

From Disconnection (*mu-en*) to  
Interconnection (*yu-en*):  
A Buddhist Path through Rural Decline,  
Migrant Laborers, Poverty & Homelessness

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# Depopulation, Poverty, and Suicide in Rural Japan



Rev. Shunei Hakamakata  
(Soto Zen), Abbot of Gessho-ji  
Temple, Fujisato-cho, Akita  
Founder of the Association for  
Thinking about Mind and Life

- By 2055 population of Japan will fall from 126 million to 90 million
- In 2011, Akita the 4<sup>th</sup> lowest level in average annual income.
- Fujisato-cho lowest wages of any town in Akita, average annual income of ¥1,462,000 (\$15,000), considered “working poor”.
- Increasing numbers, especially among the elderly, of “dying alone” (孤立死 *koritsu-shi*)
- Akita had highest suicide rate for 15 years running in 90s/00s & then 3 years 2015-17.
- Suicides peaked in 2003 at 44.6 to the national average of 25.5/100,000. In 2019, 22.1 tied for highest; national rate is 16.0
- among those of working age from 18 to 55 years old, Fujisato-cho had 113 people cut off social and cooperative exchanges=*hikikomori*.

# Structures of the “Disconnected Society” in Rural Japan

- 1964 Japan hosted the Olympics Games in Tokyo & Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda began a national drive to double personal incomes
- 1965 mechanized rice farming begins & communal labor ends
- Farmers driven to buy mechanized farming equipment & pay for new improved houses
- Need to concentrate labor for industrialization drove farmers to city to work in factories
- Only returned home during planting, harvesting, summer Obon festival, and New Year's = absentee father's
- as communal labor began to decline, the village became increasingly dispersed



# Culture Shift to the “Disconnected Society”

- *Shigoto* 仕事 originally a term to refer to the “work” of the community → a duty: communal rice planting, dike building, funeral preparations. → To refuse leads to ostracization from the community.
- *Kasegi* 稼ぎ term for outside work done for extra cash income → optional and individual
- In urban Japan, these terms flipped: *shigoto* is work you do for cash income *and* your communal and national duty to contribute to national prosperity. Family & community work is optional.
- Urban company replaces rural village as home and community
- Modern *Shigoto* as duty → Japan’s workaholic culture, *karoshi* 過労死
- Convenient 便利 & Disposable 使い捨てる Culture:  
optimization of human desire and infantilization of character,  
wanting it quick and easy and then throwing it away in the end,  
*Not just things but people & relationships*





- In 2000, founded the Association for Thinking about Mind and Life, a suicide prevention group, in his town of Fujisato-cho.
- In 2003, established a café called *Yottetamore* in the back of the city hall in the lobby of the Three Generations Exchange Center.
- created a *Yottetamore akachochin* Bar in the evenings for men who work all day



# Disposable Culture & Disposable Labor

- Japan's two-tiered work force:  
1) an elite class of highly paid employees at top companies and 2) a subclass of laborers who work for less pay, have less job security, and receive fewer benefits.

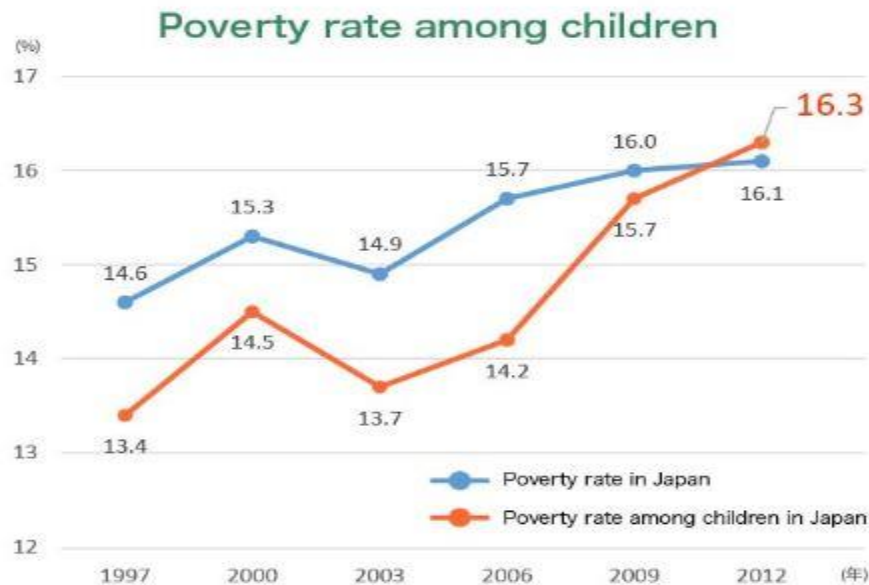


Rev. Tetsuen Nakajima  
(Shingon) activist for  
nuclear workers in Fukui

- Since late 1960s, Kamagasaki neighborhood of Osaka a dumping ground for men with drug and alcohol addiction, ex-convicts, and looking for construction jobs with few questions. It has also been a hiring spot for Japan's nuclear industry for decades. *Reuters*
- rural communities that host nuclear power plants also hire local laborers who struggle to find other work in depopulated areas.
- Since start of nuclear boom in 1970s, Japan's utilities have relied on temporary workers for maintenance and plant repair jobs. Often paid in cash with little training and no follow-up health screening. *Reuters*
- Of roughly 83,000 workers at Japan's 18 commercial nuclear power plants, 88 percent were contract workers in 2010. At the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant, 89 percent of the 10,303 workers during that period were contractors. *NY Times*

# From Boom to Bust: Rising Underemployment & Poverty in Japan

- In 1984, nonregular employees accounted for 15.3% of the Japanese workforce; rose gradually to 33.7% in 2009 and stood at 38.3% in 2019. Among the young and educated, ages 25-34, during the period of 1990 to 2017, irregular labor for women increased from 28.2% to 38.9% while for men it increased from 4.3% to 15.3%. In 2017, 55% of women were irregular employees.
- child poverty rate for working single-parent households in Japan has stood in the mid 50% for the last two decades, the highest among OECD nations, compared with 32 percent in the U.S.



Rev.  
Hidehito  
Okochi  
(Jodo Pure  
Land)  
local and  
international  
activist for  
children's  
rights



## Temple Snack Club (お寺おやつクラブ *otera-oyatsu kurabu*) for children of single-parent families living in poverty

- 1 in 7 children are in some sort of economic need.
- Rev. Matsushima Seiro 松島靖朗, a Jodo Pure Land denomination priest at Anyo-ji temple 安養寺 in Nara prefecture.
- By 2022, there were some 1,800 temples all over Japan involved in Temple Snack Club activities.
- core of the work is redistributing the food offerings that temples get from their lay members to needy children and their families
- Partnering with not only non-religious NGOs but also local city governments
- New “Buddhist” social ethic? They have discovered that there are actually many people in Japan who want to help others but do not necessarily know how to.





# Homelessness & Poverty in Urban Japan

Rev. Akinori Takase  
Jodo Pure Land Denomination



# The Homeless in Japan

- Tokyo homeless are clustered in the Ueno & Sanya areas of Northeast Tokyo that started as refugee areas after WWII and then became “day laborers ghettos” (*yoseba* 寄せ場) to find work and live (Levinson 2004)





# The Homeless in Japan

- In 2003, 25,296 nationwide homeless; mostly single men day laborers; 2/3 in their 50s-60s
- In 2018, 4,977 nationwide homeless (Tokyo 1,242; Osaka 1,110); 95.2% are men, now in 60s-70s;
- HOW? increase in government shelters and halfway houses PLUS previously unqualified day laborers getting older and qualifying for state pension
- REALLY? Government surveys done during daylight hours based on those who “look homeless”.
- IN FACT: Toko University ongoing survey estimates 2.5X the official 4,977.

# The Homeless in Japan

Do not use available public welfare programs; WHY?

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

Precarious existence

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

Neglected by public

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



# Religious Involvement

- NPO and faith based organizations help them. Most 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 Ninsho 忍性 [a.k.a Ryokan 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
  - Social welfare facilities were 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
  - Who would 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 “One Spoonful” Association

Since 2009 by Jodo Pure  
Land priests

## 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” (*ko-eki* 公益) activities 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 (re: the Buddhist chaplain who practices “deep listening”)

# Funeral Services

- Origin of the organization
- In 2008, Shinjuku homeless association requested Rev. Gakugen Yoshimizu of Kosho-in Temple 光照院 in Sanya to create a grave for the homeless
- Grave of Human Bonds (*yui-no-haka* 結の墓) →
- New graves being offered for other *mu-en* people, like LGBT, who are thrown out of families and family grave plots



“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 Graves for the Homeless at Kosho-in Temple



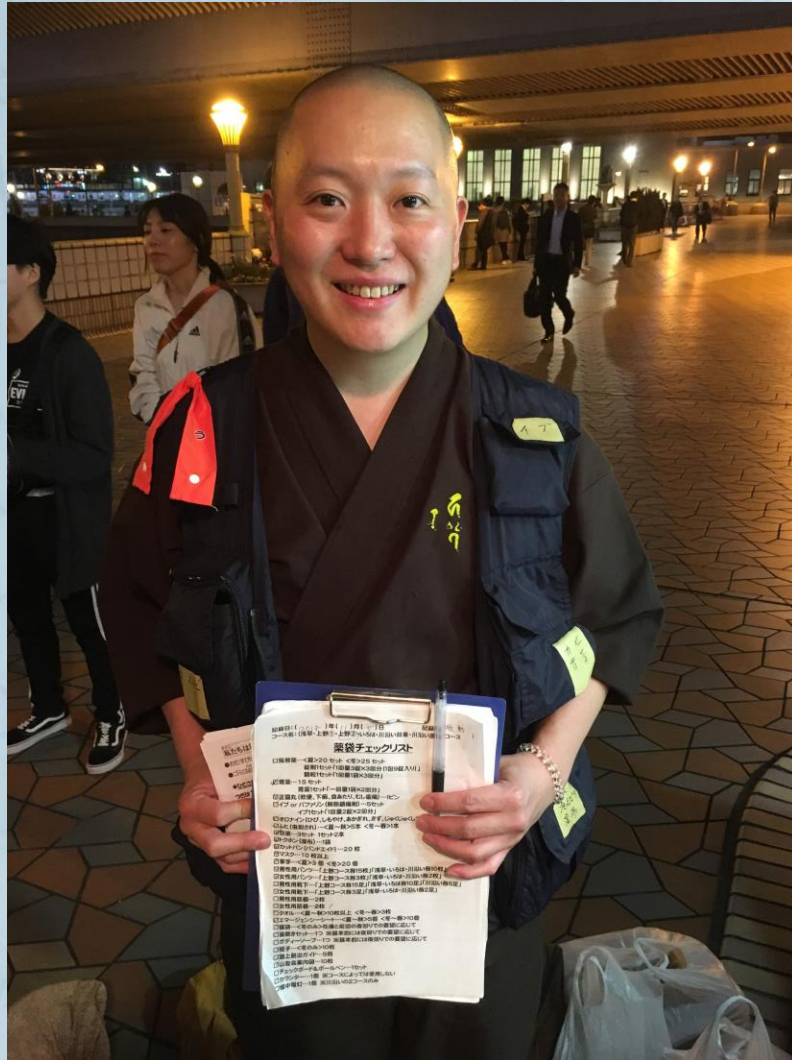
Kannon Bodhisattva wearing a cross



Gravestone made by Christian NGO 2015



Distribution of onigiri, medicine, and other essentials twice a month, 1st and 3rd Monday night with “patrol” style in Asakusa 浅草, Sanya 山谷, and Ueno 上野 areas



If needed, they inform and assist about public assistance, free clinics, and other support systems



Rev. Gakugen Yoshimizu, abbot of Kosho-in Temple



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



# Being “with” vs. Treating as “other”

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

Rev. Yoshiki  
Noda on left  
(Rinzai Zen)  
training to be a  
Buddhist  
chaplain.  
Became leader  
in Temple  
Snack Club  
movement



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 a 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



# Rice Donation Project 米一升運動



- Rice was first acquired through local government food banks
- After the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, emergency aid temple networks started to offer rice donations
- Tohoku rice project (Northern 6 prefectures) gave 1 ton between Dec 2010 - Jan 2011
- “Ancestors” of these migrant workers from the rural areas reconnect through this donation (yu-en 有縁)



# Conclusion

- Funeral support: as religious professionals they help restore self-esteem, hope, humanity, & new human bonds (*yu-en* 有緣)
- 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
- Promotion for donation & social mobilization: Connecting priests 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
- Question: Does their work have any impact on structural issues of poverty and homelessness? Could they do more/do different?

# Revival of the Monastery

- Japanese Buddhism is seen as corrupt for the laicization of the monastic Sangha. The Jodo Pure Land tradition helped create this situation by completely de-emphasizing practicing the monastic Vinaya 戒律 back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century
- In 2022, Rev. Yoshimizu received support to turn his hereditary temple family (寺族 jizoku) into a small monastery with a group of 4 celibate monks as a *sangha* 僧伽
- “As a nonmarried person (or perhaps I could not get married?), I thought it would be good to have temples that nurture monks without being bound by blood, that is, temples that are not hereditary temples.





# Returning Back Home



- ❖ Grew up in rural Wakayama
- ❖ Resonated with Rev. Hakamata in Akita
- ❖ Participated in Hitosaji
- ❖ Studied Buddhist Holistic Development (*kai-hotsu* 開発) in Sri Lanka
- ❖ Established the Amrita Social Enterprise to redevelop her home area to provide opportunities for young people to move back from the cities
- ❖ “harmony” (*wa* 和) that is tolerant to diversity not negating individuality

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