

# **The courage to rebuild**

Jun 28, 2011

“The journey of life is not smooth and unimpeded, but may be fraught with difficulties exceeding our worst nightmares,” observed Kan’ ichi Asakawa (1873-1948), a historian and peace advocate originally from Fukushima Prefecture.

More than three months have now passed since the March 11 earthquake and tsunami struck the Tohoku-Kanto region, leaving a trail of devastation of an unprecedented magnitude. The number of confirmed fatalities exceeds 15,000, with around 7,500 more still missing.

Each victim was someone’s father, mother, child, relative or friend — each was an irreplaceable individual.

As a Buddhist, I have been offering my earnest prayers for their peaceful repose, as well as for the health, safety and well-being of all those affected by the earthquake, and for the success of relief and reconstruction efforts.

The scale of the destruction is immense, with more than 110,000 people still living in shelters and temporary housing. There is a clear need to make official responses to the disaster more focused, speedy and effective.

My heart goes out to the huge numbers of people undergoing unspeakable difficulties.

The suffering of those whose loved ones and livelihoods were swept away has been compounded by uncertainties about the future, the seemingly unending problems at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, the threat of economic recession, harmful rumors and many other obstacles to recovery.

But I believe we must not allow feelings of defeat to take root in our hearts. Dr. Ved P. Nanda, an expert on international law, sent a message of sympathy stating: “Now is the time to profoundly cultivate the security of the spirit, the inner strength that can overcome any threat.”

The Buddhist scriptures teach: “More valuable than treasures in a storehouse are treasures of the body, and the treasures of the heart are the most valuable of all.” There are no greater treasures than the highest human qualities such as compassion, courage and hope. Not even tragic accident or disaster can destroy such treasures of the heart.

Even though the earthquake and tsunami was a cruel catastrophe that has left everyone stunned, I believe we can see three signs of hope.

The first is a sense of human solidarity. This can be seen both locally and internationally. We will never forget how the rest of the world offered Japan prompt and practical relief as soon as the disaster occurred. The gratitude of the Japanese people is heartfelt and immense.

Also, within the affected communities, a renewed and powerful spirit of cooperation is visible. When individuals stand up together in the face of a catastrophic challenge in this way, a dignified human community imbued with mutual care and support is born. No one should be left to suffer alone.

The second sign of hope is the indomitable courage of those affected by the earthquake. Words cannot express how deeply I have been moved by the selfless acts made for the sake of others by people who were themselves victims.

I was told of one woman from Kamaishi, Iwate Prefecture, who saved the lives of her neighbors. As the raging waters reached the second floor of her apartment building, she held onto an air-conditioning unit, meanwhile preventing a man carrying a baby from being swept away by pinning him against a wall with her back. With her free hand she then grabbed and held onto another man by the collar. She said she was determined not to let them go even if her arms were torn off.

There are thousands of such unsung heroes still working tirelessly for the reconstruction of their communities, undefeated by the heart-wrenching loss of families and friends, homes and belongings.

At the Soka Gakkai’s community centers throughout the region, survivors volunteered their help despite their own grief and exhaustion. Our relief efforts began immediately after the earthquake and included offering shelter to

evacuees. We are now supporting medium- and long-term reconstruction efforts in Miyagi, Iwate and Fukushima Prefectures.

A Buddhist scripture states: “When we light a lantern for others, our own way forward is lit.” When one takes action for others, one’s own suffering is transformed into the energy that can keep one moving forward; a light of hope illuminating a new tomorrow for oneself and others is kindled.

The third sign of hope is the passion and vigor of youth taking action.

A young man I know from Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, was swept up by the tsunami and escaped death by clinging to a pine tree above the freezing waters through the night. A plumber by occupation, he lost his shop and home.

But he refused to succumb to the crushing burden of hopelessness, assisting efforts to reestablish vital services throughout the city. Amid the ruins and on the site of his former home, he and his friends put up a huge sign that read “*Gambaro! Ishinomaki* (Don’t give up, Ishinomaki!)” made out of salvaged wood. The sign has become a symbol of the spirit of the people of Ishinomaki.

Young people are, by their very youth, the embodiment of hope. No matter how dark it is, the sun rises where young people take a stand.

The path toward full reconstruction will be long. But we will continue to move forward, inspired by the example of such courageous youth, joining forces with others exerting themselves for the recovery of the affected communities.

Each step, no matter how seemingly small, will help plant the seeds of hope and be counted among the treasures of the heart.

The spirit of the people of Tohoku is found in these further words of Kan’ ichi Asakawa: “People are not so weak that they can only live under the sway of their circumstances. ... Rather than be crushed by sorrow, let us rise proudly above it.”