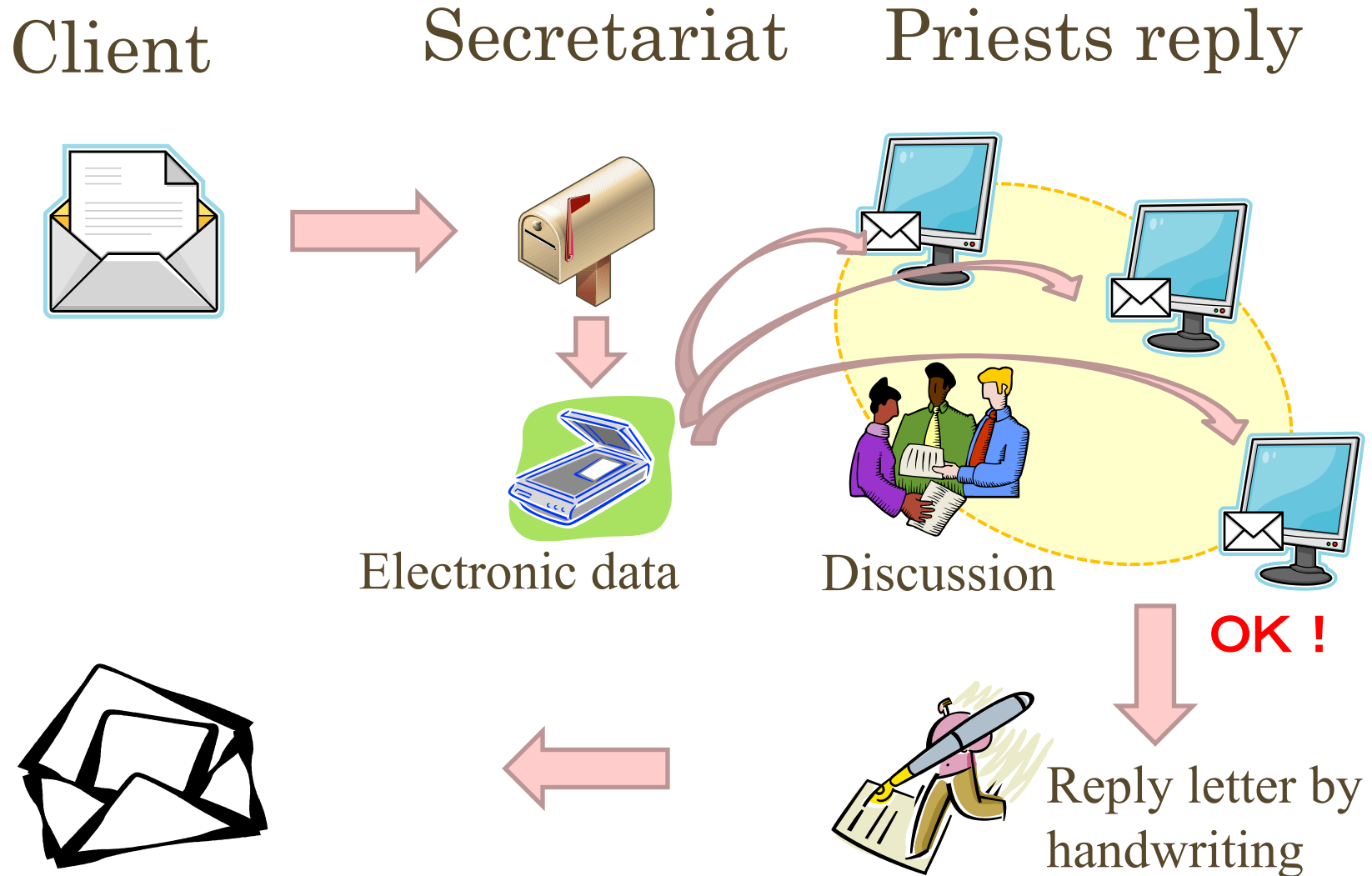
- Correspondence with priests : the matter about suicide
- At first they accept **a letter** about suicide. Three priests make one group. One makes a reply draft, and two others check the contents. Finally, the priest in charge of the draft replies by **handwriting**.

### ① For Prevention of bias ② For better content

- They have received 8,292 letters by 1,318 people (1,075 women; 243 men), from all over Japan with 42 priests working with them. (Beginning Feb. 2008 as of September, 2017)
- "At last, I was able to find **a reliable person** whom I could tell my true feelings to." (a client's voice)
- **Feedback** by afterward inspection meeting ( the case study meeting)



# Process of our letter counseling





# Memorial Services for the Suicidal and their Bereaved (*tsuitō hōyō* 追悼法要)

- ❁ Started in 2007 for bereaved family and friends of those who committed suicide
- ❁ Often held on “The Day for Living & The Time for Living” いのちの日 (December 1<sup>st</sup> annually)
- ❁ Held in Nagoya, Osaka and Hiroshima as well since 2009



# Group Counseling Sessions (*wakachi-ai* 分かち合い)

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- ❁ At Tsukiji Hongwanji, Tokyo, 4th Thursday of every month
- ❁ Offering “a safe place” where everyone can speak about the feeling which cannot be said to anyone else.
- ❁ This group sharing in a spiritual atmosphere has a therapeutic effect for many.
- ❁ In 2017, on average 33 people attended with 10 of those being new



1<sup>st</sup> *Isuto Hoyo* December 1, 2007  
at Eiju-in (Nichiren sect): 8 participants





2<sup>nd</sup> *Tsuito Hoyo*: 2008 Tsukiji Honganji (Jodo Shin Pure Land) 120 participants



7<sup>th</sup> *Tsuito Hoyo*: 2013 155 participants and 51 priests



3<sup>rd</sup> *Tsuito Hoyo*: 2009 Seisho-ji (Soto Zen)  
50 priests and 107 participants



6<sup>th</sup> *Tsuito Hoyo*: 2012 145 participants and 64 priests





**4<sup>th</sup> *Tsuitō Hōyō* : 2010 Gokoku-ji (Shingon)**

**153 participants and 75 priests**

**9<sup>th</sup> *Tsuitō Hōyō* 2015: 140 participants**

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**5<sup>th</sup> *Tsuitō Hōyō* : 2011 Zojo-ji (Jodo Pure Land)**

**171 participants and 68 priests**

**10<sup>th</sup> *Tsuitō Hōyō* 2016: 137 participants**

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5<sup>th</sup> *Tsuito Hoyo* in Osaka: 2013 Shitenno-ji Temple  
(the first Buddhist temple in Japan)  
100 participants and 49 priests

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# お焚き上げ Burning of Letters to Heaven Rev. Daiki Nakashita & Rev. Soin Fujio





# Buddhism & Suicide

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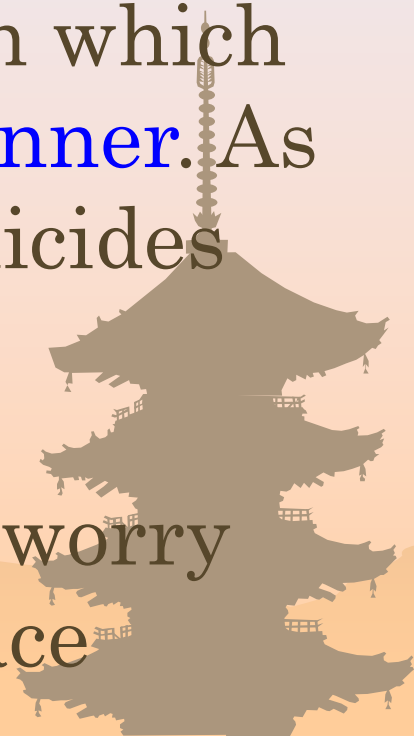
- ❁ The Association has always stressed that Buddhism has no absolute prohibitions on suicide nor absolute judgments
- ❁ Rev. Fujio Soin: “In Buddhism, the spirits of the suicidal are in heaven (the Pure Land 浄土極樂) through the compassionate welcoming of the Buddha (Amida 阿弥陀仏). However, many people misunderstand (mis-think) that they cannot go to heaven, because of their own fault. Suicide is one of the various ways of death; diseases, accidents, murder, and so on. Heaven and hell is a different matter and is not directly related to suicide issue. If I try to answer your question, I need to start talking what are the bad deeds which lead to hell. Regarding the matter of suicide and hell/heaven, please follow your views or thoughts. Or follow the doctrines of your religion or denomination. ‘Who goes to hell?’ is a profound question.”



# Ultimate Goals

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- Their aim is not only that suicide should decrease
- They aim at achieving a society in which people can **lead life in a lively manner**. As such, they want the number of suicides to decrease.
- Realize the society where we can worry at rest and can be troubled in peace



# Re-Awakening to Our Inter-connected World 我々の繋がっている世界を目覚める



1<sup>st</sup> International Conference on Buddhism and Suicide Prevention

仏教と自殺・自死防止の第一国際会議

Yokohama横浜・Kyoto京都

2017年11月6－10日







# Key Themes & Conclusions

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- ❁ Young people are especially prone to depression & suicide in contemporary society
  - ❁ A comprehensive response is necessary to address the manifold structural and cultural causes present in post-industrial society.
  - ❁ What is the role of religious professionals?
    1. Rethink & Revise teachings and doctrines that are discriminatory to suicide
    2. Develop intimacy and deep listening for those in suffering
    3. Act as a “Gatekeeper” to provide links to other skilled professionals who can help
  - ❁ Develop training for Buddhist monastics and serious laypersons in other parts of Asia, especially Southeast Asia and South Asia
  - ❁ March 12-14, 2019: 2 day conference & 1 day monks training in Thailand
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