

Twenty-ninth Annual Niwano Peace Prize Ceremony Address

Nichiko Niwano

Honorary President, Niwano Peace Foundation

President, Rissho Kosei-kai

I would like to express my profound gratitude to (GUESTS) and our many distinguished guests present here today for attending this twenty-ninth Niwano Peace Prize ceremony.

The Niwano Peace Foundation has the great honor of presenting this year's Niwano Peace Prize to Rosalina Tuyuc Velásquez, founder of CONAVIGUA, the National Coordinating Organization of Widows of Guatemala.

Rosalina's activism and leadership are rooted in traditional Mayan beliefs and spirituality. This is the first time that the Niwano Peace Prize is being awarded to a practitioner of an indigenous spiritual heritage.

In 2004, I visited the Mexican state of Chiapas at the invitation of the 19th Niwano Peace Prize recipient, Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia. In Chiapas, which borders Guatemala, I met with the Indios and with my own eyes saw conditions in which their rights are unjustly denied. There, the underlying political agenda suppresses the precious spiritual heritage passed down in that land from generation to generation as well as the livelihoods of the people who keep that heritage alive. This sad state of affairs seems quite similar to the situation in Guatemala.

Regrettably, Bishop Garcia, who was my guide in Chiapas, passed away in January 2011. I pray that his spirit rests in peace.

Rosalina's accomplishments, which I just mentioned briefly, are also outlined in the pamphlet.

Rosalina has brought together women who have lost their husbands in the decades-long civil war and crackdowns of the military regime, and through mutual assistance, worked tirelessly to provide them with relief and economic aid. The National Coordinating Organization of Widows of Guatemala (CONAVIGUA) is playing a vital role in allowing indigenous women to share their grief, access social information, learn about their own rights, and gain self-confidence.

Rosalina lost her own father and husband to violence. Her grief and pain are difficult

to imagine. However, Rosalina never let herself be moved by feelings of anger or hatred, instead choosing the way of nonviolence to transform society. Taking up the cause of women in similar circumstances, she has worked to improve the social issues at hand, one after another.

In Buddhism, such teachings as “feeling others’ grief and suffering the same as one’s own” and “making one’s own benefits benefit others” epitomize the bodhisattva spirit. And when I look at Rosalina, I truly feel that I am seeing a bodhisattva. Please give her another round of applause.

There is someone else here I would like to introduce to you. An interpreter, Ms. Tomoko Ishikawa is here accompanying Rosalina. Ms. Ishikawa has been in Guatemala for some twenty years providing support for the activities of CONAVIGUA. As a fellow Japanese citizen, I would like to express my heartfelt respect to her.

I began by mentioning that Rosalina’s work is grounded in the spirituality and traditional beliefs of the Mayan people. CONAVIGUA’s goal of transforming society through nonviolence is deeply tied to these Mayan teachings.

In the language of the Mayan people, peace is defined as “living correctly in harmony and balance with everything in the surrounding environment.” The Mayan view of peace affirms that every form of faith and all things existing in this world are worthy of respect. Therefore, it insists that violence and destruction should be rejected and eliminated.

In terms of daily life, the Mayan ideal is a way of life that acknowledges one’s debt of gratitude to the things that sustain physical existence—food, water, air, and so on.

Of course, I have only mentioned a small part of the Mayan teachings that may not be entirely accurate in some details, but certainly they offer a counterbalance to the values of self-interest and survival of the fittest that continue to dominate today’s world.

Thanks to its Mayan spiritual heritage, CONAVIGUA has persevered in dialogue and stayed the course of taking peaceful steps to solve problems, even when engaging the very people who oppressed them.

As a Buddhist, I find there are several points of Mayan teaching with which I can identify. The truth of dependent origination is the central teaching of Buddhism. For example, through immeasurable, innumerable connections—that is, through the great power of others—I exist here and now. When we say “my share” or “my part,” we are acknowledging

that each of us has a self that is unique and independent, but nevertheless is only a small part or piece of a much larger whole. Rather than saying “I am alive,” the phrase “I am caused to live” subtly conveys the importance of the dharma of dependent origination. Once we have made this realization, we feel gratitude for the infinite blessings we are receiving and understand the importance of leading a lifestyle in harmony with others.

In ancient times, Japan was called Yamato, which means “great peace” or “great harmony.” In other words, our ancestors made peace and harmony the cornerstone of the nation.

Mahatma Gandhi left us the following words: “Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, the true and perfect religion cannot be more than one, but through human mediation, it takes on many forms. This monotheism is outside the scope of language.”

At the base of every religious and spiritual tradition lie our common human values that transcend language. I am reminded of this by the Mayan teachings.

Building the future requires new insights and wisdom. However, that the Mayan people value the traditions handed down to them from thousands of years ago, and therein find ways to solve problems, reconfirms that our history and our traditions provide us with much of the wisdom needed to build a better future.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Japan has actively assimilated the scientific culture of the West, and it has taken root among the Japanese people. This ability to absorb and adapt other cultures characterizes the Japanese people. Undeniably, this trait is the foundation for today’s economic developments.

However, last year’s Eastern Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, which triggered a serious nuclear accident, has proven to be a grave test of unprecedented seriousness for Japan. Some commentators have voiced the harsh opinion that we are now paying the bill for pursuing a culture of convenience and material wealth.

As with the Mayan people, Asian intellectual culture has always been one of “learning from the old to know the new.” What Japan today needs the most is that we draw deeply from this cultural wisdom, and ourselves reevaluate our way of life.

CONAVIGUA’s programs are receiving well-deserved praise from around the world, and in reality, a mountain of issues seemed piled up before them. In some quarters, though, they are still being harassed and hindered. However, I believe that because these indigenous

women have risen up to address injustices and find resolutions, in the future their efforts will definitely blossom and bear fruit. I am praying that these women will invoke the power of the sacrifices they have made in order to harbor, nurture, and cherish life, and hereafter made even greater strides toward their goals.

I hope that today's presentation ceremony will become the opportunity for many more people to share in Rosalina's wish and support her important work. I would like to conclude by expressing my heartfelt prayer that the activities of CONAVIGUA continue to grow and meet with even greater success.

Thank you very much.