

## Address to the Forty-third Niwano Peace Prize Presentation Ceremony

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Honorary Chairperson, The Niwano Peace Foundation

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the many distinguished guests who have honored us today with their presence at this forty-third Niwano Peace Prize presentation ceremony.

The recipient of this year's Niwano Peace Prize is Mr. Benki Piyāko, the spiritual leader of an indigenous people living in the Amazon.

I would like to express my deepest respect to Mr. Somboon Chungprampree, Chairperson of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee, and all committee members who were part of this year's selection process.

As our chairperson has just mentioned, regarding the reasons for selecting this year's recipient, Mr. Piyāko has for many years dedicated himself to the conservation of the Amazon rainforest, the defense of the rights of indigenous peoples, the promotion of sustainable living models, and other activities to raise international awareness of these and other pressing issues. As you all know, the Amazon is one of the world's most important ecosystems. Spanning a rainforest approximately fifteen times the area of Japan, it stores a staggering 200 billion tons of carbon within its trees and soil. This amount is said to be equivalent to fifteen to twenty years' worth of global carbon emissions.

This magnificent forest now stands on the brink of collapse. Due to years of relentless deforestation, nearly 20 percent of its old-growth forest is on the verge of being lost.

Many scientists warn that an irreversible tipping point is quickly approaching. They contend that if further deforestation occurs, the Amazon will no longer be able to generate sufficient rainfall and will cease to exist as a rainforest. Biodiversity may be compromised, and the vast quantities of carbon currently stored within the Amazon might be released into the atmosphere.

If the forests of the Amazon were to lose their vital capacity to absorb carbon—becoming, instead, powerful sources of emissions—the repercussions would extend globally, leading to such dire consequences as a further rise in the Earth's average temperature.

This is, indeed, an extremely grave situation that bears a direct impact on the lives of people everywhere, including us Japanese people.

In light of this critical situation, Mr. Piyáko has continued to work tirelessly, in cooperation with government agencies and NGOs, to explore sustainable economic and social programs.

What is particularly noteworthy is that the spiritual basis of Mr. Piyáko's activities are rooted in traditional values that have been passed down to him by his indigenous community. According to the worldview of the Asháninka people—to whom Mr. Piyáko belongs—human beings, animals, plants, and spirits are all, in a broad sense, relatives. Nature is not something to be dominated by humans, but rather something they must coexist with, because the Asháninka believe that spiritual existence resides in every forest, river, and animal.

These indigenous values and ways of life are gaining recognition because within them lies a critical key to global environmental conservation.

According to current estimates, there are approximately 30 million species of organisms inhabiting the Earth. In addition, recent scientific research has determined that every organism that has existed over the past 3.8 billion years, as well as every new one that will emerge on Earth in the future, utilizes the exact same genetic code, which means that all living beings are interconnected through the genetic code of their DNA—in other words, they are all “relatives.”

For the ancestors of the Asháninka people, these scientific insights must have been learned through experience, by coexisting with—and having their lives sustained by—the flora and fauna of the Amazon.

Similar culture and traditions exist in Japan as well. Living in a country surrounded on all sides by the sea—and where mountains, rivers, trees, and plants weave a tapestry of beautiful scenery in each of the four seasons—the Japanese people have, since ancient times, viewed human beings as an integral part of nature and strived to embrace ways of life that coexist with nature.

For example, in Shinto (a Japanese religion) there is the phrase, “eight million gods”—in other words, the gods are numerous, beyond count—that teaches us that gods reside within every form of existence. The groves and woods surrounding the approach and grounds of Shinto shrines are known as guardian forests. These have long been cherished as “sacred forests”—places where gods dwell, that is, spaces that demarcate the shrine's holy precincts from the world outside.

In this way, the culture and traditions that the Japanese people have continuously handed down, to the present day, contain a wealth of wisdom about how nature and human

beings can coexist.

Regrettably, though, modern society has gradually forgotten its sense of reverence for nature, coming instead to prioritize mass production and mass consumption. As a result, Japan, too, now faces a mounting array of challenges, including climate change, marine pollution, water pollution, air pollution, soil contamination, the biodiversity crisis, and deforestation.

I am a Buddhist; however, Shakyamuni's teachings were never intended to fulfill the desires of human beings. Rather, they emphasize the importance of letting go of attachments and truly discovering the meaning of living as a human being.

In this sense, I have come to believe that simplicity is the most important principle for human beings in navigating the course of their daily lives. Simplicity, as I understand it, entails discerning the essence of things—identifying what matters for human beings to go on living—and, based on that insight, equipping ourselves only with things that are truly necessary while dispensing with everything else.

I believe that the most consequential stance we can take, in order to foster the coexistence of nature and human beings, is to lead lives of moderation that are free from excess and guided by religious principles, instead of allowing our desires to run free and living without rules.

From the age of six, I spent ten years living in a mountain village called Suganuma, located in Tokamachi, Niigata Prefecture. In Suganuma, I came to know firsthand the beauty and bounty of nature, as well as its fearsome aspects, such as heavy snowfalls. Even as a child, I harbored a deep sense of reverence toward the nature.

For that very reason, I feel a profound resonance with Mr. Piyáko's activities, his way of thinking, and his hope for the future. I was also able to learn from the wisdom passed down by my ancestors. And above all, I gained from them the courage to face the future.

There is not a moment to waste in addressing the challenge of conserving the Amazon rainforest. I earnestly hope that Mr. Piyáko will make even greater efforts to lead us to the realization of a sustainable world.

In closing, I would like to express my hope that today's presentation ceremony will serve as the opportunity for as many people as possible to share in Mr. Piyáko's aspirations and support his activities, and offer him my sincere prayers for his continued good health and even greater success in his sacred mission.

Thank you very much.