

Inter-religious Conference on Nuclear Issues

Story-sharing 1, December 5<sup>th</sup> (Wed.) 17:40-18:10

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On March 11<sup>th</sup> of last year, the Great East Japan Earthquake brought with it the nuclear disaster that caused radiation to rain down on my city of Nihonmatsu, now known as a nuclear hot spot.

In the early days of the disaster, we, the citizens of Fukushima Prefecture, were not given accurate information.

The image shown on television of the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant after it had exploded was soon removed and replaced with a pre-explosion clip. Information from SPEEDI, the System for Prediction of Environment Emergency Dose Information that the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology spent over 10 billion yen to build, was not released.

The grounds of the junior high school that my son attends became a helipad; the parking lot opposite it was used to decontaminate people who had been irradiated. But no one mentioned this to the people of Nihonmatsu. Stable iodine tablets were not even distributed to protect children's thyroids. In late March, a government-financed scholar held lectures at various locations within Fukushima Prefecture, including elementary and junior high schools as well as community centers. "All is well." "There is no need for concern." "Just continue on with your lives as normal." "Radiation can't beat you if you're laughing." These were the mantra of the government's scholar. And when the Education Ministry raised the annual level of radiation exposure from 1mSv to 20 mSv, the prefectural radiation risk advisor declared, "The national government set it, so the citizens must accept it." Even at press conferences, the government continued to say, "There aren't any immediate health effects."

In rural Fukushima, people had no reason to doubt the government, or the television, or the scholars. Many ended up being exposed to radiation.

I was devastated by the national government's abandonment of the residents of Fukushima Prefecture and its endangerment of our children. The diverse information we were receiving troubled me, and so I moved my family out of the prefecture on March 14<sup>th</sup>. I then launched the non-profit "TEAM Nihonmatsu" with the belief that we had to think for and protect our families *ourselves*.

We started our activities while pondering over what we needed to do to protect our precious families and look after the children who attend the kindergarten we run. We came up with three things to protect the children of Fukushima: reduction in external exposure, prevention of internal exposure and regular getaways to maintain health. At the end of March, we started decontamination to reduce children's external exposure. To avoid internal exposure, we needed to measure everything that a child would ingest, so we bought a radiation counter for food products and started taking measurements of food and drinks from last September. And because children's exposure-damaged cells require time and a radiation-free location to recover, last summer we initiated a recuperation program outside of the prefecture. The weight gained by these kindergarteners who had not been able to play outside for one year amounted to only one-half to one-third that of a regular year.

It is unnatural for children filled to the bursting point with energy not to be able to play outside. And so we came up with the idea of providing children a safe place where they could play to their hearts content. We were able to create a place in Nihonmatsu with low radiation levels where children could run, roll around, and play in the dirt without fear. We borrowed the land, decontaminated it and planted grass; hourly radiation levels fell to 0.07 microsieverts, and on October 20<sup>th</sup> this year we were able to host the annual Sports Day event for the kindergarten.

As of this writing, we are scheduled to start taking internal radiation readings in November. We have been waiting a long time for the government-conducted internal screening, but for some reason we still haven't had our turn. So, with donations we received from throughout the country we were able to buy a whole-body counter. With this, we can manage children's health on a regular basis.

There are an increasing number of things to do within these various involvements and although it may sound like I'm doing something significant, the situation is such that I am unable to even look after my own precious family by myself.

As immobile as I can be, it was the children who finally got me to my feet. Children who cannot play outside, children who are suffering due to radiation, they were the ones who came to me and said, “Why did this have to happen to us?” “Who made the world this way?” “Are you a victim or a perpetrator?” “It’s your fault!” These are the voices of the lives of children who have no voice. These are the voices that awakened me.

I have lived a life of indifference. Whether it was thyroid cancer in the children of Chernobyl, leukemia in the children of Iraq or the deaths of the two JCO Tokaimura workers from radiation exposure, I have lived a life of indifference. I couldn’t feel anything.

I really didn’t care. I just lived.

I am a Buddhist monk. My job is to confront life. I supposedly listened to the teachings of life, but only ever confronted a life that was convenient for me. I lived life without feeling life. I thought that it was perfectly normal to have nuclear power plants. I thought there was no way that a nuclear plant would ever explode. This history of indifference is what sustains society today.

The precious lives of children have taught me that living my life in indifference is what has caused children to suffer now.

Within me was a voice filled with anger crying out “Return our Fukushima,” “Give us back Fukushima,” “Give back our children’s smiles!” It was the children suffering because of radiation that changed my anger into the strength to live. It was children that woke me up to the fact that it was my fault; and it was these children who finally got me to my feet.

It is my fault that children are suffering. Therefore, I have taken action because I believe I have to do something. Of course, I cannot forgive the national government or TEPCO. Despite living on contaminated land that leaves the rice grown on it inedible, because we live outside of the 30-kilometer zone we have not even received an apology. It’s truly unforgiveable.

Nevertheless, I am grateful to the children – now I *have* to do what I can and should do.

Immediately after the disaster we were only focusing on how we could protect our children; but as time passed various issues such as divorce and suicide became more

pronounced. Parents have done their utmost to protect their children and are exhausted. One year and seven months later and the radiation remains; more and more people simply want to turn away from this reality.

And it's no wonder. Is this food all right? Is that water safe? Is this ground contaminated? Each and every choice parents make impacts the lives and futures of their children.

Parents have struggled to protect their children from this invisible radiation. But in spite of all the instances that the government and scholars have said that everything is all right, why are there problems with children's thyroids? Parents want their children to grow up healthy, and for that reason they can't face the reality in front of them; they are unable to accept it.

With Fukushima in this state, if something is not done about the parents, there will come a point when they will no longer be able to protect their children.

Both those who evacuated and those who are living their lives in Fukushima are suffering. Those who fled from Fukushima for the sake of their children's future are criticized for having left their husbands, abandoned their parents and turned their backs on their hometowns. Those who remained in Fukushima are made to suffer by those who are thinking of the well-being of Fukushima's children: "Why didn't you flee?" "Don't you care about your children?" "Do you want to kill your children?"

There is no parent who wants her child exposed to radiation. There is no parent who hopes his child will get sick.

Please do not compound Fukushima's miseries. Consider the pain and grief of the parents. The decisions made by those who either evacuated or who are living their lives in Fukushima were agonized over. It was not a right or wrong decision, but an honorable decision. Respect for each person's life is essential. Fukushima is becoming a place where you have to be able to justify yourself or you will be unable to go on living. Conflict has arisen in marriages, families, communities and various other places when people become self-righteous. So, even though it is radiation that is causing the suffering and it is radiation that is to blame, Fukushima has become a place where those suffering inflict pain on each other.

Fukushima is crying out. The land and the sky are weeping. Please listen to the voices of Fukushima. Listen to the cries of the lives of the children who are silent.

Although it seems that Fukushima is lost in darkness with no way out, I can see light. It comes from the lives of our children. Fukushima's light is in these shining lives. I believe that the anger and despair of Fukushima will change to strength with the shining light of our children's lives. Please do not forget that there are people struggling to live right in the midst of radioactive contamination.

Please do not forget Fukushima.

