

Address at The Fortieth Niwano Peace Prize Presentation Ceremony

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I would like to offer my greetings to all of you at the Fortieth Niwano Peace Prize Presentation Ceremony.

For the past three years, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Niwano Peace Prize Presentation Ceremony had to be held online, virtually. This year, for the first time since 2019, the event is being convened face-to-face.

It is my great pleasure to be able to meet in person this year's recipient, the members of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, and participants from all walks of life who have assembled here.

This year the Niwano Peace Prize is marking the milestone of its fortieth anniversary. The first Niwano Peace Prize was awarded to Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil in 1983. Since then, its reputation has grown with each year's award, so much so that today it is considered to be "the Peace Prize in Religion."

In 2003 we established the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, which consists of prominent religious leaders from around the world. Thanks in particular to the committee, we have been provided with an even broader perspective for selecting recipients.

Through the Niwano Peace Prize, I myself have come to realize that many people around the world are undertaking wonderful activities. Indeed, I have been deeply inspired by recipients from every region of the globe who have put their lives on the line in order to do their important work and I have also learned many things from them.

To date, the Niwano Peace Prize has been awarded to thirty-one individuals and eight organizations.

The recipients' activities and programs cover a vast spectrum, including safeguarding human rights, conflict mediation, disarmament, abolition of nuclear weapons, reduction of arms exports, peace education, human resource development, protecting the global environment, empowering women, helping people break free from extremism, and resolution of HIV/AIDS-related issues. The recipients

are an extremely diverse group and their religious backgrounds are also quite different. And it goes without saying that their activities and programs encompass every region of the world.

As diverse as they are, Niwano Peace Prize recipients have one thing in common: All of them have continued their extremely meaningful work because they have been spurred on by the mind of profound love and great compassion.

I believe that one of great features of the Niwano Peace Prize is that it honors activism grounded in such a religious spirit.

With the help of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, I would like to continue to shine a light on those who, with the mind of love and compassion, are tackling the real issues of the present day.

Today, the historic Fortieth Niwano Peace Prize is being awarded to Mr. Rajagopal P. V., a leader in non-violent social activism in India. I understand that this is Mr. Rajagopal's first time to visit Japan and that wife is with him here today. I sincerely thank you both for making the long journey here.

I would also like to express my deep respect and gratitude to all of the members of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee for this year's selection.

As we just heard in the Reason for Selection, Mr. Rajagopal has inherited the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi. In order to secure the right to basic livelihood of India's so-called "untouchables" and rural indigenous peoples, his nonviolent social activism has taken the form of working with local communities to organize largescale protest marches calling upon the Indian government to engage in dialogue.

At the same time, he established Ekta Parishad (literally, "Unity Forum"), an organization for nonviolent social activism that focuses on developing leaders among rural youth.

In India, indigenous peoples and untouchables in particular are forced to live extremely hard lives after their land has been taken away from them by corporations. Such vulnerable people are often the victims of direct violence. However, Mr. Rajagopal's focus is not only on direct violence, but also on forms of indirect violence, such as structural and systemic violence, because he charges that until they have been eradicated, the current social conditions in India will not change.

As Mr. Rajagopal himself says, "Exploitation and poverty are all forms of structural violence. And I think that structural and systemic violence become the breeding ground for direct violence.

Therefore, in order to prevent opportunities for direct violence to occur, we are asking young people themselves to think about how to address indirect violence.”

Furthermore, he proposes that, “Non-violence is not passive. Most of us believe in the principle of nonviolence and yet we contribute to systems that are indirectly violent. For example, we do so through our consumer behavior. What you buy and what you don’t buy determines whether you are supporting such forms of violence as exploitation. Therefore, it is extremely important that young people join us in thinking about what we can do to actively practice nonviolence.”

This is something that we who live in Japan, too, must always keep in mind.

In India, the Constitution has always prohibited discrimination based on caste. Even so, many Indians are still marginalized.

According to Mr. Rajagopal, because rural youth tend to believe that “karma” from their previous lifetimes has predetermined their fate, many of them feel resigned to their lot in this lifetime and only look forward to the next lifetime. He is concerned that as a result, they tend to accept the injustice, poverty, exploitation, and corruption of their present lifetimes.

For those young people who have little hope for the future, Ekta Parishad has organized an array of training programs that help them understand the meaning and dignity of their own existence, find social connections, and regain self-confidence.

I have heard that there are many of these young people who, by the final day of their training, have realized their potential and brimming with motivation, are ready to take off like a rocket.

In this way, for more than 30 years, Mr. Rajagopal has continued to train people to awaken to their own self-worth and realize the importance of non-violent social activism. This history of steadfast activism has borne fruit in large-scale protest marches involving tens of thousands of people, which have attracted global attention.

Once again, I would like to express my profound respect for Mr. Rajagopal and his extraordinary accomplishments.

Mr. Rajagopal’s social activism reminds me of the bodhisattvas springing up out of the earth, who appear in Buddhist scripture.

The bodhisattvas springing up out of the earth are said to appear from out of the soil itself. They are not people of high status or great power, rather they are nameless people who seek the Buddha

Dharma and quietly devote themselves to diligently practicing it while experiencing real life, with its many sufferings. Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, entrusted the liberation of this world of endurance to the bodhisattvas who spring up out of the earth.

What did Shakyamuni mean, though, by doing so?

Simply stated, the real problems of human beings must, after all, be solved by we human beings ourselves. If we think that someone will come and save us and wait for that to happen, our problems will never be solved.

In other words, there are people who know that they themselves possess the mind of the Buddha and therefore take responsibility for making the effort to improve their societies, countries, and the world. But until they appear one after another, as though springing up out of the earth, and work together in solidarity, true peace and harmony cannot be realized in this world.

I believe that Mr. Rajagopal has been raising such bodhisattvas who spring up out of the earth.

Although it may seem like a roundabout way of doing things, we must develop human resources in order to take hold of the problems of this world and guide them toward substantive solutions. This is especially the case with young people, who are the light of the future. We can expect that their involvement will lead to creative developments, based on new ideas. Indeed, I believe that through this process, the time will come when Indian society undergoes a major transformation.

I am earnestly praying that in the future, Mr. Rajagopal will continue to share his experience and wisdom with as many people as the possible and develop even greater leadership toward a world in which we can all live together.

I would like to conclude my remarks with the hope that today's presentation ceremony will serve as an opportunity for many more people to embrace the ideals and social activism of Mr. Rajagopal and that he will, in good health, continue to make great progress in his important work.

Thank you very much.