

From a Disconnected Society to an Interconnected Society

HAKAMATA TOSHIHIDE SHUN'EI

Translator's Introduction
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IN 2006, the International Buddhist Exchange Center (IBEC) began research into the suicide problem in Japan as part of its Engaged Buddhism Project. Japan's suicide rate at that point was in its eighth consecutive year of being over thirty thousand per year, which being at a rate of 25/100,000 people was easily the highest among G7 countries. At that time, we discovered that Buddhist priests from a variety of regions and backgrounds were addressing this problem from their own individual standpoints. In part through IBEC's efforts,¹ these priests came to learn of each other's work and began networking, eventually forming a cooperative body called the 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). With this, a movement began to form in the critical shift from individual activists working in isolation to a coordinated effort in group form to confront the issue.²

While the suicide rate in Japan continued to hover over thirty thousand per year through to 2011, the movement grew. It not only captured the attention

¹ IBEC's October 2007 public symposium on the issue was one of the first times prominent priests in this field came together in a public forum. Shortly after, two of IBEC's research fellows became active and ongoing participants in the group.

² For a detailed presentation on the beginning of this movement and of its prominent members, see "Reconstructing Priestly Identity and Roles and the Development of Socially Engaged Buddhism in Contemporary Japan" (Watts and Okano 2012).

of the mainstream of Buddhist denominations but also the public eye and national media, in which these priests were often portrayed in sympathetic and heroic terms. The Association of Buddhist Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem began in May 2007 with eight priests engaging in a cooperative letter writing system for those seeking counsel. On 1 December of the same year, they held their first proto-type memorial service (*tsuitō hōyō* 追悼法要) for the departed souls of suicide victims and their bereaved loved ones at Eijuin 永寿院, a Nichiren denomination temple in Tokyo, at which eight people attended. Since then, on this same day, designated nationally as “Life Day” (*inochi no hi* 命の日), the group has held such services at large and prestigious temples in the Tokyo area. The most recent was held at Tsukiji Honganji 築地本願寺 in 2013 and drew 155 participants and fifty-one priests. A third major activity of the group has been their “sharing” or group counseling sessions (*wakachi-ai* 分かち合い) held on the last Thursday of every month at Tsukiji Honganji. This consists of individual counseling sessions with priests and the bereaved starting at 10:30 in the morning, followed by meetings of the whole group in the afternoon.

By April 2010, the association had grown to twenty-five members, including five nuns, and had responded to a total of 1,733 letters by 447 people from all over Japan. By March 2014, there were forty-two members with around fifteen nuns, and they had responded to 5,609 letters from 991 people. The group has also renamed itself the Association of Buddhist Priests Confronting Self-death and Suicide (*Jishi, Jisatsu ni Mukiau Sōryo no Kai* 自死・自殺に向き合う僧侶の会)—the use of the additional term “self-death” (*jishi* 自死) reflecting a greater awareness of and sensitivity to the complexities of suicide and the problems of social taboos surrounding it. Another indicator of the growth of this work as a movement is the development of such associations in other major cities of the country, such as Nagoya, Osaka, and Hiroshima since 2009. These groups are affiliated with, yet independent of, the association in Tokyo, further reflecting the horizontal and cooperative nature of the movement as well as its ecumenical, trans-sectarian makeup.

In looking more deeply at the work of these priests, it is easy to see the profound impact they have had on the large numbers of suicidal persons (at least three times the number who actually do kill themselves) and the bereaved (another four to five times that of those who kill themselves). Yet have these activities made an overall impact on what is now recognized in mainstream society as a “social problem”? When the official numbers for suicides for the year 2012 came out in the winter of 2013, the number

27,766 marked the first time since 1997 that the suicide rate had been under thirty thousand. Again in early 2014, the 2013 official rate was disclosed as 27,276. It is hard to assess a qualitative change in the lives of the depressed and suicidal from such numbers. Indeed, 27,276 is still very high, and its rate of 21.7/100,000 citizens keeps Japan in the top ten globally, well above the rates in other G7 nations yet on par with the high rates in other East Asian countries like South Korea (28.1), China (22.2), and Taiwan (15.1). However, it cannot be denied that significant progress has been made in raising awareness in mainstream society of the problem of suicide and breaking down the social taboos on discussing and confronting it. Much of this progress has been spearheaded by Japanese civil society groups, such as 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. However, the role of these “suicide prevention priests” has not been insignificant. Their active participation in the wider social movement also marks an extremely important shift for Buddhist priests and organizations in developing meaningful social roles in contemporary Japanese society, in which they have become deeply marginalized since the end of World War II.

At the beginning of our research in 2006 and onwards for the next few years, we found that while most priests acknowledged suicide as a “social problem,” their activism did not necessarily take place on a social level, that is, confronting the structural and cultural aspects of suicide which form the root of the problem. Rightly so, many of these priests sought to address the issue at its crisis point, namely by addressing the suicidal persons themselves, by engaging in emergency counseling over the telephone, on the Internet, and at their temples. The movement to create cooperative networks for the additional purpose of supporting the bereaved at memorial services and at group counseling sessions marked an extension of this emergency work. Yet this still did not mark any shift towards either getting at the root causes of suicide or developing a more pro-active vision of a society without suicide. In Buddhist terms, this would be the necessary shift from engaging in the First Noble Truth of suffering (Pāli: *dukkha*), the suffering of depression and suicide, towards the Second Noble Truth, the cause of depression and suicide, and onto the Third and Fourth Noble Truths, which develop a vision and action plan for a “post-suicidal” society.

As these priests continued to log endless hours of emergency counseling, they came to understand the issue much more deeply, yet also to suffer from the secondary trauma and burnout caused by such emergency work. The

deep understanding and experience they have gained has provided them with an expertise that is attracting the attention of civic and governmental groups, who are now requesting their help in public campaigns and activities. This deeper understanding, along with the struggle to engage with the endless stream of disturbed individuals, has also pushed some of these priests into a more nuanced and deeper analysis of the problem. Consequently, some are developing wider ranging activities to root out the problem and reach towards such a “post-suicidal” society—hence working towards a fuller expression of the practice of the Four Noble Truths.

Rev. Hakamata Toshihide Shun’ei is one of these priests who has taken his analysis of and engagement in this issue to a deeper level. Rev. Hakamata was born in 1958 in the town of Noshiro 能代, in Akita Prefecture in northern Japan. He graduated in 1981 from the faculty of Buddhist Studies at Komazawa University, Tokyo, affiliated with his own Sōtō Zen denomination. In 2000, he founded the Association for Thinking about Mind and Life, a suicide prevention group, in his town of Fujisato-chō in Akita. In 2010, he became the Chairman of the Board of the Akita Prefecture Flower Bud Movement, which was the first prefectural level suicide prevention movement in Japan. At present, he is the abbot of Gesshōji 月宗寺, a Sōtō Zen temple in Fujisato-chō. He also serves on the Tōhoku regional board of directors of the Japan Association of Euthanasia, as the Vice President of the non-profit suicide prevention network Kaze 風, and as a part-time lecturer at the Japan Red Cross Akita College of Nursing.

The following translation is an edited version of Rev. Hakamata’s Japanese language talk, “‘Muen shakai’ kara ‘yūen shakai’ e” 「無縁社会」から「有縁社会」へ (From a Disconnected Society to an Interconnected Society),³ that was given to the Rinshō Buddhism Chaplain Training Program on 19 June 2013 at the Tokyo University Young Buddhist Association Hall and subsequently published in *Rinshō Bukkyō nyūmon* 「臨床仏教」入門 (An Introduction to ‘Rinshō Buddhism’).⁴ The presentation of the structural and cultural forces of modernity and their traumatic impact on his region marks a significant deepening of his thought and analysis since IBEC’s initial research on his work in 2007.⁵

³ I am grateful to Rev. Sakai Jin, who assisted in clarifying certain portions of the original text as I made my translation.

⁴ Zenkoku Seishōnen Kyōka Kyōgikai Fuzoku Rinshō Bukkyō Kenkyūsho 2013, pp. 167–92.

⁵ An extended profile of which appears in Watts and Okano 2012.

From a Disconnected Society to an Interconnected Society
HAKAMATA TOSHIHIDE SHUN'EI

My home town village of Fujisato-chō in Akita Prefecture serves as the entry point to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Shirakami-Sanchi mountain range. Yet with a population of less than four thousand, Fujisato-chō is also part of the nationwide social problem of suicide. According to a report by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, over thirty thousand people commit suicide every year in Japan.⁶ Within this number, Akita—with a total population of one million—until recently had the highest suicide rate in the country for fifteen years running. The suicide rate in Fujisato-chō is twice that of the rest of Akita, indicating that our people are possessed of profound sorrow.

Depopulation, the Aging of the Population, Hikikomori, and Dying Alone (koritsu shi) in Akita Prefecture

I believe that the problems of suicide, the elderly, and dying alone all are due to the increasing isolation of people. I also believe that isolation is an illness of modern society. It is a vast and deep problem. Its fundamental solution must lie in restoring the population and reviving the community as well as other concrete measures that I think are at present extremely important.

Firstly, I would like to look at the problem of the aging of the population. The situation of severe depopulation, lower birth rates, and fewer children exists all over Japan. In terms of the Japan's demographic changes, if depopulation continues at this rate, it is estimated that by the year 2055 the entire population of Japan will fall to around ninety million, compared to the present population of 126 million.

In Akita, which has some of the highest rates of elderly and suicide in Japan, the population is in transition and depopulation has been very severe. In 1980, the population of Akita was 1,250,000, and now in 2012 it is a little more than one million. While the population of the city of Akita has remained stable at three hundred thousand, the areas outside this urban center have gradually become depopulated. In 2012, the depopulation rate in Akita was the highest in Japan, so it will soon surpass Shimane Prefecture as having the highest rate of elderly, as well. As the population decreases, the age of the population is also advancing. This situation does not only pertain to Akita, but really to the whole country.

⁶ In 2012, the official number was 27,766, marking the first time since 1997 that the suicide rate had been under thirty thousand. The 2013 official rate was 27,276.

The depopulation situation in Fujisato-chō has also become quite severe. Our population dropped below four thousand, five years ago. Right now it stands at 3,789, and is falling rapidly. Although the number of households is not decreasing, we can observe that the aging of our community is advancing. This is because when young people get married, they leave home and establish a separate household. The number of these cases is quite high, so while the number of elderly households is increasing, the total number of households is not changing. In this way, elderly people are often living alone in outlying hamlets while the young live in the urban centers.

On top of all this is the growing problem of poverty. Compared to all forty-seven prefectures in Japan, Akita last year was the fourth lowest in average annual income. Fujisato-chō has the lowest wages of any town in Akita with an average annual income of 1,462,000 yen (about fifteen thousand US dollars), which is considered “working poor.” As the aging of the population continues, the elderly community becomes further marginalized, which leads to a decline in the number and quality of public services available nearby. For example, snow removal services for small groups of elderly living in isolated hamlets become administratively cost-inefficient. Therefore such elderly can only continue to have a life in their hamlets by moving away during the winter and returning in the spring to begin farming.

Usually, the elderly live only among other elderly people. In the worst cases, when they have a physical breakdown, they have no means to contact anyone. So I have developed concerns about the problem of what is called “dying alone” (*koritsu shi* 孤立死). It would be best if the elderly community could be properly interdependent and help each other out. However, farming communities have lost their tradition of community labor and mutual support because of the mechanization of agriculture. Each household now uses machinery and works their rice paddies by themselves. In the past, a household could not farm without the help of others in planting, weeding, and harvesting. However, this kind of cooperative work has all but been lost. In this present situation of individual households doing their own agricultural work, the population continues to age and decrease, while the community stops noticing what is going on with its individual members. So when an elderly person’s health breaks down, they often end up dying alone. In many cases, some people who actually could have survived if someone had noticed their problem end up dying by stroke or heart failure.

This kind of situation is happening more and more. For example, one year ago, an elderly woman, who was a member of my temple, fell in a ditch and died, right in front of her house. This eighty-nine-year-old woman was

living with her eighty-six-year-old husband. The husband had been working very hard out in the fields and did not know what had happened until her body was discovered. People who knew them thought sadly, “Ah, her time has finally come.” This is the first time such a thing happened in my community. This society of the elderly is not really a properly functioning community. Since the community has become dispersed, the elderly have become socially handicapped. In urban areas, one can find communal apartments for the elderly. That seems to be the way to create a safe place when people become old. However, I do not think you can create such a place where depopulation is occurring, which is advancing in every region in Japan.

At present, I am serving a four-year term working at the Sōtō Zen denomination’s Akita regional office. I have invited various people to think about the problem of depopulation in Akita and how it relates to Buddhist temples. The aging of communities and their depopulation is having a major effect on Buddhist temples which are shutting down in these rural areas. The official research institute of the Jōdo Pure Land denomination has done a recent study and held a public symposium on this issue. However, it seems that the headquarters of many Buddhist denominations have not considered how to confront it at all. They have not put any funding into working on it, because they cannot see any way to resolve it.

Along with declining population, there are also the problems of dying in isolation and *hikikomori* 引きこもり—those that shut themselves inside their homes and avoid all social interaction. On the surface, this appears to be a problem that has not existed until just recently. The Japan National Council of Social Welfare performed a study in Fujisato-chō and found that among those of working age from eighteen to fifty-five years old, 113 have cut off social and cooperative exchanges; in other words, they are *hikikomori*. A *hikikomori* is someone who does not reach out or call out for their own support system. The problem of *hikikomori* is related to the one of dying alone or in isolation. If one’s parents are active, then a person can live the lifestyle of a *hikikomori*. However, when something happens to the parents, who have provided for all their needs—if they become ill or die—the *hikikomori* can also end up dying as they are.

It was surprising to me to find out that 113 people in our village have become like this. We could discover this situation through the Japan National Council of Social Welfare’s study but not from our own local government’s efforts. The reason is that the parents were concealing the situation and would respond to the local government by saying, “There is no such *hikikomori*

child at this house.” However, the local branch of the Japan National Council of Social Welfare first created a plan for rehabilitating these *hikikomori* back into society before conducting the study. The council called out to people in the community, asking for information about such people, and offering to visit their households and give information about the rehabilitation program.

I believe the *hikikomori* problem as well as the issues of depopulation and the aging of society can all be traced back to the core issue of isolation. The suicide issue also became a related one when the country went into economic crisis in the late 1990s and the suicide numbers went over thirty thousand per year nationwide. When businesses turned sour and many experienced economic failure and bankruptcy, suicides began to increase. While the current suicide rate in Akita is very high, we can see that 1965 was a turning point. Something happened in that year, namely the beginning of modern agriculture and mechanized farming.

Rapid Structural Change to the Village Community

In Japan, 1964 was marked by the hosting of the Olympics Games in Tokyo. The Prime Minister at the time, Ikeda Hayato 池田勇人 (1899–1965), began a national drive to double personal incomes. He kept pounding the message of how we had to improve our economy. Out of this distorted overemphasis grew the economic gaps between the urban areas and the farming towns as well as the development of environmental pollution problems. His successor, Satō Eisaku 佐藤栄作 (1901–1975), tried to lessen this overemphasis on pure economic growth by pushing through policies for “social development,” but this ended up making a basis for the modernization of agriculture and mechanization of farming. He aimed to raise up the farming communities and thereby create economic growth. Japan’s large corporations provided the basis for this raising up, so the policy abandoned any management of environmental pollution created by factories in order to compete at an unrestrained level.

The modernization of the community started with the modernization of the household. As investment in mechanization increased and money poured into the farming communities, people were encouraged to remake the thatched roof villages where they lived. Houses at that time had straw thatch roofs, kitchens with dirt floors, and bathrooms located outside near where the farming work was done. This kind of system was very unhygienic, and in the case of Akita, many people died of strokes from going outside in light clothing or pajamas to the toilet in the middle of winter. To avoid this, people began getting modern housing.

Under the name of “social development,” various kinds of modernization policies were pursued. However, as people began to buy farming machinery and rebuild their houses, debts also accrued, which had to be repaid. For a small farming household, it was not possible to repay these debts by only engaging in traditional farming. They had to mechanize and then work at other jobs for further income. In this way, villager men used machinery to work in the peak farming seasons of spring and autumn, and then in other seasons left home to find work. They came to only live in their brand new homes during planting, harvesting, summer Obon festival, and New Year’s; some not even coming home for Obon or New Year’s.

A basic principle of capitalism is the need to concentrate people, material resources, and capital. Japan used to consist of mostly farming hamlets in which the people were not separated from each other. The Meiji Restoration in 1868 brought the drive to modernize the nation, but the collectivizing of people as a work force in order to build the modern nation state had not yet started. Japan was also a resource poor nation, so in the Meiji Era (1868–1912) it was still in an immature stage of capitalism. You could not do anything if the human resources were not collectivized, so in order for Japan to truly embark on the path of success in global capitalism, it required the initial power of these migrant laborers. In this way, everyone eventually moved to the cities, and Japan developed into the second largest economy in the world. The speed of economic development was quite incredible at this time, and an ideology of the supremacy of economy also spread throughout the country. I think this is really where the true cause of isolation lies.

The year 1965 is unmistakably the point at which the village community begins to collapse. Originally, the village community was based on cooperative labor. The periods of planting and harvest bound or fastened the community together. In mutual association, everyone brought together their energy for work. The bonds of the village were its rules or conventions, and if they were violated, there were penalties, such as being ostracized. The only exceptions were at times of funerals and fires. At such times, even if a household had broken numerous community rules and sanctions had been imposed upon them, they were helped. In this way, the village community sustained itself. One main rule was that everyone participated in communal labor. Such communal labor could muster great energy to preserve agricultural traditions and methods. However, as this practice began to decline, the village became increasingly dispersed, and so we have arrived at this present situation.

Akita is a region with heavy snow which covers and compresses the fields, so domestic animals like cows and horses were used to till them. If

you did not have such animals, then this work had to be done by hand. Only then could planting begin. When using communal labor, not every field was planted at the same time as families would rotate through the community helping one another. However, it seemed much easier and convenient when it could be done all at one time. Certainly, farmers were happy with this more convenient way of doing things. When spring came, they tilled the fields by machinery and then the rest of the time returned to work for cash incomes by which they could build new houses. In this way, we came to ignore the miserable aspects of having to be a seasonal laborer leaving home on late-night trains.

At the time I was a university student, people in my region were still engaged in this kind of migrant labor. I remember there was an express train called the Tsugaru, which took twelve hours to get to Tokyo, as opposed to the bullet train today which takes just four hours. It was an overnight train, but there were no sleeping berths. Migrant laborers would board the train with a supply of unrefined *doburoku* sake and take the usual hard seats. When *doburoku* bottles get too warm, the liquid starts to ferment, popping off the caps and overflowing. To avoid that problem, the workers would come onto the train with bottles plugged up with straw. They would spread out some newspaper to lie down on while they chatted with each other and got drunk. On their return, they would be loaded up with presents for their families and friends that would fill up the aisles as they drank heartily again.

The point I want to emphasize here is that I do not think this was a rich life for everyone. Truthfully, there was something lurking behind the new materially pleasant lifestyles and the new ways of farming that people were not noticing. If you look at the data, you will see that the suicide rate in Akita became the highest in the nation during this period. From 1930 to 1965, the suicide rate here was below the national average, and in 1955 it was well below the growing national rate of 25.2/100,000 at 20.2. However, in 1965 it began to exceed the national average. By 1970 it was 4.5 suicides/100,000 more, and from 1983 begins a period that has not abated in which it is over 10 suicides/100,000 more than the national average, peaking in 2003 at 44.6 to the national average of 25.5/100,000. This increasing suicide rate was the negative side of things, and no one wanted to speak about it.

The Effect of Structural Change on Local Culture

As mentioned earlier, one of the exceptions to community ostracizing was in the event of the death of a member of the community and the need for a funeral. No matter what was going on, when anyone died, the community

all gathered together to help out. In so many regions funeral homes now do everything. In my area, however, funeral homes have not yet entered. Funerals are run by what is called “*dami* helpers.” *Dami* is “cremation” in the local dialect. They are people from the community who come to help and to inform everyone when there has been a death. Men get together and prepare for the funeral procession as well as for the funeral itself by gathering straw thatch for the pyre and smoothing down pieces of wood for the casket.

The women break into squads: one to make food and bring it to the house of the bereaved and another to prepare embroidered clothes for the funeral. The former begins with making a soup of tofu and boiled mountain vegetables. They cook not only the normal food for the family and guests but also special dishes that are used as offerings during the ceremony. The embroidering work involves making traditional ceremonial garb, like a *haori* coat and *hakama* skirt for the chief mourner. Then they make white cloth to cover the hair of the women of the mourning family and white collars for the men of the family. However, it was not allowed to make any funeral preparations beforehand, nor say things like, “They’ll need to perform a funeral at that house pretty soon, so we should get everyone together and prepare.”

At my temple, there are still such helpers who go around and inform the community about someone’s passing. Two men go around the village together doing this, and then everyone comes together to begin the preparations I have mentioned above. I have seen that when a funeral company enters into this process, you start hearing things like, “Does the chief mourner wear a size S or L?” Of course, these clothes have already been made beforehand. Traditionally, we understand this to be very ill mannered.

“Someone has just died in this house”; “A baby has been born in that house”; “The breadwinner in that house has fallen ill”; “That old woman has become senile and needs looking after.” In times like these, people in the community would make food and bring it over or help with the farm work. This was just natural or normal, and this is what was called *shigoto* 仕事. *Shigoto* was the “work” of the community, and it was a duty. On the other hand, the term we used as employment or the work you did to earn an income was called *kasegi* 稼ぎ. Both terms are important, but in the era when there was still communal labor, *shigoto* was uttered more frequently. It was established that *shigoto* took priority, even if you had to quit or take time off from *kasegi* to take care of it.

However, this culture has all died off now. *Kasegi* has become the ultimate priority, and now the common term for “work” especially in urban

areas is *shigoto*. The basic rule of the company is that whatever is happening, one cannot take a break from *kasegi*. If there were rules that allowed employees to take breaks for community duties, it would cause problems for the companies. Therefore, doing things like helping out with funerals has gradually become impossible. A funeral is performed now only by a particular household. In this way, I feel that when funeral homes began enter into the process, it was a sign that communities were breaking down. I really do not know how much longer the *dami* helper system in my village can last.

The prioritization of *kasegi* is deeply connected with the issue of the efficiency of the market economy. Economics is without question a big issue here. In making a living today, one has to have money whether one wants it or not. If I look at my own family's finances, recently we have a regular payment for our cell phone and Internet use. If we do not pay at the fixed time, then we cannot enjoy the service. In this way, things that we need keep increasing, so we need more and more money. We use electricity, and then water, heating, and air conditioning. This all involves having money. We must use money to be able to redeem these things. In order to live a comfortable life, *kasegi* has become essential. Whatever is going on, we still must go to *kasegi*. If we have no *kasegi*, then we cannot live our lives. It has come to the point where we should not think or say that we have enough or are satisfied. If there is something more convenient or more comfortable that comes out, then we are gradually induced to buy it. This seems to me to be the logic or principle of market economics.

In terms of the rural village, nowadays, people are actively pursuing *kasegi* rather than the mutually agreed upon conventions of communal labor that connected people with each other in the past. One of the core foundations of this communal labor system was the management of water. Japan is an island nation with steep mountains, few open plains, and a monsoonal climate that brings much rain. In my village, in the days when everyone was involved in agriculture, there was never a shortage of water. Our village is at the entry of the mountains with a river running through it that is always flowing with water. Since *kasegi* has become essential for everyone, however, farming is only done on Sundays. In this way, everyone plants their rice paddies at the same time and draws water for them at the same time. When this started happening, for the first time water did not reach the paddies at the further end of the river. This forced the people at that part of the river to install water pumps. An old person in the village remarked, "We never once had a situation in the village where there wasn't enough water for the fields." There was never a cause for not having

enough water. In the end, since *kasegi* is the most essential thing, this kind of situation arises. Because of the demand for a convenient and comfortable lifestyle, the bonds of our village have been destroyed.

Another aspect of communal water management revolved around security. When the rainy season comes, the rainwater enters the river system quickly and creates strong river currents that often result in flooding. In order to protect the village, it was not possible to think of oneself. Everyone had to participate in building bridges, which could be easily rebuilt even if they were swept away. Everyone in the area around the village would gather to build bridges and embankments to protect against floods. The utmost priority was the “security” of the village. This value system, like that of *shigoto*, was eventually applied to the company. The “security” of the company came to be thought of as the “security” of oneself, and the logic of the village society was adapted into modern corporations. Protecting the lifestyle of the people was also adopted, and lifetime employment and a seniority system based on length of service was created. From the perspective of the American economic model, these concepts are considered a real obstruction or barrier. Thus, in the spread of the global market economy throughout the world, the Japanese business model has died off. Now in Japan, money has become paramount.

I think that prioritizing money making is not something to be admired. In conducting business, it used to be very important to achieve a sense of trust among parties. Trust was the most essential thing. But recently, this has come to be called a remnant of village society. For a time after capitalism entered Japan, the conventions of village society were brought directly into the business world. Yet with the advance of the global market economy, that form of capitalism has been abandoned in favor of the American one. Further, it seems that in the economic world, religion has already been abandoned. In order for the economic world to continue to turn, it is better for people’s wants and desires to develop freely as they are. This is the better way for money to revolve and be used. In order for this to develop, the bonds of the people leading to their solidarity and then to their cooperation need to be severed; and then a process of atomization can occur. It is said that because of the existence of bonds in the village, people would hesitate a bit to use money. If the son of a household dissipates its savings, the parents will surely stop him. In the case the parents do not, some relative will surely come by and scold them. You see this kind of story in traditional Japanese comic storytelling all the time.

In village society, there is a sense of the control of desire. There was no concept that it was good to allow desire to develop freely. In order for bonds

within the family and the community to remain strong, it was necessary to control desire. In the same way, religion was used to restrain human desire. The market economy, which has created globalization, is where the problem lies, because it revolves around the optimization of human desire. Perhaps humans are becoming more immature, or perhaps we have been infantilized, made to be immature. We have been encouraged to quickly raise our hands if we want something. Nowadays, we can see children throw tantrums at department stores if they are not bought what they want. While repressing desire is not good, the free development of desire is the engine for turning the economy. For this to take place, it is better for people to remain childish in terms of desire. The thing I have come to notice is that in the end, people become atomized more and more through these mechanisms of economics.

The Religious Roots of the Global Economy

Indeed, there are academics who have called this process “the atomization of Japanese society.” They explain that when people’s individual desires—their desires for personal comforts—become overgrown, then isolation occurs. In Fujisato-chō, we have day-care centers for infants at which babies from the age of two months are looked after. These children, who are still breast-feeding, are left behind to be looked after by professionals. Also, for the elderly who get sick, basically every household now uses a nursing service. In any event, almost everyone uses either day-care services for the elderly in their households or leaves them with specialists at nursing facilities. For some time now, Japan has had a system of care entirely by professionals. It seems that families have basically stopped taking care of their elderly members. This is true even for my home. We now completely depend on experts. The most important thing for families now is “work”; *kasegi* has become *the shigoto*, the duty.

Nakatani Iwao is an economist who has acted as an advisor to the Japanese government on economic issues and promoted global economics. However, he began to notice that something in global economics was making people unhappy, and in 2008 he made an about face and wrote a book called *Why Does Capitalism Self-Destruct?: A Proposal to Revive Japan*,⁷ a section of which reads:

In the thinking of neoliberalism, we are divided into individual units living in a society, and the utmost respect is afforded to the

⁷ Nakatani 2008.

freedom of each of these “atomized” individuals. Therefore, the values of a communal society—such as security, safety, trust, equality, solidarity and so on—have no importance placed upon them. That is, it sets forth the “dangerous thought” that it cannot be helped if the social connections between fellow humans must be dismantled for the sake of realizing the pursuit of profit. In contemporary society, the monster of global capital, which itself contains this sort of dangerous thought, has come to freely lord over the planet.

I would like to consider more deeply why neoliberalism and global economics have swept across the world and come to lord over it to such an extent.

Max Weber (1864–1920), the famous German sociologist, made the claim that the basic mechanisms of capitalism and market economics were born from Christian, especially Protestant, ways of thinking. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,⁸ Weber points to the doctrine of predestination espoused by John Calvin (1509–1564), an influential French theologian and pastor of the Protestant Reformation, as a factor that strongly contributed to the arising of capital. Although one might expect that this doctrine—which holds that God has already decided or “predetermined” the salvation of each individual—would lead to despair and the abandonment of moral action, in fact it has led to the opposite. A basic tenet of this sort of Protestantism is that if one were truly saved, one would of course lead a life in line with God’s intention. Thus, followers lived very simple, frugal lives. According to Weber, this way of thinking stimulated the development of capital and a market economy in two ways. First, because believers were frugal, they naturally built up wealth, which in turn became capital. Second, believers came to view their work as heavenly ordained “vocations,” such that they came to see the fruits of their labors as divine rewards to be enjoyed as they pleased.

We should keep in mind that the United States, which is the flag-bearer of the global market economy, was founded by Puritans, a group of Calvinists from England, and in many ways has Puritan ideas as the founding principles of the nation. For instance, both freedom and independence, so central to contemporary American values, are based on Puritan ways of thinking about faith. According to those ideas, the faithful must freely choose to believe, without any sort of coercion from any situation, including economic

⁸ See Weber 2001.

dependence. This led them to place a high value on total economic independence for each individual. When combined with the idea that the fruits of one's labors are divine rewards, this came to form the basis of the idea that people could spend money freely without concern for how others might think. In that sense, contemporary American ideas of freedom, independence, and thrift are very different from those held by Japanese people. In the States, spending money is not something to be ashamed of, instead it is seen as necessary to make the global economy function. In spite of the fact that Japan now has a market economy, Japanese people clearly do not see profits from their labors to be a reward from God. In this way, it has been highly regarded that many leaders of the Japanese business world have lived simply. It seems that Japanese people tend to cringe at the idea of spending money, even if they have it.

The Association for Thinking about Mind and Life and the Yottetamore Initiatives

As the abbot of a Sōtō Zen temple, I developed a sense of unease about the problem of suicide in my area. Thus in 2000, I gathered together a group of volunteers and created the Association for Thinking about Mind and Life. One reason I set up this association was to examine how to better understand suicide. Suicide is a type of death in which the surrounding environment is being rejected. We learned through our study that the chief cause of suicide is depression and issues related to it. We developed various activities, such as inviting speakers to our study sessions, so that a wide number of local citizens came to understand more about the problem of suicide.

However, there is a strong sense that suicide is an individual issue, even amidst the high rate here in Fujisato-chō. Furthermore, even though many citizens here have been connected with someone who has committed suicide, there remains a taboo about discussing the issue. Still, we continued to hold our study sessions and meet as an association over the next three years until 2003. However, just holding study sessions among our members did not reduce the suicide rate. In reality, it involved each of us deciding to do what we could to prevent suicide.

As a result, we set up a weekly community café called Yottetamore. We promoted it through the cooperation of people in the community in order to reduce the number of people committing suicide as well as to prevent people from becoming isolated. We opened the Yottetamore Café every week on Tuesdays using a building owned by the local government. The members of the association put on yellow aprons and welcomed other citizens from

Fujisato-chō. The meaning of “*yottetamore*” is “Please drop by anytime.” We have only one rule, which is to always listen to what others have to say. The coffee, which is brewed using the delicious water from the Shirakami-Sanchi mountains, provides a lubricant for our conversations. In our town, casual conversation had gone out of fashion, and superficial ways of speaking became predominant. At our café, conversation is reborn and so are new connections among the people of our community. Just to casually drop by and simply chat. What is the mystery in that?

The small connections born from the café seemed to have an effect, and no suicides occurred in Fujisato-chō the following year. In evaluating the activities of our association, we saw the tendency towards a small reduction after we started our work, and we were happy about this. However, in the following year, five people committed suicide in our town. They were all men. Since the suicide rate among men is high, we decided to start a new kind of *yottetamore* that would be easy for men in the community who work all day to join. Thus, members of the association will also sometimes gather at our community meeting place in the evenings and engage in conversation while having a drink, sort of like a Yottetamore Bar. Through the Yottetamore Bar, we have been able to further spread connections in the community. Through discussing our troubles together, listening to one another, and coming to accept and respect each other, community can be reborn. The year after those five people committed suicide, we again recorded no suicides at all in Fujisato-chō.

In 2009, in recognition for confronting head on the difficult problem of many suicidal people by creating a cooperative space to prevent suicide, giving birth to community connections, and stimulating the reduction of suicides, the Association for Thinking about Mind and Life received a commendation from the Japanese Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications. There are still today many people who are coping with psychological issues. However, if you have community connections, you can prevent isolation and suicide, so our association is continuing today to have conversations with everyone and to actively spread community connection.

Conclusion: Buddhism Can Develop New Community

I have been thinking about how best to bring people together who have become atomized and how best to build the human connections in our village that have become dispersed. There are a number of different ways of thinking, but in my case I think we are doing only what we can. This is the Yottetamore Café. Every Tuesday afternoon from one thirty to four o'clock

is really very little time. However, it is a rewarding one that we put time and sweat into. At this place that we have created, conversations are taking place. Thinking in terms of efficiency or of economic prioritization, it would be better to be at work. People who work in the rice paddies should be in their paddies; people who work in the fields should be in their fields; and people who run their own businesses should be selling things. Yet for other people, or perhaps for our own selves, we take a little break from *kasegi* time. I think this is the kind of thing that is needed.

These days a system that entrusts everything to experts is expanding. It is one in which one does not need to take time for others, because working professionals will do the childcare and nursing. There is no need for conflicts, and desires can develop freely. One can contribute through *kasegi*, which maximizes desire and removes the need to suffer in interpersonal relationships. We have created a system that rejects entanglements. It seems to me that we have created a society, a social system, that tries to eliminate all entanglements, perhaps even anything that might be thought of as suffering. We have thought this would be a comfortable and convenient society. However, in reality, haven't we become atomized and isolated?

For myself, I think that humans can mature through the process of entanglement and that it is very important to create a society that makes us mature. A new community should create relationships through which people can become mature. In this new community, there will probably be some uncomfortable things and perhaps some entanglements will arise. However, I think human connection will be the important thing. I believe that Buddhism can be one main pillar for the construction of this new community.

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