

Commemorative Lecture on the 38th Niwano Peace Prize

“It is in the distant land that all devotion forgathers “

Venerable Shih Chao-hwei

Immense gratitude springs from my heart at the honor of receiving the 38th Niwano Peace Prize.

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude and respect to the Niwano Peace Foundation and especially to its founder Mr. Nikkyo Niwano. With his extraordinary vision and powerful support, Mr. Niwano has been advocating for peaceful activities that are based on the spirit of religion yet beyond the boundaries of religious sectarianism. The Niwano Foundation precisely provides a solid platform for this purpose. The chairman of the foundation, Dr. Munehiro Niwano, his team and the judges who carefully evaluate and select the winner use this annual announcement and award ceremony to encourage individuals who dedicate themselves to the peace activities that this foundation has long sought to endorse.

Believers from all faith traditions naturally consider their religion to be the best, as a result interfaith dialogue has never been easy. Therefore, for people to act beyond their religion or sect, faith leaders and scholars must return to the rational foundation of their religion's theoretical underpinnings and reflect upon them. This way we are able to build a pluralistic (or, at least, an inclusive) system for all theological beliefs including Buddhist philosophy.

Furthermore, the emotional foundation for going beyond the boundaries of religion and faith depends on genuine interfaith friendship which emerges naturally through interaction and cooperation and moves us toward achieving a great shared vision.

The mission that religion accomplishes is greater than personal enlightenment or salvation; it can create a movement to reach world peace.

However, without vision and broad-mindedness to accept that we are one family—irrespective of faith traditions, religious sects, gender, hierarchy, ethnicity, country and even species—human rationality and conscience could surrender to and be hypnotized by powerful, passionate language and leaders could lead followers astray. If this were the case, religion could also be “the troublemaker that hinders world peace”.

Some religious terrorists who quote holy scriptures out of context and misuse these quotes to justify their behaviour instigate massacre and oppress those of different ethnicities, castes, religious beliefs, even followers of other sects of the same religion. These atrocities that drip blood and tears become history.

Some religious insiders mistakenly quote sacred books to support their point of view that women are the inferior sex. They discriminate and suppress women and unfortunately become obstacles to the evolution of human ethics. Why? Because this gender order that originated from religious doctrines, when strictly observed prevents women from taking clergy jobs. This in turn influences female practitioners within such a system as well all its religious followers. These distorted views are often caused by feelings of inferiority that sometimes are masked by arrogance and hinder the holistic development of all involved. This phenomenon also challenges the social values of equity and justice.

Likewise, there are huge groups of religious people who manipulate words from holy texts to prove the iniquity of homosexuality. Some of them bully gays and lesbians with cruel means; some have forced gay people to go through conversion therapy, which causes torment. Some of them abuse democracy and practice violence by verbally abusing the gay community citing “freedom of speech”. Some even use social media as their platform for false accusation and vilification of gay people in order to deprive them of their legal rights. In addition to gays and lesbians, other gender minorities are often targets of their hostility.

Moreover, some people exploit, slaughter, and use animals as offerings, trophies and guinea pigs indicating their belief in human superiority. The notion of speciesism causes the suffering of countless animals.

The vision and mindset that rise beyond religion, sect, gender, hierarchy, ethnicity, country and species lay an important foundation for peace in the world. The Niwano Foundation dedicates its efforts towards this goal and the Japanese society supports this foundation with open-mindedness. Personally, I bear deep gratitude to the leader, the jury and the team at The Niwano Foundation, as well as Japanese citizens who support their vision.

I would also like to use this opportunity to pay homage and extend my sincere gratitude to the founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) and a pioneer in Thailand’s movement for democracy—Mr. Ajarn Sulak Sivaraksa. In my mind, Ajarn has always been an exemplar and hero in both practicing the Bodhisattva Path and advocating for democracy. The strength and integrity he demonstrates as an intellect reminds me of a famous

quote from ancient Chinese culture— “One cannot be corrupted no matter rich or noble; one cannot be swerved from his principle regardless of poverty and humbleness; neither threats nor forces make him succumb.” As someone junior to him, I deeply thank him for his firm support in each and every way.

The International Network of Engaged Buddhists Ajarn founded has gathered like-minded practitioners of engaged Buddhism in every part of the world. Through the Network’s activities of interfaith cooperation and mutual support (both online and offline), I have witnessed a light of hope toward eliminating the suffering of all beings.

I offer special appreciation and tremendous gratitude, as well, toward Master Yin Shun—my honorable teacher who passed away sixteen years ago. His philosophy of Buddhism for the World crosses the barriers of different religions and sects and echoes the original intention of the Buddha. The master also expected and hoped Buddhist practitioners would use their wisdom cultivated from deep meditation to march forward in the spirit of Bodhisattva-compassionately, proactively and courageously. In this spirit, we then will be able to extend our care to society and offer help to those who are suffering. My teacher’s philosophy helped me to think outside of traditional Buddhist framework and motivated me to unrelentingly protect and respect the equality of all lives. On both an emotional and rational level, this is the source from which I implement altruism.

Furthermore, I would like to extend my whole-hearted gratitude to good friends practicing Buddhism for the World from INEB and across the Strait. Just like within Christianity, there are different focuses: one is prone to the calling of spiritual practice or rituals; the other is inclined to actively serve the world. The same difference occurs within Buddhism. To be concerned with social issues or to take actions to help alleviate suffering is often considered a deviation from what some see as the right track. The thought of rising beyond these different approaches between different religions and sects faces strong objection and ongoing attack. Nevertheless, these spiritual warriors of engaged Buddhism and Buddhism for the World never falter in confronting of these challenges. Together we create a vision of the Pure Land in the world, and agree to witness it together. In return, the world accepts and praises Buddhism.

Among previous Niwano Prize Winners, both Ajarn Sulak Sivaraksa and Ven. Pomnyun Sunim are champions who advocate for Buddhism for the world. The three Chinese speaking award winners which include Mr. Zhao Pu-Chu, The Venerable Cheng-Yen and myself are not only advocates for this vision, but also practice it. This is not a coincidence, but an

inevitable course of history. The jury's utmost acknowledgement attests to the effective actions inspired by Buddhist altruism. As a result, I consider the honor of this award to be shared by my good friends from Buddhism for the World and Engaged Buddhism.

Venerable Cheng-Yen, leading thousands and millions of people globally for international disaster relief, does great cross-religious and cross-cultural work. She won the Niwano Peace Prize in 2007. Both Venerable Cheng-Yen and my humble self are ordained bhiksunis from Taiwan. I believe this proves that the jury members of the Niwano Foundation are fair and have vision. They value women in religion who motivate world peace with strength. On behalf of all religious women, I would like to thank all of you for empowering and inspiring those of us who have suffered from long term inferiority.

We realize that all struggles which embrace the goal of eliminating suffering for all beings, all efforts which hope to make the human heart kind, society good and peace in the world are all spiritual practices in terms of Buddhist definition. It does not matter whether they are represented in the form of charity, disaster relief or social movements. In the Diamond Cutter Sutra the Buddha told us: When one cultivates all good without the notions of a self, a person, a sentient being, or a lifespan, one attains unsurpassed complete enlightenment. This means that as long as we do good with a pure heart that rises beyond ego, without seeking the payback of those whom we help, not asking for other people's acknowledgement or hoping for good karma in future lives, then all the good we do is practice to reach perfect enlightenment. The good I refer to roots in purification and transcendence of mind and soul.

With this boundless state of mind, one can look beyond differences among religions and appreciate the source of all good yet respect the diversity of ideas, representation and symbols of each religion. Mutual respect for other religions is not merely a polite gesture, but constitutes genuine appreciation and good will.

As Neo-Confucianism scholar Mr. Tang Chun-Yi poetically puts it, "It is in the distant land that all devotion forgathers." This encounter would certainly be full of wonder and beauty. With this in mind, I would like to express my immense heartfelt wishes to all spiritual minds.

Lastly, to my predecessors and compatriots in Taiwan's social movements; fellow practitioners, teachers, colleagues and students from Buddhist Hong Shi College and Life Conservationist Association; and administrators and colleagues from Hsuan Chuang University; all members at The Niwano Foundation and the Da Ai TV station crew who invested many hours preparing for the award ceremony, I would like to give my heartfelt gratitude. It is said that a single pole

will not make a building. Without your support, all my ideals only stay in my mind. I merely receive this award on behalf of all of our efforts. The honor of the 38th Niwano Peace Award belongs to us all!