

Commemorative Speech on the Occasion of the 37th Niwano Peace Prize

An Urgent Appeal for Peace: We Must Choose Coexistence Over Mutual Destruction

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First of all, I would like to express my deepest respect to Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of The Niwano Peace Foundation and a pioneer in making peace a reality. I also would like to pay deep respects to the officers, trustees, and staff of the Niwano Peace Foundation, who have had tremendous impact through their untiring efforts to promote world peace with interfaith dialogue and support the peacemaking efforts by non-profit organizations.

I am truly honored to be selected as the recipient of the 2020 Niwano Peace Prize. I offer my sincere gratitude to the International Committee of the Niwano Peace Prize for bestowing such an honor on me. I also would like to thank Ajarn Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand, a respected Buddhist philosopher, activist, and co-founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, for nominating me for this prize.

I clearly recall that this was the same prize that was awarded in 2000 to Dr. Kang Won Yong of South Korea as the 17th recipient. Dr. Kang inspired me with his Christian vision for peace and was a critical influence in my decision to dedicate myself to this path. Sharing this recognition with Dr. Kang is a greater honor than I can possibly express.

This internationally renowned prize is a huge encouragement not only for me but also for all my colleagues at Jungto Society who have worked with me tirelessly for the past 20 years to promote peace. In addition, I would like to share this honor with both known and unknown people who are working for the cause of peace around the world even today.

Jungto Society strives for the goal of fostering “Pure Mind, Good Friends, and Clean Earth” grounded in our understanding of the inextricably interconnected nature of the world based on “Dependent Arising (Pratītyasamutpāda).” Pure Mind means everyone can live a happy life by cultivating one’s mind. Good Friends means we can create a peaceful world by recognizing that human relationships should be based on mutual balance and harmony rather than on conflict and competition. Clean Earth means that we need to preserve the beauty of nature based on the recognition that rather than being a target for conquest, nature is the foundation of our lives that we need to coexist with. By promoting “Pure Mind, Good Friends, and Clean Earth,” Jungto Society works to create a world that is good for all of us to live in - in other words, Jungto. This is the core of the Jungto movement we have been engaged in for the past 30 years.

The Niwano Peace Foundation, although based on Buddhist teachings, has led the way to peace through interfaith cooperation. In my own humble fashion, I have worked with leaders in other faith traditions over the last twenty years to provide humanitarian support to North Korea and encourage peace efforts on the Korean peninsula. My organizations have also supported the Dalits in India, civil war refugees in Afghanistan, and the indigenous and Muslim groups in the Philippines. I have come to realize that underlying the hunger, disease, illiteracy, and abject poverty suffered by these peoples are conflicts and hostilities. Without resolving the underlying hostilities, neither humanitarian support nor human rights can be achieved or sustained. If all the religions of the world could come together and act for the cause of peace based on mutual acknowledgment and understanding of our differences, the conflicts and hostilities we see in the world today would be greatly reduced. Peace can only take root when we let go of hostilities.

Peace can only blossom in soil enriched with deep respect and understanding of one another.
Peace without such reconciliation cannot be achieved.

As a Buddhist, the life of the Buddha was the primary model for me to follow and base my actions on. Brahmanism already existed as a leading religion in the Buddha's time, while Upanishad served as the primary guiding philosophy. However, Brahmanism had become overly formalized and Upanishad so abstract that neither was able to resolve the suffering in people's everyday lives. The greatness of the Buddha lies in his overcoming the limitations of such religions and philosophical traditions and finding a new way: The Middle Way (Madhyamâ Pratipat).

The Middle Way (Madhyamâ Pratipat) is a new path that leaves the two extremes of "pleasure" obtained through fulfillment of desires and "asceticism" that suppresses desires. The Middle Way (Madhyamâ Pratipat) is a practice methodology that does not get caught up in any prejudices or ideologies, but seeks out the truth and escapes all sufferings and agony by asking, "What is the truth?"

All of humankind wants to live a free and happy life, but only a few have achieved it. It is because people mistakenly believe that the road to happiness is paved with satisfying their desires. The Buddha teaches that only when we are free from our own desires can we attain true freedom and happiness. Everyone has the right to live a happy life. Freedom and happiness are the dreams all humankind wants to achieve. In order to make that dream come true, I would like to share the three things we must first realize based on the teachings of the Buddha.

First is peace.

I hope that dialogues and cooperation will focus on activities that oppose all wars and support peace irrespective of ideology, religion, or nationality. South Korea is one of the countries at the highest risk of war. 2020 marks the 70th anniversary of the tragedy of the Korean War. Should there be another war on the Korean peninsula that potentially leads to the use of nuclear weapons and the destruction of nuclear plants, humankind itself will face an apocalypse. On the other hand, establishment of peace on the Korean peninsula will provide a vital stepping stone that leads to peace in Asia and the entire world. Peace in the world is not possible without peace on the Korean peninsula.

Second is the environment.

The global climate crisis cannot be solved by environmental activists alone. The destruction of the environmental ecosystem in developing countries are rooted in various hostilities and conflicts. We must take immediate action to resolve the climate crisis, transcending differences in ideologies, religions, ethnicities and nations. Consequences of the climate crisis are increasing and imploding into national security emergencies, food shortages, pandemic, and even uncontrollable wildfires. It is clear now that no country or individual is safe from the disasters of the climate crisis. This is truly a crisis of civilization. We have to get away from the consumption-driven civilization in which living well is defined by producing more and buying more. Humanity is at a crossroads between the path of sustainable development and self-annihilation. No global citizen's safety and security can be guaranteed without tackling climate change.

Third is resolving structural inequalities.

Structural inequalities are embodied by hunger, disease, illiteracy, and discrimination. When I first began humanitarian aid for the children of North Korea, many people were adamantly against it. They asked me, “Why are you helping the enemy?” And they warned me, “The rice we send them will come back to us as bullets.” However, I firmly believe the hungry should have food, the sick should be treated, and children should be educated irrespective of ideology, religion, or gender. Hunger, disease, and illiteracy are the biggest symptoms of endemic structural inequalities in human society. Providing food to the hungry, medicine to the sick, and shelter to refugees are the most pressing matters that should be addressed. Furthermore, no one should be discriminated against on the grounds of race, gender, class, religion, or ethnic origin. Or based on disability, sexuality, or refugee status. All human beings are equal in their innate dignity. Absolute poverty in some parts of the world is the result of a global inequality. Addressing it cannot be the responsibility of any one nation; it’s the responsibility of the humankind. Justice is the social action that you take to overcome discrimination and support equality. Justice without action is mere wordplay.

The world is facing a huge crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of whether you live in an advanced country or developing one; whether you live in the northern or southern hemisphere; whether you live in the East or West; whether you are a Christian or Buddhist; there is no place on earth that is safe from COVID-19. Collective action at a global scale is essential. Unfortunately, each nation is only looking out for itself and passing the blame and responsibility to other countries. The real danger is not the virus but the dissolution of the collective “We” in the face of common danger; this has become the biggest obstacle to resolving the pandemic. However, in the face of crisis, we humans have often gone past our limits to perform miracle-like

feats to ensure our survival. We can do so again as long as we work together based on hope and faith in one another.

It is no longer possible to attain peace just for one particular region, religion, or nation.

It is no longer possible to achieve safety just for one particular region, religion, or people.

Resolving the issues of peace, environmental conservation, and structural inequality and preventing the spread of infectious diseases are urgent tasks to which all humanity must jointly respond. Therefore, collective action by countries and religions around the world is more important than ever. To this end, if peace activists and political and religious leaders from all over the world cooperate together, even the most difficult problems can be solved. When people come together, miracles happen.

To emphasize,

In terms of peace, nations must coexist peacefully without the threat of war.

As for the environment, people must coexist in harmony with nature.

To resolve structural inequality, structural violence must be eradicated so that different genders, races, and social classes can coexist peacefully.

The essence of my message today is peace. We must choose coexistence over mutual destruction.

May all living beings be happy and peaceful.

I would like to thank everyone here. Last but not least, I would like to extend my deepest respect and gratitude to the Niwano Peace Foundation for this precious opportunity.