The Hitosaji
“One Spoonful” Association

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The Homeless in Japan

• In 2003, nationwide 25,296 homeless → 6,235 in 2016 (Tokyo 1,498; Osaka 1,657)
• Reduction from increase in government shelters and halfway houses PLUS previously unqualified day laborers getting older and qualifying for state pension
• Toko University ongoing survey estimates 3X the official 6,235

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

Do not use available public welfare programs; WHY?
- Excluded from social welfare and labor market
- Mental disorder and mild disability
- Even when they cannot apply for it, is it their choice?

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

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

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

Secularization, especially after WWII
- These facilities had split off from religious organization
- Religiosity became excluded from the public sphere

Japanese Buddhism became marginalized, withdrawn, and insular, caring only people who are their direct temple members
- How to care and treat those who dropped out from the mainstream, like the homeless & suicidal?

1980s some priests started to re-engage
- Strong personality, critical of denominational and traditional perspective
- Many were not from the mainstream of their denomination
Hitosaji-no-kai
ひとさじの会

Since 2009 (started in 2004)

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

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

- View of Buddha-nature in Pure land Buddhism is that we cannot achieve by ourselves
- From “something special by someone special” to “nothing special by everyone”
- Nenbutsu 念仏 (“mindfulness of Buddha” ⇒ chanting Amida Buddha’s name): easy practice, regardless of social status, education, and personality
- Horizontal relationships
  Being beside and with the homeless, from provider to neighbor
Funeral Services

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

Yui-no-haka (結の墓) 2008

at Kōshō-in (光照院), Tokyo

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

- a homeless man
Interfaith

Kannon Bodhisattva wearing a cross

Gravestone made by Christian NGO 2015
Feeding the Needy

Material support

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

Supported by various volunteers

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

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

- Reflecting on themselves
Serving onigiri and tea, medicines and other necessities seasonally.
Twice a month, 1st and 3rd Monday night with “patrol” style in Asakusa 浅草, Sanya 山谷, and Ueno 上野 areas.

If they need, we inform them about public assistance, free clinics, and other support systems.
Rev. Gakugen Yoshimizu 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
Promotion of Rice Donation

Networking with temples, especially in rural areas

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

Cooperation with Food Banks

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

Rice project (米一升運動)

- Local temples collect rice donations from their temple members, then donate them to local NPOs
Rice project 米一升運動

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

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

The networks worked well after the Great East Japan Earthquake
Conclusion

- Funeral support
  As a priest who specializes in the spiritual field
  Help restore self-esteem, hope, and humanity

- Feeding the needy
  Raising awareness of participants of those who live in the same society, overcoming sense of homeless as “other”
  Priests can learn from the needy and deepen their own faith

- Promotion for donation & social mobilization
  As an organization which has networks with lay people
  Connecting priest and lay people who just don’t know how to connect to social activities

- Social engagement enriches the networks between temples, NPOs, and people
  Such networks enhance the temples’ potential in the society


Nawa, Tsukinosuke. (2006). *Kanka kyūsai jigyō to Bukkyō* [Social Works and Budhism in Japan], *International Buddhist University* 44:89-123.

