

37th Niwano Peace Prize Awarded to Venerable Pomnyun of South Korea

Reason for Selection

Rev. Dr. Susan Hayward

On behalf of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, it is my pleasure to announce that the 37th Niwano Peace Prize shall be given to Zen Master the Venerable Pomnyun of South Korea in recognition of his extraordinary humanitarian work, environmental and social activism, and his inspiring effort to build relationships of trust and good will between those of different faiths and cultures as a central component of his work for peace. Venerable Pomnyun's work serves as a poignant illustration of the Buddhist ideals that inspire it.

Venerable Pomnyun was born in 1953 to a farming family in rural South Korea and at age 16 entered the Buddhist monkhood. At 35 years old, Ven. Pomnyun founded the Jungto Society, a community based on the teachings and principles of Buddhism and dedicated to addressing modern problems that drive suffering, including environmental degradation, poverty, and violent conflict. Members of Jungto Society are taught to appreciate the interconnectedness of all living things and to contribute to the well-being of the global community through developing internal peace and acting compassionately toward others.

Ven. Pomnyun has worked for peace both at home on the Korean Peninsula and abroad. His organization Good Friends seeks to ease the suffering caused by famine and natural disasters in North Korea through humanitarian aid and inter-religious advocacy, while the research institute he founded, Peace Foundation, produces insights aimed at encouraging Korean unification. His international aid organization, Join Together Society, has sought to eradicate poverty and hunger through humanitarian relief and sustainable development initiatives in North Korea, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, and beyond. In 2019, Ven. Pomnyun traveled to Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh to deliver 100,000 stoves to Rohingya Muslim refugees who had fled violence in neighboring Myanmar.

His EcoBuddha initiative encourages greater awareness of environmental degradation and encourages lifestyle choices to reduce overconsumption and ease one's negative environmental impacts. Ven. Pomnyun's efforts encompass different methods of peacebuilding, from advocacy that includes letter writing campaigns and peace rallies, to crisis response and humanitarian relief, to research that can surface policy prescriptions to address the root causes of conflict and advance sustainable peace. As is clear from this brief summary of his work, Ven. Pomnyun's efforts to build peace are substantial, respond to critical needs, and are offered across geographic and figurative borders – like those of race and religion – in ways that truly recognize and affirm the interdependence of all beings. In this way, Ven. Pomnyun has contributed immensely to the cause of inter-religious cooperation and peace, in keeping with the mission of the Niwano Peace Prize.

Ven. Pomnyun believes that work for peace must include two dimensions. First, the cultivation of happiness and equanimity internally through meditation and study that reduces mental suffering. Second, individual and collective action to transform society so as to reduce the suffering caused by external, structural factors. It is only through a balanced and simultaneous effort at both dimensions that true peace can be built. His grounded and confident commitment to understand and apply Buddhist teachings shapes and drives his work for peace and illustrates the transformative power of spiritual values and commitment to the hard, sustained work of building peace. His internal practice of the Buddha dharma is reflected in the evident joy and warmth he manifests as he continues this hard work in a world that sorely needs it.

It is for these reasons that the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, a group comprising distinguished scholars and religious leaders from around-the-world, in partnership with the Niwano Foundation, have selected Venerable Pomnyun to receive this year's prize.