

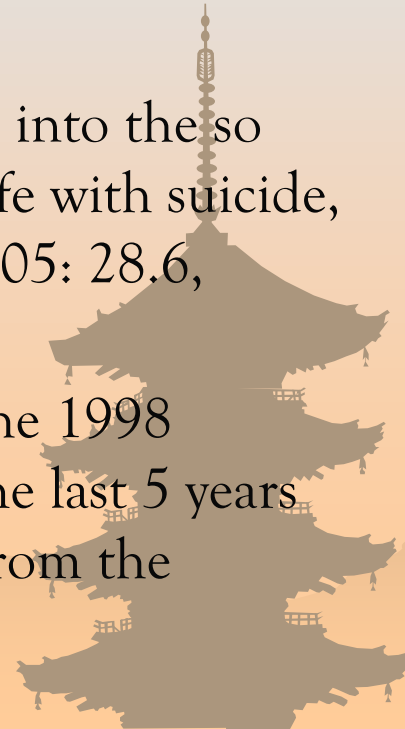
# Buddhist Engagement in the Suicide Problem in Japan

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 (2009: 35.3, 2019: 28.6 #4 in the world, 2022: 25.2) 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; 2020: 21,081; 2022: 21,881
- By 2023, Suicide is first in the cause of death of people in their 20's and 30's (19.8-19.3/100,000), but highest risk are the middle aged in their 50s (23.4). Also common among the elderly in their 70s (17.8) and 80s (18.8). *The only rate that has increased since 2009 is for teenagers from 4.6 to 7.5.*
- In 2019, women were the 12<sup>th</sup> highest rate in the world (9.4) [men were 33<sup>rd</sup> at 21.8]. Source: WHO
- The COVID pandemic sparked an increase for the first time since 2009, especially among women, whose number jumped to over 7,135 (11.1) in 2022, highlighting the problem of poverty among single mothers and their children.



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





# Wider Cultural Factors

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- ❖ Human relationships vs. Materialism & consumerism

- ❖ Collision of:

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

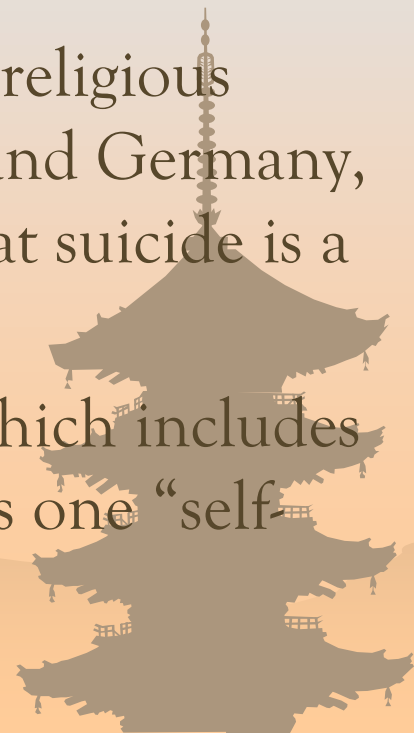
Neo-classical economic values of self-determination (自己決定 *jiko kettei*) and self-responsibility (自己責任 *jiko sekinin*).

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

# Influence of the West as a Cultural Problem

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- ❖ Traditionally, Japan has a wide variety of expressions for “suicide”: 自決 (*ji-ketsu*) “self-determination”, 自害 (*ji-gai*) “self-harm”, 自裁 (*ji-sai*) “self-judgement”, 自尽 (*ji-jin*) “self-annihilation”, 自刺 (*ji-shi*) “self-prick”, and 自死 (*ji-shi*) “self-death”
- ❖ In the late 1800s, there was an influx of legal and religious texts introduced to Japan from England, France, and Germany, coming from the strong Christian cultural bias that suicide is a “sin”.
- ❖ Suicide then became translated as 自殺 *ji-satsu*, which includes the term “to kill” (*satsu*), over the more ambiguous one “self-death” (自死 *ji-shi*).



# Buddhism as a Cultural Problem

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- ❖ The Jodo Shin Hongan-ji Research Institute 浄土真宗本願寺派総合研究所 conducted a survey of their 10,281 affiliated temples on this issue in September of 2009.
- ❖ Among the 2,694 priests who responded, 68.7 percent said affirmatively that suicide is “an act of throwing away one’s life”. 74.1 percent responded affirmatively that suicide is “an act that goes against Buddhist teachings”.
- ❖ An example involved a priest who refused to do a funeral for a child who had committed suicide unless the family paid an additional 500,000 yen to 800,000 yen (US\$5,500-\$9,000).
- ❖ He still declared to the family that the child could not be interred in the family cemetery plot located at the temple.

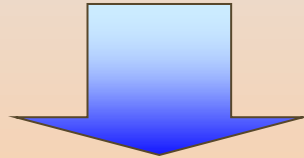


# The Roles of a Priest

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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 a priest **especially** do?

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



# Rev. Eichi Shinohara

## Soto 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.



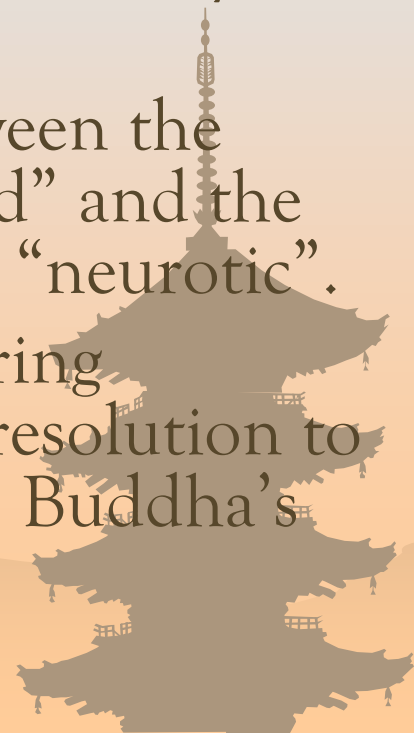
# Rev. Yūsen Maeda

## Soto Zen, Mita in Tokyo

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- ❁ Co-founder of the Association of Buddhist Priests Confronting Self-Death & Suicide
- ❁ 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.  $\leftrightarrow$  Buddha's Four Noble Truths





# Rev. Soin Fujio

## Rinzai Zen, Dokuon-ji, Yokosuka



- 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.



# Zen in the Metta-verse!

- ❖ During the Covid pandemic, Rev. Fujio learned how to teach through virtual reality.
- ❖ He found virtual reality is empowering to people who are social recluses or having mental illness.
- ❖ They can enter the space with a new identity and interact more confidently.





# Rev. Eka Shimada

## Jodo Pure Land, Tokyo

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





# 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.



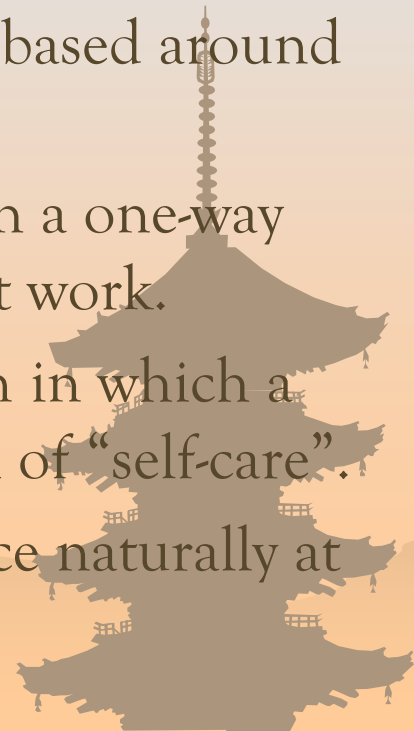
# *Tabidachi*: Death Workshop



# 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.”
- ❁ 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.





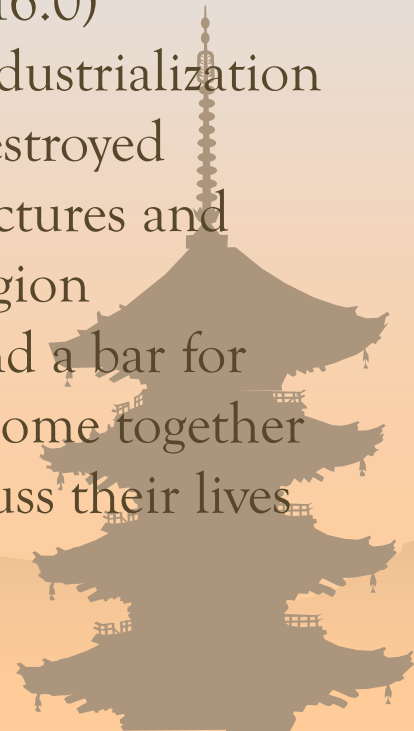
# Rev. Shunei Hakamata

## Soto Zen, Akita

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- 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



Inter-religious Cooperation:  
Rinzai Zen headquarters, Myoshin-ji temple,  
hosts training session for counselors and  
monthly gathering for suicidal

- ❁ 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

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- ❁ Overcome 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

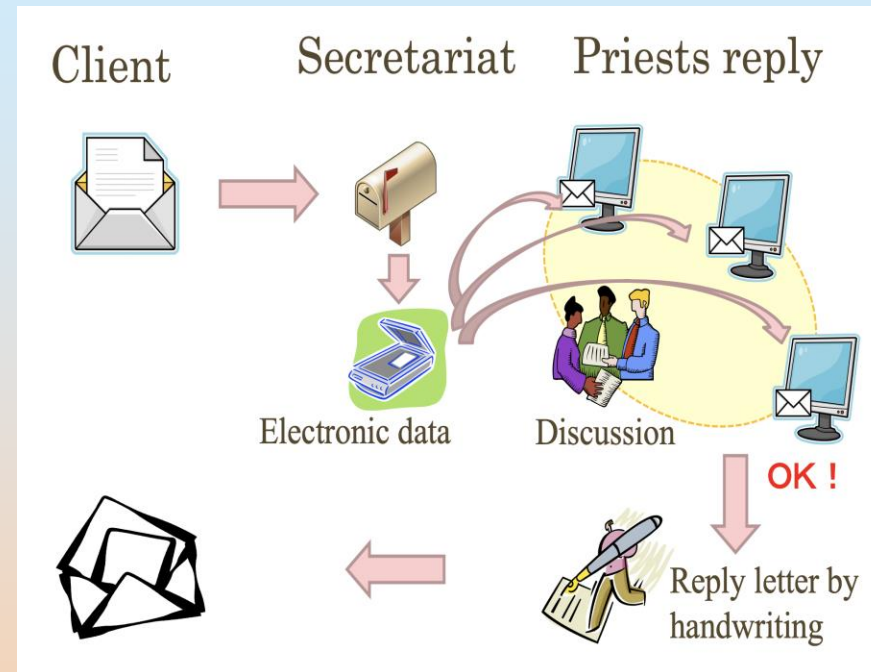


# Counseling through Letter Writing

- 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 1<sup>st</sup>
- ❁ “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)

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- ❁ At Tsukiji Hongwan-ji temple, 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



1<sup>st</sup> Tsuito 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  
11<sup>th</sup> *Tsuito Hoyo* (2017) 164 participants, 12<sup>th</sup> (2018) 208 participants



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> *Tsuito Hoyo* (2010) Gokoku-ji (Shingon)  
153 participants and 75 priests



9<sup>th</sup> *Tsuito Hoyo* (2015) 140 participants

5<sup>th</sup> *Tsuito Hoyo* (2011) Zojo-ji (Jodo Pure Land)  
171 participants and 68 priests



10<sup>th</sup> *Tsuito Hoyo* (2016) 137 participants



5<sup>th</sup> *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:

## Is it a “Sin”? Is it “Bad Karma”?

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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 浄土極楽) 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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- 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



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





# International Roundtable on Buddhist Psychology, Psycho-Spiritual Counseling, and Chaplaincy Training Bangkok March 12-16, 2019





# Public Symposium: Overcoming Contradictions in Psychotherapeutic & Spiritual Development in Buddhism

## Bangkok September 24, 2023





# 3rd International Conference on International Buddhist Psychotherapy and Suicide Prevention Bangkok November 26-27, 2023





**Concepts & Practices in Chaplaincy:  
A 3-day Workshop for Buddhist Counselors & Caregivers  
September 29-October 1, 2023 Thailand**





# Korea Japan Cooperative Study Group on Suicide and Self-Death May 28-31, 2024



Rev. Tomatsu joining seminar at Kodosan temple with members of the local and national governments



Interfaith training in counseling with Pure Land, Zen and Korean Protestant priests in Kyoto



Rev. Fujio explaining his counseling methods at his temple in Yokosuka



自殺・自死防止韓国・日本交流研究会  
Korea Japan Cooperative Study Group on Suicide and Self-Death

日程: 2024.05.28 - 08.01 場所: 日本東京・横浜・横浜駅・京都・大阪

主催: 韓国東国大生死文化産業研究所・国際仏教心理治療自殺予防連帯(IBPSP)・孝道山寺共同



## Closing the Circle

Tera Energy: Buddhist Temples providing clean energy for social renewal

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- ❁ Rev. Ryogo Takemoto (1977), a suicide prevention priest from the Jodo Shin Pure Land denomination in Kyoto, started this company in 2018 to rebuild community and get at the root of the suicide problem in human isolation
- ❁ returning of 2.5% of the electrical charge to the temple provider, which will need to then show their plan of using these returns on a social (welfare) activity, like building a cafeteria for local children or developing a plan for community restoration for the future.”



おてらのでんき

～こころ豊かに、安心なみらいへ～



TERA Energy