



The Hitosaji “One Spoonful” Association

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The Homeless in Japan

- In 2003, nationwide 25,296 homeless → 4,977 in 2018 (Tokyo 1,242; Osaka 1,110)
- Reduction from increase in government shelters and halfway houses PLUS previously unqualified day laborers getting older and qualifying for state pension
- Government surveys done during daylight hours based on those who “look homeless”.
- Toko University ongoing survey estimates 2.5X the official 4,977.



Elderly single men; 2/3 of them are in their 50s-60s → 60s-70s; 95.2% are men; 60% of them are concentrated in metropolis

The Homeless in Japan

Do not use available public welfare programs; WHY?

- Excluded from social welfare and labor market
- Mental disorder and mild disability
- Even when they cannot apply for it, is it their choice?

More vulnerable existence

- “Poverty businesses” that target the homeless
- Risk of physical assault

NIMBY- *not in my backyard*

- Do the homeless disturb public safety?
- “It’s a good program, but don’t do it here”

Religious Involvement

- NPO and faith based organizations help them. Most of faith based organizations are Christian. Some NPOs have been created by Christian groups.
- Historically Buddhists have been involved in social welfare
 - Clinics 施薬院 and shelters 悲田院 established by the imperial family who were devout Buddhists in the 6-7th century
 - Lazar house for lepers by the Shingon monks Eizon 叡尊 (1201–1290) and Ninshō 忍性 a.k.a Ryōkan 良観 (1217–1303)
- In the early 20th century, many Buddhist denominations developed social welfare programs
 - Shelters for the needy, child welfare institutions, rehabilitation facilities for former prisoners
 - Promoted by the government to prevent spread of socialism movement & reinforce the regime

(Yoshida 1996, Nawa 2004; 2006, Takase 2011)

Religious Involvement

Secularization, especially after WWII

- These facilities had split off from religious organization
- Religiosity became excluded from the public sphere

Japanese Buddhism became marginalized, withdrawn, and insular, caring only people who are their direct temple members

- How to care and treat those who dropped out from the mainstream, like the homeless & suicidal?

1980s some priests started to re-engage

- Strong personality, critical of denominational and traditional perspective
- Many were not from the mainstream of their denomination

Hitosaji-no-kai ひとさじの会

Since 2009 (started in 2004)

Activities

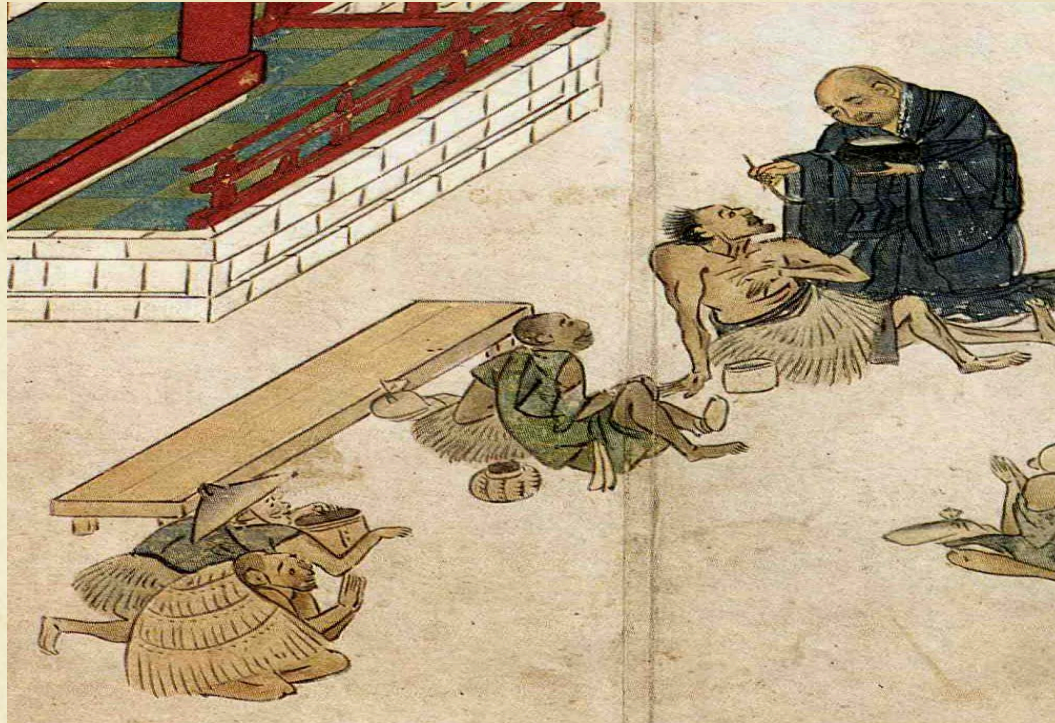
1. Funeral support
2. Feeding the needy
3. Promotion of rice donation

Goal

To build cooperative relations with the community and NPOs for supporting the needy, and to become a model for public benefit activities 公益 by temples



Background in Buddhist Thought & Practice



Origin of *hitosaji*= a spoon = a small portion, from the Pure Land teachings of Honen

“Sick people in the first stages of their disease are able to eat such fruits as oranges, lemons, pears and persimmons. But later they cannot eat any of them, being able only to wet their throats with a little bit of thin rice gruel just to keep alive. And so this teaching of the single-minded practice of *nenbutsu* (chanting Amida Buddha’s name) is really the same thing...Society is degenerating, and we are now like people afflicted with a sore disease...There is nothing to do but to take the thin rice gruel of the *nenbutsu* to escape the round of birth and death (samsara).” Myohen, a scholar monk who converted to Pure Land

Background in Buddhist Thought & Practice

- Mahayana Buddhism believes in all beings have buddha-nature and can gain enlightenment, but in Pure land Buddhism it is believed that we cannot achieve by ourselves
- *Nenbutsu* 念仏 (“mindfulness of Buddha” → chanting Amida Buddha’s name): easy practice, regardless of social status, education, and personality
- From “something special by someone special” to “nothing special by everyone”
- Spiritual democracy & Horizontal relationships:
Being beside and with the homeless, from provider to neighbor

Funeral Services

- Origin of the organization
- Annual memorial service
- The grave for the homeless

Yui-no-haka (結の墓) 2008

at Kōshō-in (光照院), Tokyo



“Now we are homeless, but after death, we must be homeless as well. If we knew we had a place to stay in the afterlife, we could be more serious, and think about how to live life. If I knew that after I died, friends would come to my grave and talk about me, I would be able to strive more intensely in life.”

- a homeless man

Interfaith



Kannon Bodhisattva wearing a cross



Gravestone made by Christian NGO 2015

Feeding the Needy

Material support

- Giving out onigiri (rice balls), tea, medicines, etc.

Supported by various volunteers

- Other denominations' priests, lay people, NPOs, college students

How much do priests know about how “Life is suffering” (1st Noble Truth)?

- Reflecting on themselves

Food Distribution



Serving onigiri and
tea, medicines and
other necessities
seasonally



Twice a month, 1st and 3rd Monday night with “patrol” style in Asakusa 浅草, Sanya 山谷, and Ueno 上野 areas

If they need, we inform them about public assistance, free clinics, and other support systems



Being “with” vs. Treating as “other”



Rev. Gakugen Yoshimizu (center) teaches us to: Bend your knees and stand in their position. Don't look down on homeless people. Show your sincerity & share their feeling. Connect with them as real people





Chanting Amida
Buddha's name
(*nenbutsu*) and
dedicating the merit of
our practice to those
in suffering time
before the “patrol”

Final Reflection & Chanting



Promotion of Rice Donation

Networking with temples, especially in rural areas

- Hitosaji has received rice donation from temples
“we could use these networks broadly!?”

Cooperation with Food Banks

- Temples could become one of “depositors”
- Making connections between temples and society

Rice project (米一升運動)

- Local temples collect rice donations from their temple members, then donate them to local NPOs

Rice project 米一升運動



Ōmi rice project (Shiga Prefecture)
400kg (Jan 2010), 2.5t (Jan 2011)

Tōhoku rice project (Northern 6 prefectures)
About 1t (Dec 2010 - Jan 2011)

- ❖ The networks worked well after the Great East Japan Earthquake

Conclusion

- Funeral support
 - As a priest who specializes in the spiritual field
 - Help restore self-esteem, hope, and humanity
- Feeding the needy
 - Raising awareness of participants of those who live in the same society, overcoming sense of homeless as “other”
 - Priests can learn from the needy and deepen their own faith
- Creating community in a Mu-En society amongst the ostracized and amongst regular citizens to root out the Mu-En mentality
- Promotion for donation & social mobilization
 - As an organization which has networks with lay people
 - Connecting priest and lay people who just don't know how to connect to social activities
- Social engagement enriches the networks between temples, NPOs, and people. Such networks enhance the temples' potential in the society

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