

Thirty-seventh Niwano Peace Prize Award Ceremony Address

Rev. Nichiko Niwano

The Honorary President

Warm greetings to all of you from the 37th Annual Niwano Peace Prize Ceremony.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the participation of a great many people, despite today's award ceremony being held online.

It is a great honor to present this year's Niwano Peace Prize to the Venerable Pomnyun, the founder of the Jungto Society, a Korean Buddhist community. I would like to express my profound respect to all members of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, especially our chairperson, Rev. Susan Hayward, for making this year's selection.

As Chairperson Susan Hayward just mentioned in her talk about the rationale for this year's award, Venerable Pomnyun has continued to give dharma dialogues that cultivate peace in the minds of many people, so much so that in Korea, he has become famous as "a true life counselor."

Based on the idea that "the practice of compassion contributes to the happiness of the whole world," for many years he has been developing initiatives to provide social welfare, humanitarian assistance, and environmental protection at home and abroad. He has also devoted himself to working together with other religious leaders to provide humanitarian relief to the people of North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea).

When Ven. Pomnyun was in his teens and twenties, South Korea was under the dictatorship of President Park Chung-hee. At the age of 16, Ven. Pomnyun took his vows as a Buddhist novice. After graduating from high school, instead of going on to university, he became involved in peasant movements and Buddhist educational programs.

In 1979, he was arrested and tortured on suspicion of sending money to an activist group.

Looking back on that time, Ven. Pomnyun reflected in the following words: “In the past, I was a warrior for democracy, fighting for social justice. I hated dictators and in protesting against them, I was prepared to sacrifice myself for the realization of justice. I was frequently voicing complaints about other people, as my mind was always in darkness.

“When I truly awakened to the teachings of the Buddha and could see the world as it really is, however, I realized that it did not matter who was right and who was wrong because these were just different points-of-view.

“Dictators, military leaders, imperialists, exclusionary religious organizations, and groups pursuing their own selfish interests . . . they are not enemies to defeat, they are simply people or groups whose point-of-view is different from mine. I came to understand that from their position, they are also doing what they think is best.”

From these words of Ven. Pomnyun, we can surmise that his great awakening changed the course of his life.

In Buddhism, the phrase “the ten realms of living beings are mutually contained in each other,” teaches us that all human beings simultaneously possess a mind like the Buddha’s and a mind like that of a demon in hell.

Behavior that is dictatorial, exclusionary, or selfish is essentially an issue existing within oneself, it is not somebody else’s problem.

On the other hand, we are taught that all human beings are born with the ability to realize the Buddha’s awakening and comprehend the truth, as we possess the seed of becoming buddhas, that is, the buddha nature.

When you become profoundly aware of this fact, the phenomena before you appear completely different from before.

One of the great things about Ven. Pomnyun is that he immediately put his own awakening into practice.

Ven. Pomnyun was convinced that “the time has come for social activism and Buddhism to become one,” so in 1988 at the young age of 35, he established the Jungto Society.

The NGOS established as part of the Jungto Society have developed initiatives providing humanitarian relief to North Korea and members of the Dalit (untouchable) castes in India, as well as programs addressing environmental protection and other global issues.

I would like to share with you an episode that is emblematic of Ven. Pomnyun’s social activism.

When he first toured India, a woman holding a baby approached him and asked, “Can I have 60 rupees to buy milk.”

Since he had been forewarned by the tour guide not to give money to beggars, he did not give money to the woman. Later on, when he learned that 60 rupees is a very small sum on money, he felt a deep sense of regret.

If someone’s life can be saved for 60 rupees, give her the money. Ven. Pomnyun solemnly decided that he would never again make such a refusal. This led him to establish elementary schools, junior high schools, and hospitals; distribute meals; and promote health education in India.

We could say that Ven. Pomnyun’s true worth is evident in how he uses the phenomena occurring before him to perform self-reflection, gain awareness, and connect it to immediate action.

Needless to say, we are now in the midst of numerous challenges. Their root causes, in the analysis of Ven. Pomnyun, are the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. He says that social structures that continue to justify the three poisons have brought about this present state of crisis.

In the background of hunger, poverty, lack of education, and human rights abuses are the underlying causes of conflict and warfare. This means that unless we resolve the persistent hostility that causes conflict, we cannot protect the sanctity of human life.

To quote a passage from the Great Learning of Confucius, “By cultivating your own character, managing your family, and governing your state, you bring peace to the land.” This means that only by leading a moral and virtuous life can you put your household in order, govern the country, and bring peace to the world.

Conversely stated, if you do not lead a moral and virtuous life, you cannot have peace in your family, peace in your country, or peace in the world.

At the same time that we look deeply into such starting points and foster people’s morality and virtuousness, we can also expand activism to society at large, which in turn means that self-transformation and social transformation occur simultaneously—this is Ven. Pomnyun’s sincere belief.

Regarding how we will create a new civilization from now on, Ven. Pomnyun has said something very impressive:

“It cannot come about through ‘self-sacrifice’ because the process of creating it must be joyful. If we with awakened minds, who lead lives that do not comport with the current social structure and values, are happier than everyone else, we will naturally become the majority. For this reason, we who practice the faith must do so joyfully. As long as people who devote themselves to reaching out to those who are suffering, building a peaceful world, and leading lives mindful of the natural environment are happier and freer, then they are definitely fostering the growth of a new civilization.”

I want all of you to join me in pondering these words.

We have not be able to meet in person today, but by reading Ven. Pomnyun’s books, we can better understand his very cheerful, kind, and warm personality. I am looking forward to the day we can meet face-to-face.

I would like to conclude my address with my sincere wish that today’s presentation ceremony will serve as an opportunity for many more people to share Ven. Pomnyun’s hope and activism and with my heartfelt prayers that henceforth he will continue to enjoy healthy and every happiness in his sacred work.

Thank you very much.