The 'Suicide Priests' of Japan and the Search for Gross National Happiness

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Socially engaged Buddhism is not a new phenomenon. Its development can be traced back to the latter parts of the 19th century with the struggle of Buddhists in Asia to counter Western political and cultural colonialism. Further still, some say Buddhism has always been engaged based on the Buddha's unique style of 'middle path' monasticism and his revolutionary ordination of women and social outcastes. However, socially engaged Buddhism has become a much more visible, and perhaps even popular movement, over the past 18 years through the Dalai Lama rising to global prominence in receiving the Nobel Peace Prize and the role that alternative and socially active spirituality is now playing in the struggle for a new, post-industrial global paradigm.

Japan's place within the emerging global socially engaged Buddhist movement remains ambivalent. There are certain Buddhist groups within Japan who have become well known outside of Japan for their philanthropic activities. However, within Japan, the evaluation of such groups as legitimately working for the common good of the average Japanese citizen has not been unanimous. At the same time, traditional Buddhist denominations and their priests largely remain mired in an antiquated ritualism of which the public has grown critical. However, amidst the larger crises of economic recession and mental and spiritual health in Japan, we are witnessing various sorts of socially engaged Buddhist activities coming from the grassroots, that is from individual priests and temples as well as small, socially conscious affinity groups and networks. This paper will first attempt a very broad overview of the problems afflicting

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Japanese society today. It will then look at the concurrent crisis in Japanese Buddhism. Finally, it will profile one of the most prominent and compelling examples of this new socially engaged Buddhist movement in Japan, which are the priests and temples addressing the problems of depression, alienation and suicide.

The Human costs of material development in Japan

For the latter half of the 20th century, Japan was hailed throughout the world for its revival from World War II and its miracle of economic development. It was held up as a shining example to the rest of Asia of the prosperity of following a modern capitalist system of development. It always served as the rebuttal against the tide of socialism and communism that swept through East and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the Japanese had seemed to attain such prosperity while retaining important aspects of their traditional culture, thus representing a distinctively Asian type of capitalist prosperity. These aspects, such as the lifetime employment system of large corporations and a strong social welfare system run by a large state bureaucracy, reflected an intelligent mixing of socialist and capitalist sensibilities, while preserving the perennial emphasis on homogeneity and harmony in Japanese culture. However, since the early 1990s this great success story has all but unraveled. While Japan's Gross National Product (GDP) per capita continued to rise steadily from 1955 to 2005, different social indicators, like the Genuine Progress Index (GPI), show that the quality of life in Japan has changed little since the 1970s. Furthermore, the percentage of those feeling very satisfied or satisfied with their lives shows a marked decline of 8-26 percentage points across age groups from 1978 to 2002.[1] The period of economic downturn in the 1990s revealed that much of the prosperity experienced in the 1980s was a built upon real estate speculation, irresponsible bank loans, and corrupt insider business between government and business elites.

With the abrupt economic downturn in the early-mid 1990s, the compassionate face of Japanese capitalism has turned into an

[1] Choden, T., Kusago, T. & Shirai, K. *Gross National Happiness and Material Welfare in Bhutan and Japan.* Thimphu, Bhutan: The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2007.

ugly frown. Slowly but surely, Japan is exhibiting the kinds of post-modern, post-industrial diseases of the United States, such as: increasing economic gaps between the rich and poor; high levels of corporate and individual debt; an overburdened social welfare system which leaves the poor, elderly, and other dependent groups at high risk[2]; brutal crime especially committed on and by the young. Perhaps the most fearful part of this whole process is that we cannot see any end to it in sight. Japanese culture is notoriously slow to change, and the politicians and bureaucrats who run Japan have shown little to no vision in addressing these challenges. For the moment, Japan appears to be reluctantly increasing its adoption of American forms of economic liberalisation and privatisation.

Alienation: the breakdown of social structures and bonds

This vicious cycle of unskillful social and economic development has led to social breakdown in Japan which is having a deep effect on human relationships. As an island nation that spent the dynamic colonial period of global trade of the 17th-19th centuries in total isolation from the rest of the world, Japan has been long known for its homogeneity, its emphasis on inter-personal and communal harmony, and its following of successor based patriarchal and hierarchical social structures. Although such a social system may be an anathema to modern Western tastes, it has been one that ensured continuity and an ability to self-regulate on all levels through a powerful emphasis on fulfilling social roles and responsibilities.

Like so other many nations, including those in the West, Japan has experienced the numerous social dislocations in the shift from a rural agricultural society to an urban industrial one.

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[2] The aging of Japan's baby boomer generation, whose socialized medical care must be paid for by the next generations, will create impossible strains on the Japanese social welfare and health systems in the next 20 years. In 2025, demographers expect Japan to have the world's oldest population at about 37 million people over the age of 65, which will be about one-third of the population. Kingston, Jeff. *Japan's Quiet Transformation: Social Change and Civil Society in the Twenty-first Century*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004. p.291.

The first stage of communal breakdown in Japan began with the mass exodus of people from the countryside to the city in the first industrial boom of the early 1900s and the second one right after World War II. At present, about 80% of Japanese live in dense urban areas. In the rural areas, we see a continual battle by communities to create jobs for those who remain and to visitors and new inhabitants through a variety of development schemes. Many of these schemes, like tourist theme parks, have either experienced limited success or been downright failures, throwing local governments into debt and increasing their problems. The young continue to be attracted by the work and lifestyles of urban areas, while many villages, mostly occupied by the elderly, are disappearing or being consolidated. Through depopulation and the consolidation of villages, local culture, traditionally expressed through vibrant local festivals, is dying off. Compared within the image of glitz and excitement in urban areas, these areas seem literally like dead zones for the elderly of a previous generation to fade away. In this situation, we find suicide among the abandoned elderly to be high. However, as a further condemnation of the loss of the idealised community of the village, we are seeing suicide even among those not living alone and also incidents of brutal crime in such small communities.

While the dislocations of rural life are certainly a concern, the large majority of Japanese live in urban environments, and these environments are the front-line of the present Japanese social malaise. Community breakdown in modernised urban areas is a common issue around the world. The problems of community in the city have been the focus of many Japanese Buddhist groups since the beginning of industrialisation. In fact, some of Japan's largest Buddhists groups, like Soka Gakkai and Rissho Koseikai, grew rapidly in the pre-war and immediate post-war years because of their ability to recreate and nurture urban community for Japanese who had left their villages in the countryside.

However, in the post-industrial era of the last fifteen years, even these groups have become overwhelmed with the challenges of maintaining community against the continually splintering forces of modern economic development. Whereas these groups were successful in working with labourers and nuclear families, most urban Japanese now work in the service sector doing more

white-collar work. The family has also further splintered into a post-modern kind of 'dormitory family', in which members of families live out busy and unconnected daily agendas retreating to the 'home space' for sleep and private forms of consumption on individualised communication devices (personal TVs, cell phones, computers).

In the work place as well, the breakdown of human connection has been on the rise. For example, the lifetime employment system of large companies has been increasingly replaced by the use of a high number of part-time workers who receive no company welfare benefits. This trend extends to all sectors of the Japanese economy, for example universities, which now rely mostly on part-time and contract base teachers. Consequently, the fulltime work force must carry heavier burdens of work and responsibility, regularly working overtime without additional pay. Whereas the company or any professional institution used to provide a form of modern urban community in which everyone was regarded as a community member, the increasingly fractured style of employment and labour policies now turns the work place into a generally alienating experience.

Alienation in modern, urban Japan begins at an early age. Over the last 20 years, bullying in the schools has become an increasingly problem in schools and the cause of numerous suicides among the young. More recently, many teachers have complained of class environments which have become anarchic because the students cannot pay attention and often wander from their seats, a phenomenon called *gakkyu hokai*. While there is mutual finger pointing between parents and school administrators, it appears that the dissolution of family life is a major cause. Even if parents are at home with their children, we can see that many parents have little interest or ability in engaging with their children. The poor socialisation of young people, whether it is due to parents in the home or to lack of meaningful community life, is a major cause for the long list of youth problems, such as bullying, violent crime, disregard for others (*mukanshin*), and inability to create strong and lasting interpersonal relationships.

The educational system, like so many others around the world, is based on the rote memorisation of information to be

regurgitated in a steady series of examinations which culminate in the critical university entrance exam. The pressure to succeed is intense. Japan's extremely low birth rate[3] allows most young Japanese today to attend university and find some form of white-collar employment after graduation. However, the elite jobs still are only available to the graduates of the highly competitive top universities. Meanwhile, graduates from the variety of second and third tier schools are faced with the blue collar like quality of office jobs with long hours of bureaucratic work. In this way, young Japanese are finding it increasingly intolerable to sacrifice their youth in such an educational system for lifestyle goals that are no longer readily available except to a small elite. The problem is not really that middle class Japanese cannot enjoy a materially sufficient lifestyle filled with a variety of electronic luxuries. It is more that such an existence does not satisfy the aspirations of the young anymore. The hyper-comparative and hyper-competitive nature of society has made a middle-class existence seem banal, whilst an elite lifestyle is out of reach to most.

Thus, over the last fifteen years many have increasingly begun to drop out of mainstream society. This begins early with students who refuse to go to school.[4] These children may develop into social recluses (*hikikomori*) who rarely venture out of their rooms or homes, a phenomenon that has now reached nationwide to somewhere between a half to one million, mostly young men. Among young adults, there are the social phenomena of NEETS (neither in employment, education, or training) and slackers or *furita*, who choose part-time menial work, such as in convenience stores, in return for more free time. There are also what is called 'parasite singles' - women who see little possibility for

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[3] The birth rate in Japan has fallen from over 25/1,000 in 1950 to over 15/1,000 in 1975 to 8.1/1,000 in 2007, a rate which is now lower than the present death rate of 8.98/1,000.

[4] In 2002, there were at least 26,000 elementary school children and 108,000 middle school students who refused to go to school -- about 10 times as many as in 1978. Actual numbers are probably higher because school officials sometimes classify absences as medical to protect the child (or the school) from the stigma of school refusal. Gordenker, Alice, "School Refusers: When one-size-fits-all schooling doesn't fit." *The Japan Times*: May 3, 2002.

advancement in the patriarchal professional world or for fulfilment in early marriage and solo children rearing with absent, workaholic husbands. Thus they choose to live at home with their families and enjoy their youth until making a life choice in their mid 30s.

Suicide without honour

Across the board, from rural to urban, from young to middle-aged to elderly, the ultimate social indicator of Japan's human development malaise is perhaps, not unsurprisingly, suicide. For nine straight years (1998-2006), since the full onset of the Japanese economic recession, Japan has exceeded 30,000 suicides per year. To give a sense of this number, that is 10 times the number of people who died in the terror incident on the World Trade Center in New York and about 9 times the total number of Palestinian deaths since the Second Intifada began in 2000. The total number for this 8 year period is over 240,000 deaths which is about equal to the number of people killed in the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. This is by far the highest suicide rate among the G7 nations with France coming in a distant second. Globally, Japan ranks 8th following only the cluster of economically ravaged countries in Eastern Europe.

The largest number of suicides, by far, accounting for one third, are middle-aged business men. These men are the ones who have born the brunt of the recession, most directly through the accumulation of bad debts and the unsustainable level and load of work they must endure along with the pressure to always perform economically. Suicides by such men so that their families can collect on their life insurance and remain financially solvent is now a well known occurrence. Another factor in their high rate of suicide is the competitive, business culture which does not encourage men to reveal their insecurities and to find someone with which to share their feelings. Unlike women, and even the young and elderly, who may have the time and access to individual friends, middle-aged business men, not just in Japan, can be very socially isolated.

Some may feel that suicide has long been a cultural value in Japan. While this may be true on a certain level, the ritualised

and often public suicides of feudal warriors to either apologise for mistakes or to follow their lords into death differ strongly in tenor from the desperate and isolated acts of people in urban Japan today who may hang themselves in a private room or jump in front of a commuter train at rush hour. There is no dignity in these acts; no (voluntary) witness by the community. These are acts which reflect a deeper existential and spiritual crisis; and a loss of sense for the meaning or purpose of life. In Japan, modern economic values have replaced the human relationship ones of traditional feudal Japan. In this way, the achievement of a life of material prosperity has overtaken the development of human and community relationships, something which was the basis of Japanese identity and nationhood. In consort, the religious institutions of Japan from which many of these relational norms and ethics were derived have also decayed from the influence of this kind of development.

Spiritual bankruptcy: compromised and anachronistic Buddhist institutions

As mentioned above, some Japanese Buddhist organisations achieved a certain amount of success in supporting and creating community in the urban areas of Japan during the industrial booms before and after World War II. These organisations were largely newly established mass lay organisations, like Soka Gakkai and Rissho Koseikai. They developed a style that suited the period, and they grew at a phenomenal rate in the 1950s coming to form some of the largest Buddhist organisations in Japan. As also mentioned above, these groups are facing declining membership as they struggle to meet the interests and needs of the new post-modern generation of Japanese. Their emphasis on filial piety and diligent effort to build family, community and nation is a message that worked well in the post-war industrial era. However, the present generation of young people desire individual freedom over burdensome familial or organisational obligations and no longer believe that their diligent efforts will reap personal rewards in post-bubble Japan. Although these organisations still have large memberships and great wealth, one wonders what the future holds for them in 30 years when their core membership dies off. Unlike the traditional Buddhist

organisations and temples which house the graves of most Japanese, there is no lingering bond for the third and fourth generations of these new organisations to remain as members.

The traditional Buddhist organisations of Japan were for the most part formed 800 to 1,100 years ago, and are organised around an ordained clergy and lay followers. They represent the kind of feudal period Buddhism of agricultural and rural Japan. As such, they embody the core of certain key aspects of Japanese religiosity. Buddhism being the principal way of dealing with death in Japan, priests conduct funerals and offer memorial services for ancestor veneration. This basic form of religiosity has changed very little over the past 400 years. However, these traditional organisations have struggled greatly to adapt themselves to the modern era. During the feudal era, Japanese temples served as quasi-governmental offices in documenting and registering all citizens. The power that temples and priests had in the community was not always handled well, and priests often developed reputations for manipulating villagers for their own personal agendas which sometimes involved money and women.[5]

In modern urban Japan, temples and priests have been basically stripped of such power with the separation between church and state instituted in the modern Japanese constitution. However, their reputations have not noticeably improved. Since the 1870s, the Buddhist monastic code stopped being enforced by the state and became the private matter of individual sects. The result was that many of the underground activities of monks during the feudal era became openly public lifestyles, such as meat eating, marrying and having families, not wearing robes except at ceremonies, and generally following lay styles of personal consumption. This development has created a continual set of contradictions for priests between the monastic ideal of striving for nirvana through an austere lifestyle and the reality of their lives as professional ritualists who have lifestyles not that different from the laity.

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[5] Tumamuro, Fumio. "Local Society and the Temple-Parishioner Relationship within the Bakufu's Governance Structure". *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies.* Fall 2001, 28/3–4, pp.261–92.

Furthermore, temples and priests also flourished during the economic boom and have developed a reputation for caring for nothing more than easy money making at the cost of lay followers' devotion to their ancestors. With the increasing advance of modernisation and secularisation in Japanese society, Buddhist priests have for the most part lost their traditional social roles in the community; lost their basis for moral and spiritual authority with their adoption of lay lifestyles; and lost the respect of the lay community for becoming overpaid, professional ritualists. The term now popularly used for them is 'priests who make money hand over fist'[6] (*bozumarumoke*) and for the system is 'funeral Buddhism' (*soshiki bukkyo*). It is felt that traditional Japanese Buddhism has no concern for the living, just with those who have already died.

The 'suicide priests'

In such a climate, what could we expect from Buddhist priests to confront the serious human relationship problems and the plague of suicides in Japan? Probably very little. However, there is a critical link in the passage from life to death amidst which the Buddhist priest lives that connects him to the sagging humanity of Japan. When someone commits suicide, there is a funeral and a priest who must deal with a grieving family. Although there is actually a social stigma in Japan concerning suicide and some families do their best to keep it secret, the priest is one of the few who may learn of the real nature of a person's death. In a nation where there are on average 90 suicides per day, there is no lack of opportunity for priests to have contact with this problem. For a few it is something they cannot turn their eyes away from. In this way, from a wide variety of backgrounds, we are seeing individual priests becoming actively engaged in not just the issue of suicide but the wider problems of alienation and human relationships in Japan. Perhaps the best way to express what is happening is to look at a few of these priests who represent an astonishingly different array of temperaments and styles.

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[6] Covell, Stephen G. *Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006. p.74.

The Salary-Man: Rev. Katsumi Fujisawa

Rev. Katsumi Fujisawa is the forty-six year old vice-abbot of Anraku-ji, a Jodoshin Pure Land temple in Tokyo. 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, Japanese temples and monasteries used to offer the highest forms of public education in society. However, now in the modern age, traditional Buddhist education has lagged behind secular education. In Japan, a bright young priest will tend to choose a stronger secular school over his own denomination's university, where even the quality of students in the Buddhist Studies department are considered inferior to those in other departments. In this way, Rev. Fujisawa represents a small group of priests with top level educations. Because they attended secular universities, they tend to have a wider view of society, one not dominated by temple matters and sectarian sentiments. Some of these priests, like Rev. Fujisawa, enter the professional world and stay somewhat aloof from temple life.

Many young priests, who are sons of priests and are expected to succeed to their father's position as abbot of the temple, grow up wanting to do something else with their lives. However, with the low level of Buddhist universities, inheriting the business of the temple is usually the best and most viable option for many upon graduation. It's a secure job in an era of economic recession. Rev. Fujisawa had similar sentiments when he finished school, but with his educational background he had an option to do something different and so worked as a computer engineer in an IT company for twenty-three years. Although he very much appreciated his time in "regular society", he experienced first hand the hardships and dissatisfactions of the typical Japanese salary man. He also knew that at some point he would return to the temple to succeed his father as abbot of the temple.

Amidst this situation, he became aware of and interested in the suicide problem. He says, "After coming to know about the suicide problem, I thought to myself 'For sure, I can't be mistaken

that priests should be concerned with this issue.'"[7] He further elaborates, "As a priest's work deals with the life of people, the suicide problem is not something we can avoid, so we have to raise consciousness of it....It is not someone else's problem. It is a fundamental social problem which when we become aware of it, there must be many such people living near us."[8] Unfortunately, such a social consciousness is very limited in the Buddhist world. Although priests have frequent connection with dying and are often exposed to families in which people have committed suicide, it seems they feel there is not much they can do beyond offering their funerary services. There is a great wall that exists between the temple world and the rest of society in Japan.

This wall seems to be one that is mutually constructed. For example, Rev. Fujisawa often shows in public lectures a government plan for dealing with the suicide problem which displays a network chart of all the key social actors who could help. Religious organisations are conspicuously absent from this chart. Rev. Fujisawa remarks, "People 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."[9] He elaborates further:

"If you are a salary man facing a problem, for example even myself when I couldn't do my work well and then developed a kind of inferiority complex, I never thought about what kind of teaching Buddhism could provide at this time. Indeed, when my personnel evaluation was low, when inferiors humiliated me, I got depressed and asked myself, 'Why can't we develop human relationships well?' At this time, I had a feeling that Buddhist teachings had no direct connection to my situation. However, at these kinds of times, if there could appear a priest who has concern, if there could be a person who radiates a feeling of personal intimacy, I

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[7] All quotes without citations, such as this come from private interviews done by the four-man IBEC research team. The translations are by the author himself.

[8] "In a Society Where There Are About 90 Suicides Per Day What Can a Priest Do? (*ichinichi-yaku kyuju-nin-mo jisatsu-suru yo-ni so-wa nani-ga dekiruka?*) *Jimonkoryu* August, 2006 p. 39.

[9] *Jimonkoryu* August, 2006 p. 42.

think Buddhism could become part of this world and not be aloof to it. If we could talk about real 'community temples' (*kakekomi-dera*), for example setting up a café or salon in a temple that anyone could visit, I think it's possible to 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."

However, Rev. Fujisawa sees that, "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…. You don't need any special ability. Simply listening. However, it's most important to create a feeling of mutuality and closeness. People contemplating suicide hold the conflicting emotions of 'I want to die but really I want to live'. There needs to be someone who exists that can listen to this kind of talk."[10] In this way, while he was still working in his IT company, he began to train as a volunteer at the Tokyo Suicide Prevention Center. The Center began in Osaka in 1978. The Tokyo Center has about 70 registered workers who are on-line from 8:00 pm to 6:00 am. In order to work as a counselor you have to train for half a year. The basic training is three months and then a period of practice sessions with other counselors. Most workers are volunteers who work in companies, and so there is a limit of working three times a month.

One of the continuing problems of prevention work is somehow connecting with this large group of middle-aged salary men who make up a third of all suicides in Japan. Rev. Fujisawa notes that in telephone counseling men have increased and now are almost equal, but in general it's not common among salary men. Using the phone in this way may not be their style. The society is so hyper competitive and there's no real concern for others, just about getting ahead for oneself. Rev. Fujisawa feels that it would be good if salary men used phone counseling, but it seems most of them are on board with this kind of competitive society. They see it as good and keep engaging in it. It would seem that Rev. Fujisawa, having lived in this world for so long, is just

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[10] *Jimonkoryu* August, 2006 p. 42.

the person who could find a way to reach these men and bridge the gap between the spiritual and business worlds.

In March 2006, Rev. Fujisawa quit his job in his company to return to attend full-time to the activities of his temple. Since then he has also taken time to become increasingly active in the suicide issue. He was part of a petition campaign to demand for basic government legislation for suicide prevention. This bill passed in June 2006 and has become a watershed event for publicly recognising that this problem is not just an individual one but a larger, social one. Rev. Fujisawa has also recently established a local group called "Buddhist Priests Taking on the Suicide Problem" and become a leader in trying to develop a nationwide network of priests concerned with this issue. It is felt that such a network is needed: 1) to help such individual priests and temples to sustain such social work; 2) to better provide those people in need with actual temples and priests whom they can visit in person during crisis; and 3) to expose and educate a largely ignorant society about these priests' activities.

Open 24-7: Rev. Eichi Shinohara

A priest who is realising this vision of a community temple which responds to the mental and spiritual needs of the people is Rev. Eichi Shinohara. He is the sixty-three year old abbot of a Soto Zen temple called Choju-in located in a rather remote area of Chiba yet near the massive Narita International Airport which serves the Tokyo area. He has been involved with overseas aid and support for children since he was a young priest, but first started getting involved with the problem of suicide and the larger issue of alienation and depression seventeen years ago. When he was forty-two, he developed a brain hemorrhage which required serious surgery. Coming close to death, he says, gave him a new awareness which provides him the energy to sustain the very demanding work of working with the suicidal. Rev. Shinohara himself is a heart type. He likes to engage personally with people in crisis and to confront them in a very direct way. This character makes him perfectly suited for the kind of 24 hours 7 days a week help line he offers.

Operating out of his temple and from the basis of what his calls his Choju-in Sangha Association, Rev. Shinohara provides 24 hour telephone consultation as well as offering his temple as a refuge to anyone at anytime. If someone visits suddenly or calls in the middle of the night, it is Rev. Shinohara's policy to never refuse them. As his work has received more attention in the media recently, he now gets calls from all over the country and an endless stream of visitors. On average, he estimate he receives 3-5 calls per day with that total spiking to over 10 per day on the weekends. Per month he receives about 12-15 personal visits by appointment and another 5 without notice. Many of these calls and visits are repeaters. Rev. Shinohara reports that these calls and visits come from people of all age groups.

He does indeed receive calls and even visits from salary men, a few who have spent the night at the temple. The elderly are another group who mostly call by telephone due to their immobility. They are usually victims of depression, being cut off from their families who do not bother to visit or call. Rev. Shinohara has also done extensive work with the young, perhaps based on his own difficulties as a youth. He remarks that Japan has become a difficult place to create human relationships. There is a serious problem of indifference or apathy (*mukanshin*) among all ages. Rev. Shinohara feels Japanese nowadays don't seem to know or care about what others in the family are doing. They seem to be just stuck in themselves, their own worlds and their own interests. The young grow up in such an environment are cut off from the continuity and connection to life which the Japanese understand as coming from their ancestors.

This lack of 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. Religion, and specifically Buddhism in this case, offers a view of the afterlife, and therefore helps to give meaning to life and death by showing the continuity between this life and the next. Secular, modern culture, however, emphasises the material aspects of this life so strongly that it fails to provide a sense of continuity to existence, especially after death. While Rev. Shinohara emphasises this continuity, he also emphasises the preciousness of this life. He remarks that transmigration is an

inexact science, and one cannot know where one will end up in the next life. Thus suicide is not a viable means of escape either into another better world or into a realm of nothingness. This sensibility is also something he communicates to the families of those who have committed suicide. There is a great danger amongst the bereaved of following the suicidal into death as a way to make amends for not helping them enough before they killed themselves or in order to find them on the other side of death. This latter notion is one that is strong in Japanese spirituality as the other side of death is often spoken of as a realm of ancestors or a Buddhist Pure Land where one can meet with departed loved ones again. Rev. Shinohara warns against this mentality. He says it is best to develop and preserve the present connections one has in this life now.

The Buddhist temple used to be a place to communicate these values and to socialise the young, especially through festivals. The temple used to provide a regular sense of continuity and connection to their ancestors and to life and death. However, today with the rise of secularism and consumerism, the young may go to a temple only once or twice a year for a funeral, brief memorial service, or grave visit. Like Rev. Fujisawa, Rev. Shinohara talks about the present wall between the temple and society, remarking that, "Temple people also have some uneasiness about dealing with suicide, so they would rather not end up having to think about being concerned with suicide. However, I think that if someone is feeling suicidal, a priest should confront the situation, meet them and listen to what they have to say."[11] He emphasises that, "Buddhism is not a religion for the dead but for the living."

On the other hand, Rev. Shinohara thinks there is the potential for greater trust with a traditional, local temple priest, because in contemporary Japan, the rise of cults have made people very suspicious of alternative means of spirituality. Another common alternative to the temple are medical doctors. However, Rev. Shinohara notes medical and mental health professionals are so overloaded with cases that they usually only have time to diagnose, prescribe medicine, and then move onto

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[11] *Jimonkoryu* August, 2006 p. 46.

the next case. He remarks that in the United States there are three doctors for every patient while in Japan the ratio is only one to one. He says that 80% of the people who come to him are on medication, and he feels this is a devastating and inhuman form of treatment.

In this way, the Buddhist priest as counselor (not as ritualist for a funeral) has the potential to provide critical support to the medical system. Rev. Shinohara emphasises the personal connection that a priest can develop with someone. He sees himself as a friend, without office hours, fees or subsequent expectations for a cure based on payment. He also eschews the doctor-patient barrier of professionalism to which most psychiatrists and psychotherapists ascribe. For example, he may take the time to share a meal as he finds that the suicidal often don't eat well and a good meal helps them think better. However, unlike many religious professionals, he emphasises simply listening over sermonizing, while offering patience, time and energy. While most people, including priests, feel this kind of work can only be done by licensed professionals, Rev. Shinohara emphasises that more people with such listening skills and concern for others need to get involved. In this way, he often encourages other priests to confront this problem even if they don't have a license

The temple out of which he works in rural Chiba was originally a training temple supported by the feudal government and had no lay people. Although Rev. Shinohara himself was born into a Buddhist temple in Hyogo, Choju-in is not a temple based on succession and one to which he was introduced by a friend. At present, he has about 100 lay members with some additional personal followers. Some of these people assist him in the 24 hour temple service for the suicidal. Rev. Shinohara does have a family. However, in order to allow them some space from the intensity of his 24 hour work, they live about one hour away in a separate residence.

In order to revive the value of the traditional community temple, Rev. Shinohara and his members have developed the Choju-in Sangha Association. This association has quite a number of activities and subgroups such as: a Buddhist school which runs some public programmes and practice events; an

events circle which creates concerts, tea ceremonies and such; a communal farming group; a relief aid circle for both international and domestic disasters; a mental support group; and an environmental group.

Rev. Shinohara stresses that the temple can be a refuge for 'hanging out' and finding quiet. "Almost all temples offer some green and open space, and not much other extraneous stuff. Even if there is some silence between the person and myself, they can still communicate with nature. People who have a daily lifestyle built upon running after time find this time precious. Above all for the person, it's important to make clear at the beginning and 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.' Regular people still have many hopes for the temple, and we must provide an environment that responds accordingly."[12]

It is interesting that while Rev. Fujisawa has worked so hard to raise awareness that suicide is not just an individual problem but a larger social one, Rev. Shinohara feels that if we don't focus on the individuals, one by one, they'll get left behind because we are blaming society or calling it a social problem. People need to do something where they live. In the end, the two are not at odds with each other on this point but rather have complimentary approaches which are both essential. Indeed, Rev. Shinohara is also strongly supportive of a network which can work on the larger, social aspect of the problem and through which older priests with experience can have regular contact with younger ones to pass on their knowledge.

Mr. Coffee: Rev. Toshihide Hakamata

Rev. Toshihide Hakamata is the forty-seven year old abbot of Gesso-ji, a Soto Zen temple in one of Japan's most northern and rural areas of Akita. Rev. Hakamata was born into this temple in the area known as Fujisato-cho. It's a rather remote mountainous area of about 4,300 residents. This area is well known in Japan for the Shirakami Mountain Range, a world heritage site, and also the brutal winters in which at least a foot of snow falls most days

[12] *Jimonkoryu* August, 2006 p. 47.

from January to March. Akita is also notorious in Japan for suicide, having had the highest suicide rate in the country for eleven years running. The area of Fujisato-cho itself had the highest rate of suicide within Akita, specifically amongst the elderly. From 1989 to 2003, a total of fifty locals took their own lives. On top of this chronic problem, Fujisato-cho came into national focus again in the Spring of 2006 when a disturbed young mother murdered both her own daughter and, a few weeks later, one of her daughter's friends.

In this way, we can see that Rev. Hakamata might have developed some innate connection to the problem of suicide having grown up in this area. As a temple successor, Rev. Hakamata went through the typical temple upbringing, including four years of living in Tokyo attending Soto Zen's Komazawa Buddhist University. However, he did spend an exceptionally long time in monastic training at Soto Zen's monastic center of Eihei-ji in the mountains of central Japan. He spent six years there whereas most candidates spend only the required one year in training. After returning home at the age of twenty-nine, Rev. Hakamata developed a detached retina and temporarily lost sight in his left eye. Coping with the suffering of losing a bodily function, he began to grapple with the problem of life.

In 1992 with other Soto Zen monks from the same prefecture, he created a chapter of the Vihara Association which works on terminal care, especially for the elderly. He began doing volunteer work in the palliative care ward in the Akita City hospital where he came in contact with terminal cancer patients. Around this time, he first learned about the situation of suicide in Akita at a seminar held at the Akita University Department of Medicine where a local expert, Prof. Naofumi Yoshioka, spoke. He continued to study the issue with Prof. Yoshioka, participating in a meeting entitled "Thinking about Depression in Akita".

The question arises, why is suicide so common in this area? We are not so surprised to learn of the high rates of suicide in urban Japan where community has broken down and individual alienation is high. However, the countryside is where the traditional values of Japan are supposedly preserved and where community is still something important. However, the three northernmost and perhaps most rural prefectures in Japan of

Akita, Aomori and Iwate have the three worst rates of suicide. The fact is that since the end of World War II, Japan has experienced a huge depopulation of its rural areas. Hence, suicide related to solitude, especially among the elderly living in depopulated mountainous regions, is high. However, 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, for example during rice planting season, they can be left in the house all day while the family works outside. In Japan, technology has become relatively ubiquitous, and those in rural areas tend to spend as much time by themselves with their cell phones, TVs and computers as urban people. In the countryside, the space between houses and communities and the reliance on automobiles actually increase the lack of physical connection among people.

Rev. Hakamata comments that, "In the countryside as well, human relationships have become fractured. For example, farm work is no longer done cooperatively. Each family works in a different company. Children have become fewer, and in these households, children aren't disciplined. The real meaning is that there is no connection across generations." [13] According to Motohashi Yutaka, a professor of public hygiene at Akita University, because of the drop in population, "the emptying out of villages" is spreading and traditional festivals can no longer be held in these areas.[14] As we noted with Rev. Shinohara's work, these festivals used to be an important way to nurture community and socialise the young. The despair of people from the regions which have been 'abandoned' could be a trigger. There can be a palpable feeling that compared with city life, these regions and communities are ones in decline which are filled with old people from another generation just waiting to die.

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[13] **"**What an Abbot Can Do for a Follower Who Complains of 'Wanting to Die'" (*'Shi-ni-tai' to uttaeru danka-ni jushoku-ga dekiru-koto*) *Jimonkoryu* September, 2006 p. 89-90.

[14] Naga, Satoru. "Sharing Anxiety at a Café: Challenging the Taboo of Suicide in Fujisato, Akita" (saron-de nayami kyouyu; akita. fujisato jisatsu-no tabu-ni idomu) Asahi Shinbun, September 25, 2006.

To this situation, Rev. Hakamata comments, "People who want to commit suicide at the time of doing so find themselves all alone. The power to stop this is needed from the community. Just from a small thing can come the chance of becoming anxious. As so we should give a hand when these small anxieties arise. When you overcome some problem, you must experience some happiness you could have never imagined..... In this way I thought that the key to create connection in the community did not need experts but rather getting people together to do something to stop suicide."[15] So in 2000 he organised a meeting called "Thinking about Our Hearts and Lives" at which twenty-eight people attended, including monks of his own denomination, housewives, health professionals and public health officials, and members of the social welfare organisation and district welfare officers. At this meeting, public health officials from all over the area gave lectures on health but also learned from listening to local residents. Rev. Hakamata has been part of this group that has held such meetings, lectures and activities in other cities and towns in the region.

In Fujisato-cho itself, he leads a group residents called the Thinking about Our Hearts and Lives Association (*kokoro-to inochi-wo kangaeru kai*), which consists of 28 members. In 2003, they established a café called *Yottetamore* in the back of the city hall in the lobby of the Three Generations Exchange Center. This center is a brand new building with tall ceiling and big windows for sunlight as well as using natural wood from the local area for an organic feeling. In this age where Starbucks and other such high end cafes 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 is not even a single café in Fujisato-cho. 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. It is situated in the main lobby of this community center and is open once a week on Wednesday afternoons. The purpose has been to provide a place where anyone can freely get together to talk. Rev. Hakamata comments that, "Whoever comes here will find someone who will

[15] *Jimonkoryu* September, 2006 p. 89-90.

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."[16] During this time, people can talk about difficult experiences or their problems, like marital friction, conflicts with mothers-in-law, and the distress of caring for the elderly. When people begin to spit out what's weighing on their minds, they can get pretty heated up. Rev. Hakamata notes, "This is a place of grieving for the unraised worries of the mind/heart." In general, the café is popular among middle-aged women, though occasionally young people and men will stop by in the midst of their busy days.

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 in some way resembles Rev. Fujisawa's in that it is done outside of the environment of the temple. Like Rev. Shinohara, he 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. For Rev. Hakamata, working outside the temple is also in response to a specific problem he encountered in dealing with suicide. He remembers one unforgettable scene while performing a wake service at a private residence. He was not informed of the cause of death by the grieving family, and there was some unusual suffering and confusion coming from the family. It was suicide, and the grieving family was keeping it a secret.[17]

The idea that suicide is 'the shame of relatives' (*mi-uchi-no haji*) is currently a deep rooted value in his region and most of Japan as well. Rev. Hakamata comments that while those who commit suicide are from within the town, no one talks about it. At the time that the Thinking about Our Hearts and Lives Association was started, suicide was a strong taboo in the region. There was a culture of not-speaking, and many grieving families didn't grieve themselves. They sought to refrain from crying and to act courageously. This has been difficult to redress, but Rev. Hakamata has worked hard to try to change this culture. He says,

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[16] *Jimonkoryu* September, 2006 p. 89.
[17] Naga, *Asahi Shinbun*, September 25, 2006.

"Suicide is not shameful. When suffering and suicide are spoken of and the difficulty of the mourning family is made known, an opening in the community is made and there must be a connection to the decrease in suicide."[18] Indeed, in 2004, for the first time in 17 years, there wasn't a suicide in the town. In 2005, there was one person and in 2006 one person. Rev. Hakamata feels that this isn't because they always talk about suicide at the café, but rather when people have problems, there is always an open window for them.

Working on such attitudinal change within his Zen community has also been a project of Rev. Hakamata. He notes, "It's sure that there is no temple that hasn't had to do some funerals for suicides. In this way, Buddhists have a connection with the suicide problem. But it seems no one understands how to listen to the voices of the bereaved families. It's difficult to get involved in people's problems which are seen as individual ones especially suicide, because you are not supposed to invade the privacy of others."[19]

In this way, Rev. Hakamata has confronted the wall between the temple and society by not only going out into the world himself but also getting his larger denomination involved. The Akita Soto Zen Youth Division has for the last three years done memorial services honoring those who have killed themselves and created prayer gatherings for the bereaved families of such people. This is the only such activity for dealing with suicide organised specifically on a denominational, not individual, level. In this way, at last year's gathering, Rev. Hakamata appealed to other priests, "This is an important chance to listen to the real feelings of bereaved families. There are many people participating who were close to a person who committed suicide some years ago. So shouldn't each denominational office create such a project soon?"[20] On a recent visit to the café, we not only found Rev. Hakamata with his group of devoted community followers serving coffee, but also helping out a young priest from the region who

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[18] Naga, *Asahi Shinbun*, September 25, 2006.
[19] *Jimonkoryu* September, 2006 p. 89.
[20] *Jimonkoryu* September, 2006 p.89.

through doing funeral services for numerous suicides had decided to get involved.

Virtual Reality: Rev. Jotetsu Nemoto

Rev. Jotetsu Nemoto is the abbot of Daizen-ji, 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 from Revs. Fujisawa, Shinohara, and Hakamata. 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.

This generation's parents grew up in the immediate post-war period and hold values of hard work for the sake of building the country, one's company and one's family. This post-war baby boom generation valued material benefit in this life, and their spirituality reflected this as this generation made up the core of the 'new religious movements' (*shin shukyou*), like Soka Gakkai and Rissho Koseikai, which emphasised the worldly benefits of a conscientious and industrious lifestyle. On the other hand, their children as the post-boom, post-modern generation never experienced the deprivations and difficulties of the post-war years. They experienced a nation and a culture transfixed on work and material gain, often at the cost of human relationship. In turn, this generation spawned a movement of 'new, new religions' (*shin shin shukyou*). These groups, such as the notorious Aum Shinri-kyo that gassed the Tokyo subways in 1995, focused on mysticism, occult practices, and the meaning of life beyond the material. In the past decade or so, the latest generation of Japanese youth has become even more individualistic in their orientation. While their religious or spiritual sentiments may reflect the more recent 'new, new religions' and the larger New Age

movement, they remain suspicious or unwilling to find relief in a spiritual community.

Rev. Nemoto studied Western philosophy and existentialism at university, becoming interested in Nietzsche and the famous Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima. His existential interest flowed out of an already strong appreciation for the difficulty of living. His mother's older brother committed suicide when he was young as well as two other school friends during his junior and senior high school years. By the third year of university, he had become dissatisfied with his life at university and quit school. Slowly he was drawn into an interest in Zen practice and entered a strict Rinzai Zen meditation temple at the age of 25. He lived in this strict and very secluded environment for four years.

In Japan today, such a person is rather extraordinary. First of all, young men who do not come from temple background rarely ordain to become Buddhist priests. Recently, those who do ordain from non-temple background are often men who marry the daughters of priests and ordain to join their wives' family temples to take up the work and livelihood of a priest. While these men may have a generally stronger than feeling of religiosity than their successor counterparts, there are still very few young men who ordain into strict monastic environments out of their own spiritual interests. Rev. Nemoto chose the Rinzai Zen order which is relatively stricter than other orders in their training and has far fewer temples that succeed through father-son connections.

For most Japanese priests, including the Soto Zen order, they have a brief period of intense monastic training, anywhere from one week to one year at most, and then return to their family temples. One finds that most priests view this training as a right of passage, a period of hardship they endure with their 'brothers' from the same order. It is not something from which they gain a tremendous amount of spiritual illumination or value. This is mostly due to the style of these training temples, which tends to focus on 'toughening up' young priests as in a military boot camp. This situation is in contrast to what one might idealise as the role of such temples in edifying and giving young priests a taste of a spirituality that is difficult to experience in the almost lay lifestyle of the family temple. Rev. Nemoto is actually one of the few priests

one will meet who found great value and spiritual illumination in the strict training he underwent.

After four years of living in such a monastic setting, Rev. Nemoto came back out into the world to search for his place in society again. What he found surprised him. He remarks that, "Nothing had changed." In fact, if anything, things had become worse. Since the time of his school friends' suicides, the number of suicides all over Japan had increased. Part of his re-integration experience was working part time in a McDonald's on the west side of Tokyo. He himself surmises that after four years of vegetarian food in the temple and numberless urges to eat junk food and meat during that time, he was drawn to this kind of job – one usually held by students trying to make a little pocket money or by the new generation of 'slackers' (*furita*) who only seek for free time and a basic lifestyle. This choice of work was more than ironic as it put Rev. Nemoto on the front line of alienated, urban Japanese youth.

At McDonald's, he came into close personal contact with these young people, especially as his fellow workers. At first he became famous among the staff for his shaven head which went against company regulations for workers but for which he successfully gained exemption since he is a religious professional. After his identity as a Zen priest became known, other workers started asking him questions about Buddhism or the meaning of suffering. He reports that they didn't want to just know about beliefs but also about what practice was like. Rev. Nemoto found that many expressed doubts or little hope about their futures and what to do after graduating 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 like 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. The connection between youth and suicide was something that had been with him since his friends' suicides in his school days. At this time, Rev. Nemoto was also living near a train station on the western Tokyo Chuo Line, which is notorious for the high number of people committing suicide by throwing themselves in front of its trains. From his apartment, he

could hear whenever there was an announcement that train service had been halted due to "an accident resulting in injury or death" (*jinshin jiko*).

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" (*shi-ni tai hito*). 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 actually met 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 400 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. However, 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 94.

When he began these chat groups, he just jumped into counselling individual mails. He used to answer up to 60 e-mails a day but he has now found that 30 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. Sutra copying is an ancient spiritual practice in Mahayana Buddhism and has always been popular among lay followers as a way to learn the teachings but also enjoy the meditative relaxation of copying a short sutra text. Instead of doing this by hand on the premises of the temple, people in Rev. Nemoto's group type out the sutra on a computer keyboard and then e-mail it to him. Rev. Nemoto also uses the conference call capabilities of the software called Skype to create a virtual Zen meditation practice session.

As compared to the popularity of telephone counselling 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 'social recluses' (*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. In fact, although Rev. Nemoto does some counselling over the phone himself, he has some reservations about the larger 'industry' of telephone counselling and suicide prevention centres. He remarks, "There are some people who seek them out I suppose, but these people after using the service many times may feel 'Is it that simple?', and they eventually become cynical about such services." He continues, "If you yourself have some anxiety, would you call a counselling centre? Of course not, you would rather talk to a friend. If we are not aware of this sensibility in most people, we won't really be able to save them. The framework is important. Since I've never been to such centers I don't really know. It's also rude to say such negative things. But if there are people who are helped, there are also ones with no energy to use the service or who dislike it."

Rev. Nemoto's deeply Buddhist approach to his life and work stand in contrast to others who work in this field, even other priests. Firstly, his approach is in contrast to the way modern Japan deals with this issue as the domain of medical and mental health professionals. Rev. Nemoto remarks, "People go to the hospital and get a prescription for medicine but no resolution ever comes. They just continue on like this, just wanting to die. One time, at one of our off-line gatherings, a mental health professional came and talked, but we all felt that medicine has no basis for telling us the meaning of life. What are the reasons for saying you shouldn't die? In this situation, if you take a more religious approach, it seems you can help people by finding some motivation for them to keep on living."

Secondly, his approach is somewhat in contrast to Rev. Fujisawa and other priests who emphasise more that priests should develop professional counselling skills and/or work in non-religious counselling organisations. In fact, Rev. Nemoto's lack of professional training and his somewhat solitary approach to his work received some criticism at a gathering two years ago of socially engaged Buddhist priests called "Bozu Be Ambitious".

Some participants expressed their concern, "There's a limit to how far you can continue with counselling with just a kind attitude."; and "You can't just do this by yourself. You need some kind of organisation." Rev. Nemoto appreciated the feedback and said, "I listened to the very concerned words of the participants. Afterwards, we prayed for the recovery of the suicidal, and briefly chanted the sutras of each sect. For everyone it was moving to feel together the connection to the suicide problem."[21]

The difference between Rev. Nemoto's sentiments and those of some other priests may lie in the different way they approach their faith and practice. As we saw earlier, Rev. Nemoto came to Buddhism and the priesthood of his own will and desire for spiritual meaning. This led him into a period of serious monastic and spiritual practice from which he continues to draw in his counselling work. From a certain standpoint, we could ask why wouldn't one expect a Buddhist monk to be especially skilled to counsel the suicidal – they come from a tradition with a deep meditation practice that has much contemplation on impermanence, death and the meaning of life? However, this type of sensibility is not one that you readily find among typical priests in Japan. The succession system amongst the priesthood, the routinisation and ritualisation of their practice, the adoption of largely lay lifestyles, and the increased secularization of Japanese society have all contributed to the average Japanese priest lacking much spiritual depth and in turn doubting the contributions he can make to society from the standpoint of Buddhist teachings and practice. Finding a priest like Rev. Fujisawa who has worked hard to understand and master the secular world is easier today than finding a priest like Rev. Nemoto who attempts to creatively bring his Buddhist study and practice into the secular world.

Rev. Hakamata further exhibits the possibilities of a priest who becomes re-grounded in his practice and finds this a source of creativity for social work. He comes from a typical temple family but seems to have had some proclivity for practice as he spent an additional five years beyond the norm at his Soto Zen's training centre at Eihei-ji. After returning to his home temple in Akita, it appears that his meditation practice waned. However, after getting

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[21] *Jimonkoryu* September, 2006 p. 92-93.

deeply involved in the suicide issue, he found that a return to frequent meditation practice helped to refresh his spirit and to better handle his work. The discipline of enduring and transforming both physical and emotional pain in formal meditation practice helped him to gain insight into the nature of people to avoid such pain at all costs, through immersing themselves in material comforts as well as avoiding relationships with depth. This tendency to avoid pain he sees as a root problem in the alienation and suicide problems. Rev. Nemoto as well has derived important insights from the sheer physicality of meditation practice. Nowadays so many people are trapped in their minds, and meditation can seem overly mental as well. However, Rev. Nemoto talks about the direct awareness and experience of the body through the breath. This understanding he uses in the visits his group makes to famous places for committing suicide. His emphasis is on going in a group, not alone as the suicidal do, with friends who are in relationship with one another to physically experience the place where death occurs. In this way, he hopes for some possibility to transform the experience of the place as one of suicide to one of rediscovering the meaning of life with others.

Conclusion

While such creative use of traditional monastic practice is inspiring, the impressive aspect of this general movement of priests to deal with the issue of suicide is that no one is really championing a single proper method or approach to engaging this work. Each priest has their own unique background and abilities and each of them is engaging in the way that works best for him. In fact, at a recent public symposium on Buddhism and suicide, Revs. Fujisawa, Shinohara, Hakamata and Nemoto served as guest speakers[22]. Rev. Nemoto commented that he personally

[22] On October 22, 2007 in Yokohama, the IBEC team in association with the National Youth Edification Consulting Group, the Japan Buddhist Federation, and the AYUS Buddhist International Cooperation Network organized a half day public symposium entitled "Thinking about the Suicide Problem: Searching for the Possibilities of Engaged Buddhism in

could not run the type of 24-7 community temple in the way Rev. Shinohara does. The internet is the medium at which he is best and can serve people the best. His comments weren't made in criticism but rather in respect towards Rev. Shinohara's ability and different style.

The one common feature that does arise in all the priests we've surveyed thus far is the emphasis in counselling on deep listening and creating close personal relationship. This is a practice inherent in the Buddhist practice tradition but it also a very basic human competency. Rev. Nemoto remarks here in a way that many other priests have as well, "Concerning intimacy of partnership, one can say sending a mail is roughly equivalent to speaking. E-mail is the chief means of speaking. But it doesn't involve any specialised words. It's just exchanging the usual discussion of everyday life. Within this, it's possible to come to a resolution of the problem together. The thing I can do at this time is to create the basis for shared intimacy or being a partner. They may tell me the details of their illness or medication, which I listen to, and share their anxiety about it closely. In this, they may come to think 'Man, why have I been wanting to die?', and then they can say they can move forward. After such an exchange, if Buddhism can play a role that's great."[23] Rev. Nemoto emphasises that whether it's on the telephone or on e-mail, the important thing is to share in their anxiety.

Through these 'suicide priests', we can gain a deeper insight into the potentials for a robust and authentic socially engaged Buddhist movement in Japan; that is a movement which deals with the real and pressing suffering of the people on the ground and which also confronts these problems on a structural level. From a structural level, we can see the concurrent crises of the deterioration of social structures which can foster human relationships and the deterioration of the Buddhist temple as a community center. These suicide priests' show us how to take on these concurrent crises at the same time. Priests can use their temples as places to engage in efforts to confront alienation and

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Japan" which was attended by around 150 people including priests, NGO workers, concerned citizens and the mass media.

[23] *Jimonkoryu* September, 2006 p. 92.

suicide and to rebuild human relationship. Rev. Shinohara spoke directly of how temples can offer people a place where time and money are not an issue, and where nature can be directly experienced in a healing way. Rev. Hakamata's café is an extension of this sensibility, and Rev. Nemoto further extends such a place of 'refuge' into the virtual world. Finally Rev. Fujisawa, in this earlier quote, shows where this movement can go. "If we could talk about real 'community temples' (*kakekomi-dera*), for example setting up a café or salon in a temple that anyone could visit, I think it's possible to 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." Beyond the problem of suicide, the Buddhist temple could rediscover its place in Japanese society as a place devoted to human relationship with a wide variety of activities and services for people in need.

It is this wider vision that is slowly emerging in the general temple revival movement, which we are seeing here in Japan recently through a variety of new kinds of social events being held at temples. However, one of the lingering problems for the Buddhist temple is how to survive financially in this market society. There are increasing cases of laity leaving their familial temples out of dissatisfaction with the abbot and his business practices. However, perhaps the practice of funerals as the core financial foundation of the temple is still necessary in order for the temple to develop its ability to offer other un-commodified human services to the living. It would appear to ruin the whole strength of the present movement if such counselling activities became services with fees (something Rev. Shinohara directly speaks to). A more radical solution would be to revive the tradition of laity providing for the temple materially out of donations (*fuse*), while the priests lessened this material burden through adopting a simple lifestyle. We are certainly not at this point in Japan. However, it is remarkable that the idea of socially engaged Buddhism is gaining interest at the centre of the major denominations which are struggling with managing the future of their temples. By providing various human services to the people, they see how they may be able to revive their social role and re-establish themselves in the 21st century.