

RECONSTRUCTING PRIESTLY IDENTITY AND ROLES  
AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM  
IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

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*The Development of Socially Engaged Buddhism in Japan*

Good governance, poverty, and discrimination may not seem like typically ‘Buddhist’ themes, but we do find these topics in some of the earliest teachings of the Buddha (Swaris 2008). The connection between Buddhist teachings and practice and issues of social justice is today referred to as socially engaged Buddhism. Although there is this perennial aspect to it dating back to the Buddha, socially engaged Buddhism has been defined and can be properly circumscribed as a movement that began in response to the influences and dislocations of western colonialization and modernization a little more than one hundred years ago (Queen 1996, 20). Although Japan never came under direct colonial rule, the forces of the colonial era in Asia had a major influence on it. In 1868, the so called ‘Meiji Restoration’ brought an end to the international isolation of the Tokugawa feudal dynasty and created a more modern type of representative government, albeit based in the ‘restorative’ ancient mythology of the divine rule of the emperor. At this time, Shinto ideas and rituals were co-opted and fused into a new form of state religion and national ideology, while the control and patronage of Buddhism as almost a state religion under the Tokugawa dynasty was swiftly ended, accompanied by a brief period of severe Buddhist persecution (*haibutsu kishaku* 排仏毀釈).

Japan’s major Buddhist denominations subsequently initiated a wide variety of reform and revitalization strategies to prove their usefulness to the new Japanese nation state. While local conditions were different, these revitalization movements in Japanese Buddhism were similar to ones that took place at the same time in Sri Lanka led by Henry Steel Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala,<sup>1</sup> who are seen as the forerunners of today’s socially engaged Buddhist movement (Queen 1996). Both these and other such movements in Buddhist Asia sought not only to address the influence of Christianity and modern scientific and material values but also to revitalize their own Buddhist traditions that had grown decadent under centuries of feudal patronage. A number of different eminent monks in Japan, like Shaku Unshō (Shingon – Tantric) and Fukuda Gyōkai (Jōdo – Pure Land), as well as laymen, like Daidō Chōan (Sōtō Zen), addressed the decline in monastic standards and practice by calling for a return to a more ‘original Buddhism’ (*genchi bukkyō* 現地仏教) through the stronger practice of both lay and monastic precepts.

Further, in parallel to the secular leaders advocating modern institutions of this time,

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, Olcott and Dharmapala visited Japan together in 1889 and 1891 to promote the unification of all Buddhist traditions. Although they were initially received by large crowds, the major Japanese denominations used especially Olcott’s conversion to Buddhism as a Caucasian westerner to prove the superiority of their own nationalist form of Mahayana Buddhism over Christianity (Yoshinaga 2009).

there was a group of Buddhist writers and scholars like Kiyozawa Manshi (Jōdo Shin – True Pure Land), Inoue Enryō (Jōdo Shin), Suzuki Daisetsu (Rinzai Zen), and Shaku Sōen (Sōtō Zen) who sought to rearticulate Buddhism in modern ways by referring to western philosophy and thought. For the most part, however, their writings did not seek to create new modern interpretations of Buddhism but rather reaffirmed conservative, traditional Japanese Buddhist understandings, like ‘discriminating equality’ (*sabetsu byōdō* 差別平等), retributive karma, filial piety, ‘repaying benefits’ (*hō-on* 報恩) to the nation and emperor, and the use of meditation for armed combat (Davis 1992, 39; Victoria 2006, 182–88). In this way, mainstream Japanese Buddhism’s response to the era was largely reactionary in developing its own nationalist theology for supporting rising Japanese colonialism and militaristic nationalism (Davis 1992, 171).

However, as the changes and dislocations of modernization in the Meiji period grew and developed around the turn of the century, more progressive and radical responses from lay Japanese Buddhists and individual priests also emerged. The New Buddhist Movement, which began in the 1890s, was made up of young, middle class, and largely unaffiliated Buddhists, such as Furukawa Rōsen and Sakaino Kōyō, who denounced the use of Buddhist rituals by the old denominations for ensuring good fortune and ‘repaying benefits’ to the state and the emperor instead of the Three Treasures of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. They also had a keen social conscience, specifically in addressing the increasing dislocations of industrial capitalist development, such as the rising gap between rich and poor and the exploitation of workers, women, and social outcasts known as *burakumin* 部落民 (ibid., 179).

A small but dedicated number of priests also engaged in such campaigns for the socially exploited and became directly involved in the socialist and anarchist movements. Uchiyama Gudō (Sōtō Zen) and Takagi Kenmei (Jōdo Shin) are two significant examples of priests who thought that the Buddhist Sangha provided an ideal social model for communal lifestyle. Their activism, however, was met by swift resistance from state authorities, and both died in prison after their purported involvement in the High Treason Incident of 1909 (*taigyaku jiken* 大逆事件) (Victoria 2006).

A final, short-lived but progressive movement that succeeded these was the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism (Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei 新興仏教青年同盟) founded in 1931. Like the New Buddhists, they were young laypeople from largely unaffiliated backgrounds who criticized the conservative and outdated Buddhism of the old denominations, were anti-capitalist and promoted a socialism based on the Buddhist Sangha model, and advocated international cooperation rather than nationalist confrontation as a path to world peace. Their leader was a remarkable Nichiren lay activist named Seno’o Girō who had come to reject the reactionary nationalism of his ‘Nichirenism’ (*Nichirenshugi* 日蓮主義) mentors Tanaka Chigaku and Honda Nisshō. However, he too was imprisoned after only a few years of activism and forced to recount all his views, though he did re-emerge after the war to continue his Buddhist activism for socialist agendas (Kawanami 1999, 110, 116; Lai 1984). These movements, however small and temporary, parallels the ferment of radical Buddhist Socialism in countries like Burma and Sri Lanka at this time.

It is also interesting to note that in response to oppressive colonial regimes Buddhist movements in other Asian countries also developed a strong sense of ethnic nationalism

like the reactionary Japanese Buddhists we have profiled above. Although aspects of these movements have become part of a post-war ethnic nationalist Buddhism in places like Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, strong progressive strands have also developed. These have been characterized by non-violent forms of civil disobedience, both as anti-colonial movements and later as anti-war and pro-democracy movements. Because such movements could not develop fully in Japan in the pre-war era nor have any meaningful impact in the decades following the war, many people have felt that Japan has lacked a true socially engaged Buddhist movement. However, it is still important to note the self-critical attitude toward ethnic nationalism and vision of an ecumenical, international Buddhist peace movement by the few dedicated engaged Buddhists of this period.

In the immediate post-war era, the continuation of armed conflict either for national independence, as result of Cold War conflict, or for democratic regime change kept many Buddhists in Asia deeply engaged with political and social issues. Many Japanese Buddhists also became involved in the movement for global peace in the face of the escalating tensions of the Cold War. However, since Japanese Buddhism had been deeply complicit in the Pacific War effort, many progressives inside and outside of Japan doubted the sincerity of this sudden about face (Victoria 2006). Indeed, it would not be until 1987 that any of the traditional Buddhist denominations came forward with an official apology for their wartime complicity. It has taken now more than fifty years since the end of the war for five of the major traditional denominations to make any such substantive declarations.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, many of the new Buddhist denominations that have roots in the conservative and nationalist Nichiren teachings of the Meiji Period have continued to develop programs in peace dialogue and exchange, if not actual social and political activism.

In this way, the legacy of nationalist complicity and lack of substantive reform from the Meiji and pre-war eras has continued to haunt traditional Japanese Buddhism in the post-war era. There seems to be an inability or lack of concern to engage in critical social issues facing the country. Furthermore, the changing landscape of modern Japanese society has increasingly marginalized Buddhist temples and priests from their central roles in the nexus of traditional rural community life. Specifically, during the mass shift of the Japanese population to urban eras over the past sixty years, many Japanese have abandoned their traditional family temples in the countryside. Curiously, the traditional denominations have been unable to coordinate the transfer of temple membership to affiliated denominational temples in these urban areas, which for some denominations is due to the lack of such temples in urban areas. While there have been a number of attempts at internal reform and restructuring, most of these efforts have not led to any substantive change in the nature of traditional Japanese Buddhism (Covell 2006), which maintains its antiquated style of ancestor veneration based around funerals and memorial services or what is now pejoratively dubbed as ‘funeral Buddhism’ (*sōshiki bukkyō* 葬式仏教). The increasing modernization and professionalization of social institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and even funeral homes, and the subsequent loss of social roles for priests coupled with outdated forms of monastic education based on the study of ritual and doctrine has meant that priests are no longer

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<sup>2</sup> Both the Higashi (1987) and Nishi (1992) branches of the Jōdo Shin denomination, the Sōtō Zen (1992) denomination, and the Myōshinji and Tenryūji branches of the Rinzai Zen denomination (2001) (Victoria 2006) as well as the Jōdo denomination (2008) [http://www.jodo.or.jp/report/jodo\\_heiwa.html](http://www.jodo.or.jp/report/jodo_heiwa.html).

regarded as public intellectuals and opinion leaders in Japanese society. In sum, most Japanese Buddhist priests themselves will admit that the Japanese Buddhist world is very inward looking and lacking in confidence to confront mainstream society.

### *The NGO Era*

It was in response to these conditions that the Buddhist Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) movement emerged in the early 1980s. Organizations such as the Renge International Volunteer Association (ARTIC, Shingon), the Shanti Volunteer Association<sup>3</sup> (SVA, Sōtō Zen), the Buddhist Aid Center (BAC, Nichiren), Relief, Assist, Comfort, Kindness (RACK, Rinzai Zen), and the AYUS Network of Buddhists Volunteers on International Cooperation (predominantly Jōdo & Jōdo Shin) were created by small groups of priests outside of the confines of denominational management or influence (Watts 2004). Fundamentally, these priests were seeking a way to express their frustration with the inwardness of their denominations and, in turn, to revitalize the identity and social roles of priests. They were outwardly looking enough to notice the international stature that the new Buddhist groups had gained through their peace activities. They were also becoming aware of not only the remarkable non-violent political protest campaigns of Buddhists in countries like Vietnam and Cambodia but also the new kinds of responses to modernization and economic development by Buddhists in places like Sri Lanka and Thailand. Japanese Buddhist NGOs attempted to link to these issues through creating emergency aid and social welfare programs in these countries.

One of the pioneers of this movement was Rev. Arima Jitsujō (1936–2000) (Sōtō Zen), the founder of the most prominent of these NGOs, the Shanti Volunteer Association, which has worked primarily in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. He serves as a link to the radical, pre-war Buddhist activists, in that he became socially engaged through his awareness of *burakumin* discrimination perpetuated by his own Sōtō Zen denomination<sup>4</sup> (Arima 2003). He was able to articulate, in a way that most Japanese priests are unable, how traditional Buddhist teachings connect with modern social problems, and he also introduced Japanese Buddhists to socially engaged Buddhists in other countries, like the development monks of Thailand (Arima 1993). Arima's contribution was critical, because Buddhist NGO priests have continued to struggle to articulate the kinds of Buddhist-based critiques of society and alternative visions that socially engaged Buddhists have in other countries. If there has been any criticism of this movement, it is that the largely material aid projects of these Buddhist NGOs do not differ in any substantive way from secular NGOs, calling into question the need to even declare them as 'Buddhist' NGOs.<sup>5</sup>

Up to this point in the post-war era, Japanese Buddhist social engagement had been largely limited to international activities for peace and humanitarian aid while lacking a

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<sup>3</sup> It was originally named the Sōtō-shū Volunteer Association. It changed its name after qualifying for direct funding support from the Japanese government, which technically cannot support religious organizations.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this issue, see Bodiford 1996.

<sup>5</sup> One of the few exceptions in Japan to this generalization is the work of Rev. Ōkōchi Hidehito, a Jōdo priest living in Tokyo and co-founder of the Buddhist NGO AYUS. Unlike his contemporaries, his experience doing social welfare work in Southeast Asia motivated him to develop a comprehensive structural analysis of global issues and to launch a variety of social ventures within Japan from the basis of his temple to confront Japan's complicity in as well as victimization from globalization (Williams 2009).

critical stance towards its own domestic issues. However, the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble and the great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 created a watershed moment for socially engaged Buddhism in Japan to make a new shift inward. The well-known paralysis of governmental bodies in responding to the earthquake in a timely manner led to a huge and spontaneous outpouring of relief work by common Japanese, including many Buddhist temples and Buddhist NGOs, who to this point had been largely focused on ‘international cooperation activities.’<sup>6</sup> In responding to the crisis, Buddhist priests, temples, and organizations had a renewed experience of their traditional roles in providing relief to the common public. This experience combined with the increase in social problems during the post-bubble depression made Buddhist NGOs and Buddhist priests in general not only more sensitive to domestic issues but also more confident that they could offer something to the average person besides funerary rituals (Arima 2003).

The development of the domestically focused Non-Profit Organization (NPO) movement<sup>7</sup> and an increased consciousness of engaging in domestic social problems since 1998 parallels the present, full onslaught of social dislocations brought about by the economic downturn of the 1990s. While we can identify individual priests and general Buddhists engaging in similar problems back in the 1990s, there has been a marked increase of engagement since roughly 2004. In turn, we are seeing the emergence of a new young generation of Buddhist priests, both male and female, who are taking the Buddhist NGO movement to another stage. This present generation of young Buddhist priests has grown up in post-bubble Japan, filled with community and family breakdown, alienation, and the deterioration of human relationships. In this way, their frustration with the continuing inwardness of the traditional Buddhist world and their own crisis of identity as priests is even stronger than that of the Buddhist NGO priests. The heightening of these tensions has begun to express itself in the establishment of new organizations and networks devoted to Buddhist reform and revival, which are in some ways reminiscent of the pre-war movements. Below we will profile a few of the most significant and conspicuous of these groups.

- *Bōzu* (Priests) Be Ambitious:<sup>8</sup> The group began in 2003, ironically, out of the efforts of a lay university professor named Ueda Noriyuki of the Tokyo Institute of Technology. He has become a well-known social figure through the publication of a popular book on exceptional priests involved in society (Ueda 2004) and numerous public appearances. The group, however, is largely organized and self-run by young priests, both male and female, who arrange bi-annual, all day seminars and workshops on a variety of themes such as: suicide prevention, confronting the problems of Funeral Buddhism, the social role and potential of the temple, and the identity of the priest. These meetings are conspicuous for attracting priests of all ages from a wide variety of denominations and also for their formats that focus less on speeches and more on workshops and close inter-personal contact with the participants.

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<sup>6</sup> In the Japanese context, NGO has been defined and usually refers specifically to a group engaged in ‘international cooperation activities’ (*kokusai kyōryoku katsudō* 国際協力活動) (Shimizu 1999, 699).

<sup>7</sup> In 1998, the Non-Profit Organization (NPO) Law, amongst other things, enabled NGOs and NPOs to raise funds by appealing to the tax write-off afforded to donors – a fundamental legal right that is essential to the financial viability of most non-profits around the world – and thus to develop more rapidly.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www5.ocn.ne.jp/~seishoji/bouzbeiframe.html>.

- Tera Net Sangha:<sup>9</sup> Begun in late 2007, this is a group coordinated by a young Jōdo Shin priest named Nakashita Daiki, who previously worked at the Jōdo Shin initiated Vihara Hospice in Niigata prefecture and presently works supporting the homeless in Tokyo. Tera Net Sangha is a network of priests, temple related persons, graveyard managers, tombstone merchants, morticians, and other such persons trying to reform the role of Buddhism in the daily life of the people by reforming the Funeral Buddhism industry. The group has general meetings three to four times a year. Although it is moving slowly, the very creation of such a self-critical working group on this issue represents a major move forward within the Buddhist world itself.
- The *Rinbutsuken* Institute of Engaged Buddhism:<sup>10</sup> Begun in early 2008, this group runs on largely the impetus and energy of Rev. Jin Hitoshi, the director of the Buddhist based *Zenseikyō* Foundation for Youth and Child Welfare, where he is also very engaged in suicide and youth issues. The Institute evolved from the Engaged Buddhist Study Group begun by Jin and a few other Buddhist NGO priests and staff in 2004 that would meet every two months to discuss issues in engaged Buddhism, often with noted foreign socially engaged Buddhists. The Institute has held three major public symposiums focused on the ‘public benefit character’ (*kōeki sei* 公益性) of the Japanese Buddhist temple and the meaning of ‘Buddhist development’ (*kaihōtsu* 開発) for Japan, which included prominent foreign socially engaged Buddhist leaders A.T. Ariyaratne, Joanna Macy, and Phra Phaisan Visalo.
- Tōkai-Kantō Network of Women and Buddhism: Established in 1994, this network well predates the previous three groups. Although still small and marginal, it marks a slowly growing trend to confront the huge issue of patriarchy in Japanese Buddhism. The network also is confronting the problem of temple wives (*jizoku* 寺族) and their ambiguous status and rights. Kawahashi Noriko, Associate Professor at the Nagoya Institute of Technology and also a Sōtō Zen *jizoku*, is a noted participant and writer on these issues (Kawahashi 2003).

One of the ways that priests have tried to cope with these identity issues is by actively creating new identities through social engagement and reviving their temples as community centers. In the past five years, there has been a growing movement of holding new types of ‘events’ (*ibento*) at temples covering a wide range of activities from concerts to bazaars and flea markets to therapeutic workshops. While in some ways such events do not seem to address the more fundamental problems of traditional Buddhist denominations, they do show a sense of trying to rebuild community networks of which the Buddhist temple had been the center. In general, Japanese Buddhism still lags far behind the diverse and creative developments that have emerged elsewhere in the Buddhist world over the last twenty to thirty years, such as Buddhist environmental movements in both the West and Asia, the fusion of trends in alternative and holistic education with Buddhism, the application of Buddhist practices for dying in the global hospice movement, and so on. However, the seeds planted in the Buddhist NGO

<sup>9</sup> <http://teranet.web.fc2.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.zenseikyo.or.jp/japa/thinktank.html>.

movement and the experiences of the 1995 Hanshin earthquake appear to be sprouting in a recent increase of creative social engagement by Buddhist priests concerning various pressing issues in Japan today. The following profiles are some of the more notable examples:

- The Vihara Movement: Groundbreaking work was done in the area of Buddhist terminal care in the mid 1980s by two Jōdo Shin priests, Rev. Tamiya Masashi and Rev. Tashiro Shunkō. The movement began as a series of study groups about spiritual care for the elderly and dying, and then developed into actual training for spiritual care professionals. Finally, two Buddhist based hospices were established, one at Nagaoka Nishi Hospital<sup>11</sup> in Niigata in 1993 and the other as the Asoka Vihara Clinic<sup>12</sup> in Kyoto in 2008. A third Buddhist hospice was established in 2004 by the lay Buddhist denomination Rishshō Kōseikai 立正佼成会 as part of their Kosei Hospital complex in Tokyo<sup>13</sup>. Similar such Vihara study and care groups have been established by an independent group of Nichiren priests called the Nichiren-shū Vihara Network<sup>14</sup> in 1994 and by a group of Sōtō Zen priests in the northern region of Tohoku in 1992.<sup>15</sup> This latter group was initiated by Rev. Hakamata Toshihide, a priest actively involved in suicide prevention work who will be profiled in detail later in this chapter. More recently established groups in this area are: the Professional Association for Spiritual Care and Health (PASCH)<sup>16</sup> in 2005 by Buddhists, Christians, and non-religious persons to develop and train chaplains; the Japan Association for Buddhist Nursing and Vihara Studies<sup>17</sup> (Bukkyō kango bihara gakkai 仏教看護ビハーラ学会) in 2004, and the Ōjō 往生 and Death Project<sup>18</sup> in 2006 by the Jōdo Shū Research Institute.
- Tera Net EN:<sup>19</sup> Begun in 2004 and coordinated by the aforementioned Rev. Jin Hitoshi through the Zenseikyō Foundation for Youth and Child Welfare, it is a network of temples across Japan that mostly deals with youth issues, such as school drop outs, juvenile delinquents, and shut ins (*hikikomori* 引き籠り). One of the main purposes of the network is to provide portals for counseling whereby especially families facing these problems can better connect to resources in their own region. While Rev. Jin runs a regular telephone counseling service out of the Zenseikyō office in Tokyo, the network also features some of the most exceptional socially engaged Buddhist priests in Japan, such as Rev. Noda Daito<sup>20</sup> in Shikoku, who run shelters for the young out of their own temples. The network also holds symposiums to educate the public on these issues, training programs in counseling skills, and study tours amongst members.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.sutokukai.or.jp/nagaokanishi-hp/kannwakea.html>. (Taniyama 2012)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.asokavihara.jp/>. (Sengoku 2012)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.kosei-hp.or.jp/hospital/consultation020.html>. (Hayashi 2012)

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.nvn.cc/>.

<sup>15</sup> <http://vihara.main.jp/>.

<sup>16</sup> <http://web.mac.com/tanimjp/iWeb/PASCH/Welcome.html>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://jabnvs.com/index.html>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.jsri.jp/English/Main.html>. (Watts&Tomatsu 2012)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.teranet-en.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.kappa.or.jp/>.

- The ‘One Spoonful’ Association (Hitosaji-no-kai):<sup>21</sup> Begun in 2009, this is a group of young, mostly Jōdo denomination, priests and volunteers who do street patrols for homeless people in the Asakusa area of Tokyo. Unlike a soup kitchen which receives and feeds the homeless, these priests walk the streets to find the homeless and provide them with basic medicine and small meals that they prepare themselves from donations of rice to the temple. Some of the priests involved in this activity are also doing suicide prevention work, and have connection with the aforementioned Nakashita Daiki,<sup>22</sup> who is working on the relationship of suicide with poverty and works with a local NGO on feeding the homeless in Shinjuku, Tokyo.
- Association of Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem (Jisatsu taisaku-ni torikumu sōryo-no-kai 自殺対策に取り組む僧侶の会):<sup>23</sup> Begun in late 2007, this group has assembled a variety of priests who individually came to work on the issue of suicide prevention. It will be the focus of the second half of this paper.

These movements are significant in the Japanese Buddhism landscape for three reasons. First, the priests show a strong sense of self-awareness and self-criticism in addressing the character and identity of their own Buddhist institutions. Second, they pair this critical perspective with an outward looking awareness of real social issues and the willingness to risk their own comfort in getting intimately involved with the suffering of people on spiritual and emotional levels. Finally, they indicate a substantive change from activities by generally isolated individuals to cooperative like-minded organizations and networks, which could be described as a socially engaged Buddhist movement if it continues to develop along these lines. In the second half of this paper, we provide a more in depth illustration of these trends through the issue of suicide.

### *Suicide as a Flashpoint of the Japanese Social Crisis*

March 1998 was marked by a sudden and disturbing upturn in suicides in Japan.<sup>24</sup> March is the end of the fiscal year in Japan when budgets are reviewed and employee redeployment is very high. 1997 had brought the Asian economic crisis that hit some of Japan’s closest trading partners, such as Indonesia and Thailand, particularly hard. On the heels of this crisis was Japan’s own banking meltdown in November 1998 with the dissolution of some of Japan’s longest standing financial institutions, like Yamaichi Securities.

Looking back, we see a 26% spike in suicides from the previous year; 24,391 in 1997 to 32,863 in 1998. The total number of suicides has remained stubbornly over 30,000 for the past eleven years (highest 34,427 in 2003, lowest 31,042 in 2001), ranking Japan well above the rest of the G-7 nations at a rate of 25 suicides per 100,000 people, compared to the respective rates of France 17.8, Germany 13.0, and the United States

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<sup>21</sup> <http://hitosaji.jp/>.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.inochi.or.jp/>.

<sup>23</sup> <http://homepage3.nifty.com/bouzsanga/>.

<sup>24</sup> Suicide figures by month for 1998 are: January: 2,100, February: 2,300, March: 3,300, April: 2,900, and May: 4,000. In general, over the past eleven years, suicide spikes by between 500–1,000 people in this March period of employee turnover (Honkawa Yutaka).

11.0. The major at risk group is, not surprisingly, the unemployed at roughly 47% of all suicides. Employees (24%) and the self-employed (13%) are also high-risk groups; and, somewhat disturbingly, bureaucratic managers and administrators are one of the lowest at risk groups at only 2%. The most at risk age group are middle aged men from their 40s to 60s, whose rate is about 4.5 times higher than women in the same age group. However, Japanese women commit suicide at the third highest rate in the world as compared to Japanese men who do so at the eighth highest rate. The youth and the elderly are also very susceptible to suicide, and suicide is now the most common form of death for people in Japan under the age of thirty (*Summary Data on Suicide for Mid Year 2008*).

The Center to Support Measures Against Suicide (Jisatsu taisaku shien senta 自殺対策支援センター), more commonly known as Life Link, is a major NPO involved in suicide prevention and public awareness that has published an extensive report on the problem. It has outlined a classic pattern in suicide that begins with economic and work related problems, like bankruptcy, overwork and exhaustion, poor worker relationships due to competition, and anxiety around change in the workplace. These strains cause further health problems, mounting debt, and the breakdown of family relationships. The eventual result is various lifestyle hardships, alienation, depression, and eventually suicide (Jisatsu taisaku shien senta 2008, 21). This particular analysis focuses primarily on economic and work related issues and does not directly address the high rates of suicide in the young and elderly. Although these economic triggers may be an essential key to the problem in Japan, they are also a reflection of deep structural problems in Japanese social relationships.

The core of this structural problem is the breakdown of Japanese communities and social networks. As noted in the opening discussion, the mass shift of the Japanese population to urban areas since the end of World War II has dismantled many rural social networks, especially those based around the Buddhist temple. For a period, large corporations and new religious organizations, especially mass Buddhist based ones, provided new social networks in urban areas. The Japanese government, primarily under the direction of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), relied heavily on these institutions and the extended family to provide social safety nets, while spending less on social welfare institutions than most European countries. However, the company as a community and almost family type container has eroded since the 1990s with the restructuring of the once heralded lifetime employment system to the present heavy reliance on part-time labor with no benefits and little security (*Asahi Shimbun* 2006). The extended family has also become diluted through urbanization, divorce, and the effects of communications and entertainment technology to a state beyond the nuclear family, a type of post-modern 'dormitory family.' In this way, more and more people have lost the social networks that used to help them in times of need and have become dependent on the government social safety net system. This system is in increasing crisis with tax revenues down due to declining birth rates and expenses up with a rapidly aging population.

This deterioration of social networks, as reflected in the high rates of suicide amongst all groups, has had a huge impact on how Japanese form their sense of personal identity. The Japanese are of course well known for their thick, intimate, and sometimes closed communities based on a strong emphasis on harmony (*wa* 和) with others, self-sacrifice

for the group (*mushi* 無私), repaying the benefits of elders (*hō-on*), and dependence on others for support and care (*amaeru* 甘える). What this system lacked in individual autonomy, it made up for in intimacy – there was always someone who would notice and support you in times of crisis. In fact, it was such intense intimacy that necessitated the individual virtues of harmony, non-confrontation, and self-effacement, because there were so few boundaries between people.

However, since the end of World War II and especially in the last twenty years, there has been an growing emphasis among Japanese on the neo-classical economic values of self-determination (*jiko ketei* 自己決定) and self-responsibility (*jiko sekinin* 自己責任). The baby boomer generation of the late 1940s and 50s inculcated these values in their children as part of Japan's economic drive to recover from the war. These children have now come of age and have already passed these values onto a third generation as a source of identity formation. Furthermore, the gradual erosion of the seniority system in companies with a merit-based system has also instilled the values of taking personal responsibility for one's career and life rather than depending on others for mutual support and aid.

The problem has been not so much the rise of such values but the juxtaposition of them alongside the core Japanese values of harmony, cooperation, and self-sacrifice. For example, the combination of feelings towards needing to take personal charge for one's advancement in a company with the sense of needing to sacrifice for oneself for the advancement of the company leads to the Japanese tendency towards overwork and the phenomenon of death by overwork (*karōshi* 過労死). Further, the value of harmony (*wa*) means one should keep up an appearance of vigor and well being, even though the underlying ethic of the group is no longer one of cooperative mutual support but of competitive individual advancement. This creates intense stress and ultimately alienation, because there is no support coming from outside while from within there is withdrawal due to fear of being judged negatively. In such a situation, Japanese are still reluctant to reach out for help, because the tradition of intimate community was sensitive enough to personal distress to discourage the direct expression of it. Traditional internalized Japanese social values thus increase alienation in an era where intimate communities have for the most part disintegrated, and structural barriers to intimacy are much stronger because community must be sought out rather than inherited. For the young, especially, a lack of confidence ensues, because they have not been brought up in intimate relationships and social networks where conflict takes place but is resolved internally. Young Japanese generally do not know how to express themselves, and this leads to a high rate of social withdrawal (*hikikomori*). Meanwhile the elderly experience a sense of abandonment by younger generations no longer interested or willing to take the time to maintain social bonds.

As we have noted, traditional Buddhist temples used to form a major nexus for the social support networks of rural society. Like other systems for social support, such as the company and extended family, they too have lost their ability to sustain intimate relationships. As such, the young Buddhist priest, like the average young Japanese, also suffers from alienation and identity issues. These issues are exacerbated by the larger marginalization and alienation of temples and priests from mainstream, modern Japanese culture.

*The 'Suicide-Prevention Priests'*

As we noted earlier, some priests are confronting their own personal issues of alienation and the larger social marginalization of their denominations in creative identity formation through social engagement. One of the most conspicuous forms of this new wave of social engagement is suicide prevention. In the five short profiles<sup>25</sup> of priests working in suicide prevention that follow, we will catch a glimpse of how they have used their own struggles and personal crises as a basis for confronting the alienation of many others in wider society. In these profiles, we will see many of the themes that we have discussed come together. Like the progressive Buddhists of the pre-war era, these priests are confronting the dislocations of modernization through addressing the suffering of the common people most victimized by these forces. Furthermore, through this activism, they are seeking to redefine and revitalize the role of Buddhist priests in modern society, as well as the role of Buddhist temples and the larger Buddhist denominations. Although the latter two potentialities have not yet been fully realized, the work of these priests points to the rebuilding of social networks of support and intimacy based around the Buddhist temple.

*(a) The Salary-Man: Rev. Fujisawa Katsumi*

Rev. Fujisawa Katsumi is the abbot of Anraku-ji 安楽寺, a Jōdo Shin temple in Tokyo, and the Head Representative of the Association of Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem. Born in 1961, he is somewhat unusual for a Japanese priest in that he did not attend a Buddhist university and receive a degree in Buddhist studies, but rather graduated from one of Japan's top secular schools, Waseda University. As in other Buddhist countries, monastic education used to offer the highest form of public education in society, but now lags behind secular education. In Japan, a bright young priest will choose a stronger secular school over his own denomination's university. In this way, Rev. Fujisawa represents a small group of priests with top-level educations who have a wider view of society than the more typical inward looking priest educated by his own denomination. These priests may enter the professional world and stay somewhat aloof from temple life, as did Rev. Fujisawa who worked as a computer engineer in an IT company for twenty-three years after graduating.

During this time, he experienced first hand the hardships and dissatisfactions of the typical Japanese salary man, relating that,

[I]f a salary man faces a problem and cannot do his work well, he then develops a kind of inferiority complex. At this time, he never thinks about what kind of teaching Buddhism could provide; which was true even for me when I faced this situation. When my personal evaluation was low and inferiors humiliated me, I got depressed and asked myself, 'Why can't we develop human relationships well?' I had a feeling that Buddhist teachings had no direct connection to my situation. However, if there could appear at these times a priest who has concern and radiates a feeling of personal intimacy, I think Buddhism could become part of this world and not be aloof. If we could talk about real 'refuge temples' (*kakekomi-dera* 駆け込み寺)

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<sup>25</sup> Where not noted, all information and quotes in these profiles come from private interviews done with each individual priest by the four-man IBEC research team. The translations are by the authors.

込み寺), for example setting up a café or place to hang out in a temple that anyone could visit, I think it's possible. [We could] create a place to talk which can open up the heart and mind and which could apply not only to the suicide problem but to other situations, like in companies when people get humiliated.

While he was still working in his IT company, he began to train as a volunteer telephone counselor at the Tokyo Suicide Prevention Center (Tōkyō jisatsu bōshi senta 東京自殺防止センター). He chose this path rather than working out of his temple because he feels that,

[P]eople who are filled with anxiety, when walking past a temple, might suddenly feel like going in and confiding in the priest. But from the gate to the entrance seems far. In order to restore the temple as a community center there needs to be preparation. At this stage, telephone consulting is something we [priests] can do outside of the temple. (*Jimonkōryū* 2006a, 42)

In March 2006, Rev. Fujisawa quit his job in his company to attend full-time to the activities of his temple and to become increasingly active in the suicide issue. He was part of a petition campaign to demand for basic government legislation for suicide prevention, which passed in June 2006. He has also been one of the driving forces behind the Association of Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem and their attempts to both build a nationwide network of priests engaged in this issue and to expose and educate a society largely unaware of these priests' activities.

*(b) For the Greater Public: Rev. Maeda Yūsen*

Rev. Maeda Yūsen is the abbot of Shōsan-ji 正山寺, a Sōtō Zen temple in Tokyo and is the Vice Representative of the Association of Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem. Born in 1971, Rev. Maeda's background is also somewhat unusual. He is the third son of the abbot of a Shingon temple in northeast Tokyo. As his oldest brother was set to become successor to that temple, it was decided that he would take over an abandoned parishioner temple in southern Tokyo connected to his mother's family. This necessitated him to ordain and train in a different denomination, Sōtō Zen, than his father and brothers. While having certain reservations about his Sōtō Zen training experience, Rev. Maeda received a major influence from his father and the way his home temple was run – not as a typical parishioner (*danka* 檀家) temple focused on funerals but as a believer (*shinja* 信者) temple focused on the spiritual needs and interests of the members who visited the temple. In the world of Japanese Buddhism filled with priests who often show very little monastic comportment, Rev. Maeda maintains a stricter (yet open) comportment that he feels is a reciprocal duty for living off the fees and donations of his parishioners.

This particular background led Rev. Maeda, unlike Rev. Fujisawa and others involved in this issue, to base his work out of the temple. About eight years ago, he put up a poster outside the front gate of his temple saying, “We will listen carefully to what you have to say. Although it may seem a trivial matter to others, it is a serious problem for you.” Further indicating this gap between Rev. Maeda and the typical parishioner temple priest, a neighboring abbot challenged him once about the sign, saying it was unnecessary since parishioners assume they can come to the temple for such

consultation. However, Rev. Maeda felt such a sign was important to communicate with the everyday people in the area not connected with the temple as a parishioner. Indeed, the result was that people who had no connection to the temple came one after another to visit, and Rev. Maeda has developed regular (free of charge) consulting work at the temple and through a telephone call-in service.

In this same period, Rev. Maeda completed a five year course for gaining a license as a conversational therapist – a private course created by some top ranked doctors from Keio and Tokyo Universities called the Mental Care Cooperative Group (Mentaru Keya Kyōkai). The program has incredibly demanding standards with a certification rate of only 15%, as compared to 70% for normal clinical psychologists (*Jimonkōryū* 2006b, 87–88). Nationwide there are now more than 600 of these therapists, of which Rev. Maeda believes there are only three Buddhist priests. Ironically, when discussing his method of counseling with people, he eschews psychoanalytical models and methods because he feels they create a wall between the clinician (as ‘normal and healthy’) and the patient (as ‘disturbed and ill’). 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.<sup>26</sup>

(c) *Open 24-7: Rev. Shinohara Eichi*

Rev. Shinohara Eichi is the abbot of a Sōtō Zen temple called Chōju-in 長寿院, located in a rather remote area of Chiba yet near the massive Tokyo-Narita International Airport. Born in 1944, he was influenced by the Buddhist NGO movement and has been involved in overseas aid and support for children since he was young. He first started getting involved with the problem of suicide and the larger issue of alienation and depression twenty years ago. Two traumatic life experiences have emboldened Rev. Shinohara to sacrifice the comforts of a typical parishioner temple priest’s lifestyle to take on the very demanding work of dealing with the suicidal. The first was as a young boy he survived his mother’s attempt to kill him as she tried to kill herself (Taniguchi 2007). When he was forty-two, he developed a brain hemorrhage which required serious surgery and has left him with visible scars.

Operating out of his temple and from the basis of his Chōju-in Sangha Association, Rev. Shinohara provides 24-hour telephone consultation as well as offering his temple as a refuge to anyone at anytime. Chōju-in is predominantly a believer and not parishioner temple, and Rev. Shinohara maintains a private residence for his family at some distance from the temple so that it can remain as open as possible to the Chōju-in community. If someone visits suddenly or calls in the middle of the night, it is Rev. Shinohara’s policy to never refuse them. On average, he estimates that he receives three to five calls per day with that total spiking to over ten per day on the weekends. Per month he receives about twelve to fifteen personal visits by appointment and another five without notice, including salary men. He even permits overnight stays at the temple when the situation warrants. Rev. Shinohara stresses that it’s important to make clear at the beginning and to remind them that the temple is “for you, a place you can come to freely anytime. It’s fine to just hang out and do nothing” (*Jimonkōryū* 2006a, 47).

Rev. Shinohara remarks that Japan has become a difficult place to create human

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<sup>26</sup> Maeda Yūsen in a private talk given to Keio University students on field trip with author. Shōsan-ji Temple, Tokyo, Japan. May 29, 2009.

relationships. There is a serious problem of indifference or apathy (*mukanshin* 無関心) among all ages. He believes that young people and adults who grow up in such an environment are cut off from the continuity and connection to life that Japanese have traditionally understood as coming from their ancestors. This lack of a sense of continuity and connection to life appears to be making it much easier for Japanese, especially the young, to consider suicide as a means for dealing with their alienation and apathy. There is a strong sense in Japanese spirituality of the other side of death (*ano-yo* あの世) as a realm of ancestors or a Buddhist Pure Land where one can meet with departed loved ones again. Rev. Shinohara warns against the mentality of those who consider suicide as a way to reunite with loved ones on the other side of death. He counsels that Buddhism offers no final word on this matter and that there are many vital relationships, such as raising one's own family, to take care of before we depart this world.

Finally, Rev. Shinohara sees the potential of the priest as counselor (rather than as ritualist). Not only does a counselor support a heavily burdened national medical system, he also offers an alternative means of therapy and cure based in developing an intimate relationship with a counselor as a friend,<sup>27</sup> who is in turn connected with an authentic temple community. While most people, 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 don't have a license by using listening skills and a concern for others.

*(d) Mr. Coffee: Rev. Hakamata Toshihide*

Rev. Hakamata Toshihide, born in 1958, is the abbot of Gessō-ji 月宗寺, a Sōtō Zen temple in the area of Fujisato-chō in one of Japan's most northern and remote areas of Akita with its stunningly beautiful nature and brutal winters. Akita is also notorious in Japan for suicide, having had until recently the highest suicide rate in the country for eleven years running. The area of Fujisato-chō itself had the highest rate of suicide within Akita, specifically among the elderly. Some still consider that the rural areas in Japan preserve the traditional community values of Japanese culture. However, the huge depopulation of these areas over the last eighty years has led to high rates of suicide related to solitude, especially among the elderly living in depopulated mountainous regions. Rev. Hakamata notes that suicide is common among old people who don't just live alone but also live with their families. Although they live with others, they still develop feelings of being neglected and isolated.

In the countryside as well, human relationships have become fractured. For example, farm work is no longer done cooperatively. Children have become fewer, and in these households, children aren't disciplined. The real meaning is that there is no connection across generations. (*Jimonkōryū* 2006b, 89–90)

In 2000, Rev. Hakamata organized a meeting called "Thinking about Our Hearts and Lives" at which twenty-eight people attended, including housewives, health professionals and public health officials, members of the social welfare organization, district welfare officers, and priests of his own denomination. Since then, they have

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<sup>27</sup> This derives from the traditional Buddhist model of the priest as a 'spiritual friend and counselor' (*zenchishiki* 善知識), especially when facing death. (Stone 2008)

organized further such meetings, lectures, and activities in other cities and towns in the region. In 2003, in Fujisato-chō itself, Rev. Hakamata and a group of residents established a café called *Yottetamore* in the back of the city hall in the lobby of the Three Generations Exchange Center. In this age where Starbucks and other such high-end cafés can be found in practically every rail station and on every corner in the cities, it is a statement about life in this region that there was not even a single café in Fujisato-chō. The *Yottetamore* café with its modern, yet warm and very inviting ambience, thus provides not only a place to talk about problems but simply to get a good cup of coffee. Rev. Hakamata comments that, “Whoever comes here will find someone who will listen to them carefully. People know that once a week at this place there will be someone that will surely give them some mental support” (ibid., 89). In response to the needs of working men who are only free at night and prefer the atmosphere of a bar to a café, Rev. Hakamata has recently created a ‘business trip’ bar to extend and compliment the *Yottetamore* café.

In 2004, for the first time in seventeen years, there wasn’t a single suicide in the town. In 2005, there was one person who took their own life, which happened again in 2006. Rev. Hakamata feels that this decline in the suicide rate isn’t because they always talk about the issue at the café, but rather when people have problems, there is always an open window for them. Indeed, the cultural taboos around discussing suicide make it very difficult to confront at the temple during a funeral or memorial service. The café enables Rev. Hakamata to address the issue from a different angle and in a different context that is more amenable to open communication. In this way, it is interesting to note that while Rev. Hakamata shares some of the same concerns about the loss of community life as Rev. Shinohara, his work resembles Rev. Fujisawa’s in that it is done outside of the environment of the temple. Like Rev. Shinohara, he also feels he must be careful about over exposing his family to this kind of work, but rather in a mirror image to Rev. Shinohara, he keeps his family at the temple and works on this issue away from the temple.

*(e) Virtual Reality: Rev. Nemoto Jotetsu*

Rev. Nemoto Jōtetsu is the abbot of Daizen-ji 大禪寺, a Rinzai Zen temple in a rural region of Gifu in central Japan. Rev. Nemoto represents yet another totally different background and approach to the suicide issue. Like Rev. Fujisawa, Rev. Nemoto was born and raised in Tokyo and attended one of the top schools in the country, Keio University. However, Rev. Nemoto did not grow up in a temple and is one of a minority of priests, only about 25%, who do not come to the priesthood through succession. He was born in 1972, growing up during the height of the bubble economy and its subsequent collapse. Thus his manner, speech and sentiments are more representative of the present young generation of Japanese, many of whom are alienated and have a hard time creating a meaningful life.

After taking an interest in western philosophy and existentialism at university, he eventually dropped out of school and entered a strict Rinzai Zen meditation temple. After four years of living in a very secluded environment, Rev. Nemoto came back out into the world and found that since the time of his own school friends’ and uncle’s suicides, the number of suicides all over Japan had increased. Part of his re-integration experience was working as a temp in a MacDonald’s on the west side of Tokyo, where

he came into contact with this young generation of alienated students and ‘slacker’ (*freeter* フリーター) youth. Rev. Nemoto found that many expressed doubts or little hope about their futures and what to do after graduating from school. He remarks, “They really have no hopes, and I discussed this with them. There is this gap between what they feel they are and can do and what they are expected to be as a model person.”

At this point, Rev. Nemoto began to visit and write comments on internet sites created by young people who had some connection to suicide. After a year and a half of this reintegration back into society, Rev. Nemoto moved to Gifu in central Japan for more training and to become the abbot of a local temple. In 2004, with the various people he had met through his web surfing, he created a ‘community group’ on the internet called “Those Who Want to Die” (*shinitai hito* 死にたい人). It was a support group where suicidal people who didn’t want to be by themselves could talk about any kind of thing from daily living to death. They would actually meet to talk face to face, as well as to visit famous places where people like to commit suicide, sometimes to chant and pray for the dead. After only two years, the group became quite popular and had assembled over four hundred members. However, because of matters of privacy and impressions that the site might be condoning suicide (i.e. the name “Those Who Want to Die”), the server forced the group to shut down. Shortly afterwards, Rev. Nemoto initiated a new group which didn’t advertise itself as a ‘suicide group’, drawing back many old members and now holding a steady membership of around ninety-four. When he began these chat groups, he jumped into counseling individual mails. He used to answer up to sixty e-mails a day, but he has now found that thirty per day is a more manageable level. Besides this basic e-mail work, Rev. Nemoto has developed some unique spiritual practices using the internet, like e-mail sutra copying and virtual Zen meditation sessions using the Skype camera software.

As compared to the popularity of telephone counseling we saw in the cases of Revs. Fujisawa and Shinohara, this use of the internet appeals to a different kind of person. Rev. Nemoto has many members who are ‘shut ins’ (*hikikomori*). They rarely leave their houses and find the internet a more comfortable medium than actually talking by phone. For a generation that has grown up using the internet, such forms of communication are perhaps more usual and appealing than for those who feel computers and the internet lack intimacy. The common denominator with all the priests we have seen is their commitment to engaging in an intimate personal relationship with those suffering, neither out of evangelical interests nor as therapeutic saviors, but as ‘spiritual friends’ (*zenchishiki*) walking the same road of suffering towards enlightenment.

### *The Building of a Movement through Cooperative Action*

In the initial stages of our study in 2006, it became apparent that contrary to popular and even expert opinion there was a fairly significant amount of grassroots activity in Japan that could be characterized as socially engaged Buddhism. However, this activity has been largely out of the mainstream, because it is so localized. Also, until very recently, information has not been disseminated effectively in a way that promotes networking among like-minded activists. The Association of Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem, Tera Net EN, Bōzu Be Ambitious, and the Tōkai-Kantō Network of Women

and Buddhism, all demonstrate a marked change in this situation. Internet technology with websites and social networking software are not only greatly increasing exposure to the actions of individuals but also enabling the mushrooming of priestly and general Buddhist networks on a variety of social issues. Additionally, while the secular media has not paid much attention to Buddhist-inspired activism, the priests working on suicide have begun to appear frequently in print and television media.

The Association of Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem came together through the mutual exposure of the priests profiled above and others in various public forums and meetings held in the Kantō area during the previous years.<sup>28</sup> Eleven priests began the group in May 2007 with Rev. Fujisawa taking a leading role in directing its activities. At the beginning, they did not have enough members to run a telephone-counseling group nor did their memorial services for families affected by suicides attract many people. Thus, in March 2008, they put an advertisement in one of Japan's largest national newspapers, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, calling on the suicidal and troubled to write them letters that they would read and respond to carefully. Surprisingly, this initial appeal attracted many letters. At this time, there were only eight priests actively involved in this activity, and there was no training to participate in the group. Obviously, a number of the priests like Rev. Fujisawa had previous experience in counseling, but it was a more training on the spot type of affair. Rev. Ogawa Yūkan, a young Jōdo priest and doctoral candidate at Tokyo University who participates regularly in the group, notes that even at this early stage the members were quite skilful in their letter writing.

Two years later, the group had received 1,060 total letters from all over the country. Many of these are by repeaters; for example, out of a sampling of sixty-five letters, there were nineteen people in total. The age group has varied, although many of the letters come from women. Depression is a common issue, but also family problems and the core issue of grieving families connected to suicides often arises. In some cases, the writers have wanted to meet face to face with one of the priests, and such meetings have been arranged. At this point, the group has developed a set process in which three to four priests read and discuss one letter. One of them takes responsibility to individually write the response, which is then reviewed and finally approved by the others for mailing. The group has now swelled to twenty-five members, including five nuns and five members outside of the Kantō region including all the priests profiled in the previous section. They meet as a whole once every two months to discuss a specific issue and case study, a process that Rev. Maeda often organizes.

As mentioned, the group has held specific memorial services for bereaved families (*izoku* 遺族). Such memorial services were first performed specifically for groups of people affected by suicide perhaps around 1996 by a Rinzai Zen priest in Ehime Prefecture named Rev. Asano Taigen. The office manager for the group, Rev. Yoshida Shōei, a Nichiren priest who lives an hour south of Tokyo, held such a service in 2007 that attracted eight bereaved families. Since 2008, on the nationally designated "Life Day" (*inochi-no-hi*), December 1, the group holds such a service at the large Jōdo Shin Tsukiji Hongan-ji Temple 築地本願寺 in Tokyo, which attracted 127 bereaved families in 2008. In June of 2009, they held another service at the large Jōdo Zōjō-ji Temple 増上寺 in Tokyo attracting twenty-one bereaved families. Rev. Ogawa recounts that just

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<sup>28</sup> This included a major public symposium held on October 22, 2007, and sponsored by IBEC that featured Rev. Jin Hitoshi, and Revs. Fujisawa, Shinohara, Hakamata, and Nemoto (*Jimonkōryū* 2007).

the work of receiving registrations by phone turned out to be complex as the people who called in had questions which involved emotional counseling. The Jōdo Shin, Sōtō, Nichiren, Jōdo, and Shingon denominations have all begun to show interest in holding their own such memorial services in the near future. However, at a February 2010 symposium on this issue sponsored by the Jōdo Shū Research Institute, both Rev. Fujisawa and Rev. Maeda warned that quickly putting together such events is not enough and that a more systematic approach needs to be taken by the denominations. Rev. Fujisawa feels that an infrastructure needs to be developed for priests to properly study and train to do this work.

These comments strike right at the core issue of Funeral Buddhism and the crisis of the traditional denominations. Carl Becker, a leading international scholar in death and dying at the University of Kyoto and also part of the aforementioned *Ōjō* and Death Project, has noted that the elaborate Japanese funeral and memorial system, which includes a seven week period of initial services followed by an extended thirty-three year period of services, is a profound and meaningful form of grief care for bereaved families. However, due to the aforementioned breakdown of extended families and social networks based around the temple, as well as increasing apathy towards ritualized temple based ancestor worship, these ceremonies are being abbreviated and scaled down to only immediate loved ones. Becker has commented that this situation reflects the disturbing shift from 1960 to 2000 of Japanese being some of the most intimate and least death denying people in the world to some of the *least* intimate and *most* death denying. (Becker 2012)<sup>29</sup>

As seen in Rev. Fujisawa's comments above, the Association of Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem has a critical attitude towards their own traditions and the simple formalism of holding memorial services for families affected by suicide. By connecting these services with other activities, they seek to develop a more comprehensive response to the problem. Thus, they are promoting the various creative activities developed by the priests that we have already profiled, such as Rev. Hakamata's *Yottetamore* café and 'business trip' bar, Rev. Nemoto's internet counseling, and Rev. Maeda's in-temple counseling for non-temple members. They have also begun a series of "Getting to Know One Another" (*wakachi-ai*) events that serve as opportunities to do grief care counseling. On the last Thursday of every month at the aforementioned Tsukiji Hongan-ji Temple, they hold individual counseling sessions starting at 10:30 in the morning, followed by meetings of the whole group in the afternoon.

By connecting funerals and memorial services to social problems and the real life suffering of common people, there is the potential of liberating these practices from their empty formalism. These core activities of the Buddhist temple and priest thus could serve as a fulcrum for revitalizing the community temple system by re-building human relationships through grief care and counseling. Integrated with the other kinds of human outreach activities like cafés and internet and telephone counseling, there is the potential to rebuild the temple as a nexus of social networking. Rev. Fujisawa has articulated a similar such vision, calling it a "Ribbon Temple Net" (*ribbon-no-tera-net*), which connects like ribbon a group of affiliated 'refuge temples' (*kakekomi-dera*) offering care and counseling. In fact, Rev. Shinohara has already begun such a network

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<sup>29</sup> Becker 2012.

in 2009 called the *Ka'ze* Suicide Prevention Network<sup>30</sup>, and we have also seen that Tera Net EN has developed such a network for youth issues.

### *Conclusion*

The advance of modernization – principally the giving way of mythical, religious worldviews to secular, scientific ones and the shift from rural communities based on reciprocal, intimate, and hierarchical human relationships to urban communities based on individualistic, diffuse, and horizontal relationships – has been perhaps the greatest challenge ever faced by the world's great religious traditions. Socially engaged Buddhism is a concept to express some of the common ways that Buddhism has sought to respond to modernization through the reform of its own traditions and institutions and through developing new ways of being a part of society. Japanese Buddhism, as we have seen, has certainly attempted to respond to modernization in a variety of ways. However, the vast majority of traditional priests, temples, and denominations have yet to develop a substantive response to modernization's challenges. For the most part, their responses have been reactionary, supporting the prevalent social attitudes of both the pre-war and post-war periods in an attempt to hold on to their slowly deteriorating social status.

In this way, certain critics, like Sulak Sivaraksa, the leading founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), feel that Japan has lacked a full-fledged socially engaged Buddhist movement. At a public symposium held at the Jōdo Shin Tsukiji Hongan-ji Temple in Tokyo in June, 2010, Sivaraksa stated that most Buddhist organizations in the world are afraid to get involved in social change and that Buddhist organizations from affluent East Asian countries, especially Japan, have often gotten involved in social welfare but rarely in social change. The difference between social welfare work, which remedies the symptoms of social injustice, and social change work, which gets at the structural roots of such injustice, is the key point in distinguishing the more radical, socially engaged Buddhist movements of South and Southeast Asia from the more conservative ones of East Asia.

The recent trends in Japanese Buddhism over the last decade, however, show a more complex interplay of these two modes of engagement. As we noted, since the mid 1990s, Japanese Buddhists have increasingly shifted their social welfare activities from international crises to the growing number of domestic ones afflicting Japanese society. These domestic social welfare activities, such as supporting the homeless, the dying, and the suicidal, are slowly leading to a deeper understanding and critique of the problems of Japanese society by these engaged Buddhists, which seem to be heading towards a more comprehensive engagement that addresses the deeper causes of these social problems.

An important aspect of a deeper engagement would be the impact such activities have on wider society. For Japanese Buddhism, a major step towards emerging from its inwardness and social marginalization would be to work cooperatively on these pressing social issues with government and civil society groups, who have been reticent to work with religious groups. In 2010, an important such initiative was begun by the Jōdo Shin Nishi Hōgan-ji branch in establishing the Kyoto Suicide Prevention Center (Kyōto

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.soudannet-kaze.jp/>.

Jisatsu Bōshi Senta (京都自殺防止センター) in collaboration with the Kyoto city government. The Association of Religiously Affiliated Research Institutes (Kyōdan Fuchi Kenkyūjo Konwa-kai 教団付置研究所懇話会) has added their backing to this endeavor making it now a cooperative inter-religious endeavor. This is the type of model – in which Buddhist individuals and organizations create cooperative networks with other religions and secular groups to work for the greater good of society as opposed to the benefit and growth of their own institutions – that shows the importance of socially engaged Buddhism in Japan as a means to both reinvigorate Japanese society and Japanese Buddhism itself.

Japanese Buddhist denominations are still fundamentally reactive in their stance towards larger society. In the same way that they followed the social trends of the Meiji and pre-war eras in order to prove the worth of their continued existence to society, today they are showing a sudden interest in social engagement and public benefit activities. This is a direct response to the looming threat of losing their tax exempt status as ‘public welfare corporations’ (*kō-eki hōjin* 公益法人) through a new, government reform movement. However, in the specific case of the suicide issue, we have seen the influence and potency of a group of individual priests who work at the grassroots level coming together to exert a true influence on both their own denominations and society at large. The coming decade will be critical in terms of deciding whether this nascent engaged Buddhist movement will have substantial meaning for the general Japanese Buddhist world and for Japanese society at large.

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