

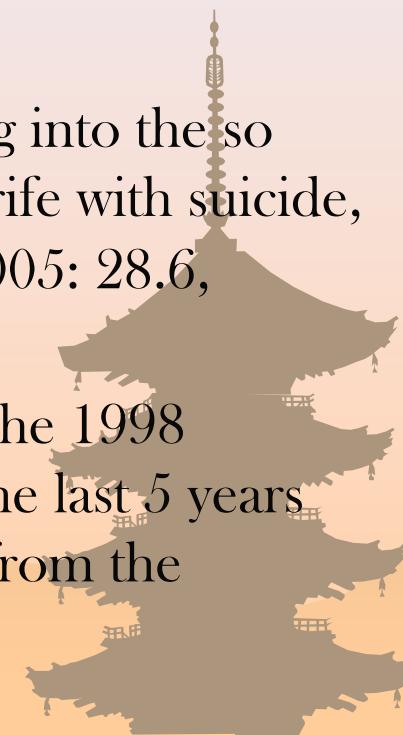
The Problem of Suicide in Japan & Buddhist Priests Confronting the Situation

Jonathan S. Watts - Keio University, Tokyo, Japan



It's a World Wide Suicide

- ✿ 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 (2009:24.9/100,000, 2019:16, 2021: 16.8), but have taken hold in South Korea (2011: 34.5, 2019: 28.6, #4 in the world) 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 India (2000:17; 2017: 12, 2019:12.7), Sri Lanka (2005: 28.6, 2019:14), & Thailand (2000:12, 2013:7.5, 2019:8.8)
- ✿ While numbers in Asia are down from the peak set off by the 1998 regional economic crisis, rates have begun to rise again in the last 5 years among the young overexposed on social media and adults from the pressures of the Covid pandemic.



The Situation of Suicide in Japan

- Japan is a principal 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; 2019: 20,169; 2020: 21,081; 2021: 21,007
- Suicide is first in the cause of death of people in their 20's and 30's (20.7-18.7/100,000), but highest risk are the middle aged in their 50s (21.3). Women are 12th highest rate in the world (9.4) [men are 33rd]. Also common among the elderly in their 70s (18.3) and 80s (18.3). *The only rate that has increasing since 2009 is for teenagers from 4.7 in 2009 to 7.0 in 2020.*
- The COVID pandemic has sparked an increase for the first time since 2009, especially among women, whose number jumped from 6,091 (9.4) in 2019 to over 7,000 (11.0) in 2020/21, highlighting the problem of poverty among single mothers and their children.

Wider Structural Factors

- 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, single mothers
- Elderly ignored, seen as burden (*meiwaku*)



Wider Cultural Factors

- 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*).

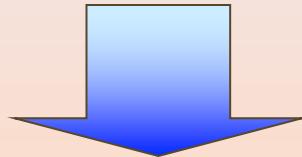
- thick, intimate, and closed community → communication is vague and nuanced → without such structure, alienation and withdrawal ensues



The Roles of a Priest

✿ 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 a priest **especially** do?

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



Rev. Eichi Shinohara

Sōtō Zen, Chiba



- ✿ counseling not only by licensed professionals
- ✿ priests should engage by using listening skills and a concern for others.
- ✿ priest as counselor, rather than as ritualist.
- ✿ alternative means of therapy and cure as an intimate “spiritual friend” (*kalyāṇamitra* 善知識 *zenchishiki*)
- ✿ also connected with an authentic temple community.

Rev. Yūsen Maeda

Sōtō Zen, Mita in Tokyo



- ✿ Co-founder the Association of Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem
- ✿ trained as a conversational therapist, but eschews western psychoanalytical model
- ✿ Take down the wall between the clinician as “well adjusted” and the patient as “disturbed” or “neurotic”.
- ✿ fellow comrades in suffering, searching together for a resolution to collective suffering. ←→ Buddha’s Four Noble Truths

Rev. Soin Fujio

Rinzai Zen, Dokuon-ji, Yokosuka

Kamakura Kencho-ji denomination



- Born in a temple, son of a priest but worked as a banker in Tokyo, New York, Singapore and Bangkok for almost 20 years.
- 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 Shimada

Jodo Pure Land, Tokyo



- 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
- one of the main representatives of the Association of Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem

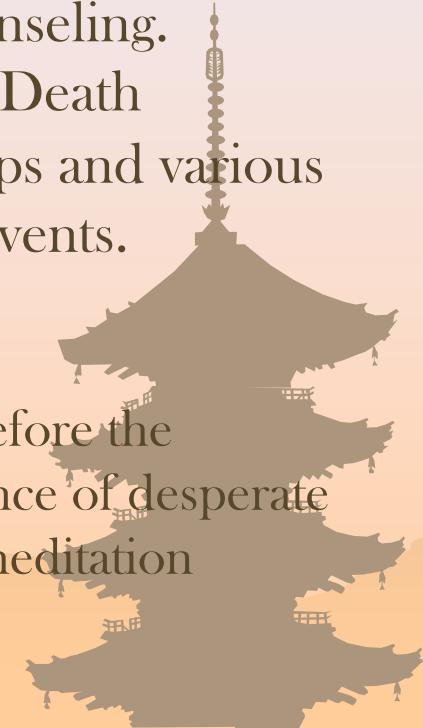
Rev. Jotetsu Nemoto

Rinzai Zen, Gifu



- Not born into a temple
- Keio University drop out.
- Trained in strict Rinzai Zen temple for 6 years.
- worked in 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 a new life.



Maintaining bonds through community building

- ✿ Ittetsu Net, “a network for building friendships and for holding workshops for mental and physical health, emphasizing self care and outdoor activities.”
- ✿ To get at the deeper roots of suicide
- ✿ working with groups of people sharing a wider range of anxieties
- ✿ then working to build back communities of connection based around healthy living.
- ✿ prevalent model of volunteers and counselors working in a one-way relationship with the mentally ill and disturbed does not work.
- ✿ In Ittetsu Net, 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, counseling will take place naturally at these events.

Rev. Shunei Hakamata

Soto Zen, Akita



- From the most northern area of Akita where suicide rates and depopulation are among the highest in the country (22.1 in 2019 tied for highest, national rate is 16.0)
- analyzed how industrialization systematically destroyed community structures and culture of his region
- created a café and a bar for local people to come together and openly discuss their lives and problems

SOTTO Self-Death & Suicide Counseling Center in Kyoto



- ✿ Jodo Shin Pure Land Buddhist group. Rev. Ryogo Takemoto (left) co-founder
- ✿ No use of mindfulness or meditation, rather providing the sense of warmth that a Pure Land Buddhist feels when embraced by Amitabha Buddha.
- ✿ “accepting feelings just as they are”
- ✿ Pioneers in breaking down rigid separation of church & state: Receiving support and working with Kyoto City government

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

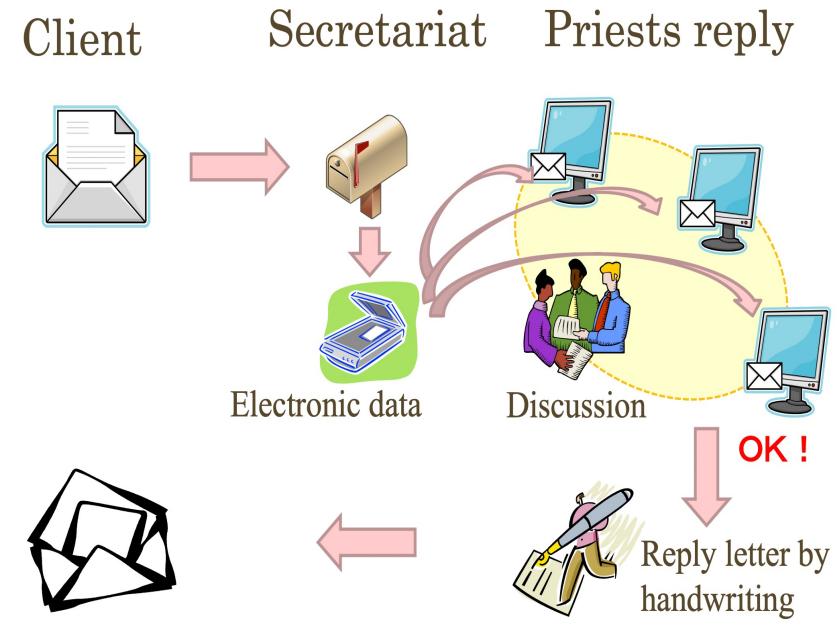
- ✿ ecumenical & sectarian divisions
- ✿ study the problem of suicide & then act on it
- ✿ cooperate positively with not only Buddhist groups but also the other civil society groups
- ✿ Founded in May 2007 and focused on Tokyo area
- ✿ Now expanded to independent but cooperative groups in Nagoya, Osaka, and Hiroshima

Counseling through Letter Writing

- First advertised in major newspapers
- Three priests make one group.
- One makes a reply draft
- Two others check the contents.
- First priest replies by handwriting.

① For Prevention of bias

② For better content



- 8,369 letters from 1,448 people (1,194 women; 254 men) from all over Japan responded by 42 priests (Beginning Feb. 2008 as of September, 2019)
- "At last, I was able to find a reliable person whom I could tell my true feelings to." (a client's voice)
- Feedback and case study meeting at bi-monthly meeting

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
- Held annually on December 1st
- “The Day for Living & The Time for Living” いのちの日
- Held in Nagoya, Osaka and Hiroshima as well since 2009



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



- 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 2018-19, on average 38 people attended with 8 of those being new

1st *Tsuito Hoyo* December 1, 2007
at Eiju-in (Nichiren sect) 8 participants



2nd *Tsuito Hoyo* (2008) Tsukiji Honganji
(Jodo Shin Pure Land) 120 participants



7th *Tsuito Hoyo* (2013) 155 participants and 51 priests

11th *Tsuito Hoyo* (2017) 164 participants, 12th (2018) 208 participants

3rd *Tsuito Hoyo* (2009) Seisho-ji (Soto Zen)
50 priests and 107 participants



6th *Tsuito Hoyo* (2012) 145 participants and 64 priests

4th *Tsuitō Hōyō* (2010) Gokoku-ji (Shingon)
153 participants and 75 priests



9th *Tsuitō Hoyo* (2015) 140 participants

5th *Tsuito Hoyo* (2011) Zojō-ji (Jodo Pure Land)
171 participants and 68 priests



10th *Tsuito Hoyo* (2016) 137 participants

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



お焚き上げ Burning of Letters to Heaven

Rev. Daiki Nakashita & Rev. Soin Fujio



Buddhism & Suicide

- ✿ 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 淨土極樂) through the compassionate welcoming of the Buddha (Amida 阿彌陀仏). 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

- aim is not only that suicide should decrease
- achieve a society in which people can lead life in a lively manner. In this way, 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



1st International Conference on Buddhism and Suicide Prevention

佛教と自殺・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

- ✿ 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

International Roundtable on Buddhist Psychology, Psycho-Spiritual Counseling, and Chaplaincy Training

Bangkok March 12-16, 2019

