

Special Talk: Reflection on Humanity against Suffering — Resilience and Hopes in the Time of Corona Pandemic¹

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Issues Emerging amidst the Coronavirus Disaster

In Search of Humane Insight

Yamagishi: It has been almost seven months since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. While the governments of various nations of the world have been torn between infectious disease control and economic measures to mitigate the economic crisis created by the pandemic, the people of these nations are required to evolve new lifestyles for coexisting with the Coronavirus. The disaster has not only brought up issues related to infectious diseases, but has also foregrounded problems such as environmental destruction and inequality that are worsening due to growth-oriented economic policies. My concern is that excessive economic activities have made our environment prone to the virus outbreak and its spread, and that governments seem preoccupied with responses to the critical situation, thereby losing their capability to aid and protect the weak. A pandemic situation should have brought us together in a concerted effort to deal with it; rather, it has misled us into further division and discrimination. Viruses are not supposed to discriminate, but the Coronavirus definitely does discriminate as the risk of infection differs depending on the specific situation of nations. Moreover, the Coronavirus renders people anxious and scared, thereby causing them to discriminate against each other.

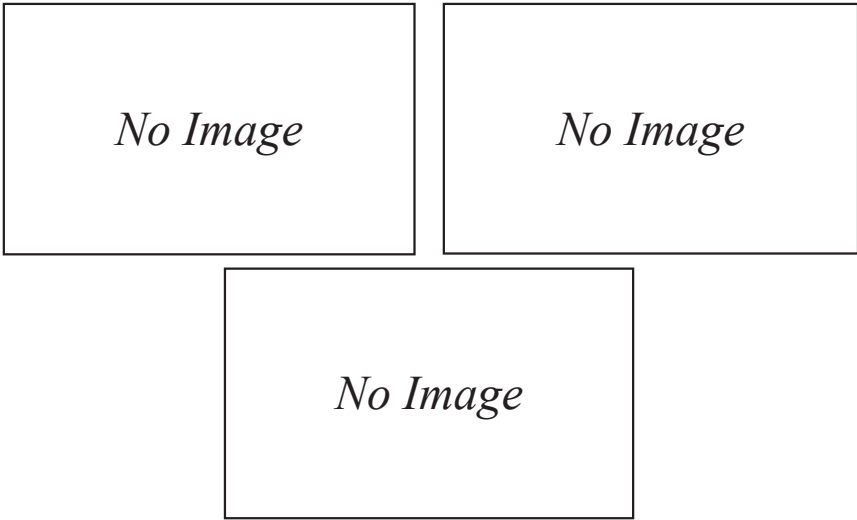
The global scientific community is currently trying to develop a method of detection and a vaccine in order to ease our anxiety about an invisible and unfamiliar virus. However, aren't we just in response mode: 'How we should respond to the infectious disease' or 'How we can treat the disease'? In other words, we are not raising more fundamental questions about 'why human beings are facing the

infectious disease in the first place' or 'what the infectious disease tells human beings'. In this sense, the Coronavirus disaster has raised the question of 'how much human beings can get insight into themselves'. Such insight could cover matters of human life and death, the fundamental way of human life, and the nature of religion. So how should we live life in the time of the Coronavirus disaster? Today, we would like to discuss this topic while looking back at the history of infectious diseases with Prof. (Emer.) Hiroshi Ichikawa, who focuses on Judaism, and Dr Yutaka Ishigami, who is a specialist in philosophy and humanities.

Ichikawa: The Coronavirus disaster has suddenly befallen every single person in the world and they are confronted with a critical situation. Looking at the history of the Jewish people, times of crisis have always produced sages. In the midst of great peril, when in the first century CE Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem and most of the city, the rabbis acted as sages or religious teachers and Judaism got a fresh lease of life as Rabbinic Judaism. In the early 20th century, humanity and the Jews in particular again encountered a period of grave peril with the Great Depression, the rise of the Nazis, wars of aggression, and the Holocaust. However, even in such circumstances, Jewish scholars and thinkers stood up to change the world and in the era corresponding and subsequent to the mid-20th century, produced new philosophies and ideas. There are some views that the current crisis might lead to the extinction of humanity. But I see that Jewish people have taken their cues from crises and turned them into times of sages and scholars, offering new insights to the world. Looking back at their achievements, I would like to stress that we should not lose hope for the future and gather wisdom even in such an unprecedented crisis.

Ishigami: I am also deeply interested in the viewpoint that in the history of civilization, human beings have acquired new insights from adversity and developed them (for the future). The Coronavirus disaster seems to push us to answer the following questions: 'What should we think about right now?' and 'What can we learn from history?' There should be something that we can learn from the history of the Jewish people, who have created new ways of life amidst adversity.

The future path of development for humanity lies in the development of humane insights. I would have to say that humanity has depended too much on scientific insights instead of seeking humane insights in modern times. The great historian Dr Arnold Toynbee was also very critical of a modern technological civilization. In particular, he viewed this crucial change of the world with great concern once nations



Counter clockwise from the upper right are Dr Ichikawa, IOP senior research fellow Dr Ishigami, and IOP commissioned research fellow Dr Yamagishi

acquired nuclear bombs after World War II. Scientific technology itself can be said to be neutral and scientific views are as a matter of course very necessary for us. But if scientific technology develops and operates beyond human understanding, it might become something that would even bring inhuman or anti-human results. Nuclear weapons are a typical example of this and they cause serious environmental issues at the global level as well. Coronavirus is yet another example of a man-made phenomenon resulting in a disaster of global proportions. Human beings might be currently challenged and threatened by a civilization that they themselves have created. I believe the time has come for us to turn our attention to fundamental issues behind such phenomena, which can help us envision what modern civilization will be like in the future and perhaps correct the course we are currently taking.

Ichikawa: Human civilization has always offered ways of thinking in order to consider every issue as a human issue and go through it. Human beings have faced themselves and taken a relook at their own ways of life in order to overcome the challenges they encountered. That is why they could bring forth potential to bear, no matter how great the disaster that befell them. This is what we call ‘resilience’. However, as Dr Ishigami mentioned, I am afraid that we currently grapple with issues only from the scientific perspective and lack the attitude that we should reflect on ourselves as human beings. It is impossible for us to explain all the issues related to the Coronavirus — inequality, trade, and

environment — only from the scientific perspective. Now is the time we should turn our attention to the missing angle.

Disparity, Discrimination, and Authority

Yamagishi: We note that these modern issues have become prominent on account of the Coronavirus pandemic. In India, my field of research, the central government executed a nationwide lockdown and succeeded in minimizing the number of infected people initially. However, millions of urban migrants and slum dwellers were forced to lose their jobs and go hungry in the streets, and flow into the rural areas. This created a risk of virus spread all over the nation, and at 7.12 million (as of October 16, 2020) the number of infected people is second only to the US. It has been revealed that the lives of a great number of people in India are endangered not only because of the Coronavirus infection but also on account of malnutrition. It was also revealed that the nation is more vulnerable in terms of hygiene management and support for poorer people than other developed and emerging countries. Such disparity between economic classes is apparent both domestically as well as when one compares conditions with other emerging countries.

Another concern is the standard of reporting related to the Coronavirus (the infected, infected dead, and health professionals) in mass media. Initially, the Japanese mass media reported casually how Coronavirus patients died in the absence of their family and returned home in the form of ashes. As time passed, the human-interest stories ceased and only the number of infected people began to be updated daily, while deaths due to infection are hardly being reported anymore. This numbness to human tragedy and consequent reduction to numbers is reflected in Albert Camus's *La Peste* (The Plague, 1947). Camus uses 'abstraction' to explain how the Black Death brought repeatedly monotonous days with escalating deaths, and at least in Japan, concrete and graphic description of Coronavirus deaths has been lacking. I am also concerned about discrimination toward Coronavirus patients and health professionals who risk infection themselves. There have been cases when residents and police of India have assaulted and harassed health professionals, believing that they carry infection and can spread Coronavirus. Since the virus is an unknown to the general public, people are scared and have practiced extreme segregation of anyone linked to it in any way.

Prof. Ichikawa, you have been in Israel for a long time, right? The government of Israel also executed its lockdown early on, just like India, and it seems to have minimized the number of domestic Coronavirus

patients. So, what kind of issues is Israel currently facing?

Ichikawa: While Israel, of course, has the issue of disparity like India, other serious issues have also emerged. I attended one lecture on the Coronavirus in Japan the other day, and the lecturer introduced Israel as a nation that has succeeded in its response to the Coronavirus infection. Israel certainly managed to effectively carry out large-scale PCR testing (after South Korea and Germany) and quarantining of infected patients to contain the virus successfully in a short period of time. However, that was done when the first wave attacked in April 2020, and the numbers of infections and deaths are currently increasing in communities of ultra-Orthodox Jewish people. As the Israeli government tried to carry out two nationwide lockdowns over the Jewish holidays in both spring and autumn and curb Israelis from traveling, it came into confrontation with the ultra-Orthodox group that opposed these measures, resulting in increasing numbers of infected people. Since the ultra-Orthodox group prioritizes divinely inspired insight of the Bible and Halakhah (Jewish laws based on divine will) over scientific insight, it opposes the measures that the government takes based on scientific insight. Moreover, whether ultra-Orthodox or not, Jewish people generally consider that visiting each relative and interacting with neighbors during holidays are important in a social context. Therefore, they are against the government that tried to shut down close interaction amongst people.

Especially during the second lockdown, people developed a feeling



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of distrust against the government that tried to limit the protests to fend off criticism of the prime minister, who was charged with corruption. Therefore, it is widely believed that, as protests and criticisms against government efforts to limit the ultra-Orthodox group have become more active, the lockdown has been less effective. On the other hand, the Israeli parliament has been racked by the antagonism between the right and the left, which makes it impossible to have smooth deliberations, get a national consensus, and take effective measures. The Coronavirus disaster highlights a serious problem with people claiming their freedom and rights clashing with the government and a consensus not being arrived at even within the government. In short, the freedom of people and trust toward the government can be said to be the focus of the issue.

Yamagishi: I have also been paying attention to the responses of religious communities and people in the time of the Coronavirus disaster. I have an image of the Jewish community as having strong ties, but this carries a high risk of the so-called ‘three Cs’ (closed space, crowded places, and close-contact settings). Particularly in Israel, I think the issue of authority has become a major one in terms of whether priority should be given to religious authority (as the ultra-Orthodox demand) or whether the sovereignty of the state should be recognized. One emerging religious organization that I have been observing has closed temples and centers around the world and urged its followers to refrain from congregating for religious activities in response to the WHO’s declaration of a pandemic. Especially in India, this organization has started focusing on its public activities to support a number of poor and needy on behalf of the government. It is precisely a critical situation like the COVID-19 crisis that makes it possible for us to clearly see the different attitudes and choices of religious communities that trust the government’s policies or ignore them and continue their own religious practice according to cultural background. Although the issues exposed by the Coronavirus disaster differ from country to country, in any case, as Dr Ishigami said earlier, I think we need to focus on the fundamental issues behind them.

Information Manipulation and Public Control

Ichikawa: What concerns me is that human beings are still trying to respond in a self-centered way even in such a situation. A crisis such as the Coronavirus disaster is an opportunity for human beings to pause and reflect upon many things, but in reality, we are concentrating on how we can overcome the crisis with science and technology. Here,

the manufacture of vaccines and therapeutic drugs is set as the goal for a ‘solution’ to the Coronavirus disaster, and everything is geared to the ultimate purpose of ‘returning to normal life’. To add to this, only information that people want to know will be aggregated and reported, while information that people are not interested in — and therefore doesn’t bring in high viewer ratings — will be left out of the news, even if it is important. The Coronavirus disaster is telling us to reconsider ourselves, but we are paying attention only to superficial information that interests us without thinking too deeply about the fundamental nature of the disaster. Information that is repeated monotonously day after day is given out according to our interest. Even in the Coronavirus disaster, we are accustomed to news content based on commercial considerations, and it makes us realize that we are stuck in a superficial world.

One thing I was very grateful for was the coverage of the Coronavirus disaster and many enlightening articles in the *Komei Shimbun* (newspaper) and *Seikyo Shimbun*. Looking back over the past six months, I have kept more than a hundred cuttings that are full of not only current news of the Coronavirus disaster in countries around the world, but also the efforts of Soka Gakkai International (SGI) members to combat it, and the thoughts and actions of Soka Gakkai members in Japan who have faced various hardships but have not stepped back. I have been greatly encouraged by them, and was able to reaffirm the importance of keeping hope alive.

Ishigami: Especially in Japan, the media coverage is in general quite numerically biased, and I feel that they are now reporting only the numbers of infected people. Another thing that concerns me is that most of the comments in the reports are made by doctors and researchers specializing in infectious diseases, and there are none by cultural personalities or scholars, whom we get to see only in some special features of magazines thereafter. Moreover, many of the recent debates have been set in a seemingly straightforward and dichotomous frame of economic measures versus infection-prevention measures. I feel that such debates somehow seem to miss the fundamental point. Looking at the media, I even feel that they intentionally try to keep people’s mind off the fundamental issues. I am worried about that such media coverage will hamper awareness of infection prevention and foster an attitude of indifference.

Yamagishi: If the media provides only information that the audience wants, the content will be biased and the opinions formed by people accordingly biased. There is also the possibility that the state will

manipulate information to form a consensus among people so as to easily control the nation. For example, government-leaning experts might be asked to provide only the information that people want or need to know and cover up the rest. If the intention of the government (which wants to increase its approval rating by capturing the public's behavior and opinions) matches that of the news media (which wants to provide only information popular with viewers), the provided information will eventually become monotonous.

When Michel Foucault wrote about panopticism and power, he assumed that the subject dislikes or fears being observed. However, nowadays on the contrary, more and more people feel anxious unless they are observed. For example, under pressure to conform, people feel anxious when they are not being watched by others around and are left out of the control of the state. The party of control tries to provide only the information that people want to know and hide the inconvenient information. It is necessary to discuss whether this is universally applicable, but I think there is a possibility that the state would try to keep people's mind off fundamental issues and control them all.

Signs Heralding a 'Century of Life'

Ishigami: At the beginning of this talk, I mentioned that modern science and technology have gone beyond human understanding, but I also think that there has never been a time like today when it is important to rethink issues after going back to the perspective of 'life' as the basis of understanding of human beings.

In 2020, it was reported that 2000 reindeers died of an infectious disease in Siberia and people who ate the meat also got infected. The cause of this was said to be the thawing of the permafrost due to recent global warming and a resurgence of pathogens that had been contained in the permafrost. As a result of self-centered human behavior such as excessive economic activities, nature can also become a great threat to human beings.

This reminds me of the book *Mononoke Hime* (Princess Mononoke, 1997), in which Hayao Miyazaki depicted the world of human beings, the unseen world of *mononoke* (supernatural beings), and the world of *Shishigami* (Forest Spirit) which symbolize life itself encompassing both the human and *mononoke* worlds. While humans are beings in search of happiness, they should not seek materialistic happiness but rather, one backed by a theory of life. I believe that the most fundamental idea behind this is the dignity of life.

In his writings and speeches, SGI President Daisaku Ikeda, the

founder of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, has for a long time been proclaiming the 21st century as ‘the century of life’, and I have been thinking for a long time about what President Ikeda means by this phrase. Just as I was wondering if there were any signs of a ‘century of life’ in the first two decades of the 21st century, the Coronavirus disaster occurred. There have been many large-scale disasters in limited areas since the 21st century, but I think we are witnessing the first global-scale disaster in this Coronavirus situation. The Coronavirus disaster may be a ‘sign’ that turns the 21st century into the ‘century of life’.

We can also regard viruses as living organisms in the sense that they can replicate themselves in a specific environment. When I attended a symposium with researchers focusing on micro-organisms, I learned that bacteria are not uncommon and that there are many bacteria useful for human beings. We also discussed the importance of respecting bacteria and living together with them, since bacteria have been around for much longer than human beings and are superior to them in terms of survival.

The concept of ‘symbiosis’ was originally a biological term, and it refers to the mutual relationship between different species of organisms. The term can also be used broadly to mean that human beings and nature should be considered as one. In Buddhism also there are the teachings of *engi* (dependent origination) and *esho-funi* (oneness of life and its environment). They expound that each being exists through mutual dependence and that if one is destroyed, the other will be also destroyed and the entire harmony will be disturbed. From this perspective, even a small phenomenon, especially when it comes to life, must be considered significant for the whole universe including the biosphere.

Although the Coronavirus is currently causing problems for human beings, we can adopt a different perspective that human beings are in fact the ‘virus’ of the earth. In the history of the earth, human beings can be regarded as a virus that has only recently settled down. Some other beings may consider human beings to be a bad virus that is destroying the global environment and may feel that human beings should be exterminated from the earth. In any case, I feel that we have literally entered an era in which we must think about everything from the dimension of ‘life’.

Yamagishi: Viral infectious diseases can be viewed in the same way as disasters and wars in terms of the threat to human life. Buddhism regards pestilence as one of the three calamities along with warfare and famine and now we can see pestilence as a part of natural phenomena. If the Coronavirus disaster has occurred as a reaction to our human behavior or as a reprisal from nature, we can consider it as a calamity

that is meant to be. This is why we need to change our mindset from ‘human response to viruses’ to ‘viral response to human beings’ and from ‘viruses for human beings’ to ‘human beings for viruses’. In such a case, what is important is a process of rethinking from the perspective of ‘life’. We may have already accumulated knowledge through such a process, but if so, I think it is necessary to confirm whether or not we have learned something from our experience of the Coronavirus disaster and what lessons it holds for us in the long term.

Toward the Inner World of Human Beings

Yamagishi: Let us now look back at the history of infectious diseases. Here, I would like you to approach it not only as a factual history of infectious diseases, but also see how people lived through and thought about the infection. It is very important to look at the recent Coronavirus disaster from the perspective of people who have lived through history and think about ‘what the future should be’. I hope we can position this talk as a starting point for listening to the voices of the people of the past and delivering their voices to the distant future. So, let us proceed with this talk, looking back at the past but keeping in mind that we must be future-oriented.

Facing Gods and Supernatural Beings

Yamagishi: It is not too much to say that our history has been shaped by infectious diseases. There are many records of plagues in ancient Japanese documents. For example, in *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters of Japan, 712), the word *eyami* or *enoyamai* meaning plague was written as 疫疾 or 疾疫. Since there are records of a smallpox epidemic in the Silla Kingdom which killed a lot of people at that time, it is quite possible that diseases were brought to Japan from the Asian Continent. However, such plagues were not regarded as just so-called ‘diseases’ but believed to be caused by *kegare* (human defilement) or a curse of the plague gods.

Ishigami: The ritualistic customs of *kiyome* or *misogi* (purification process) have existed since ancient times in both the East and the West and these are never irrelevant to plague. In *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters of Japan) and *Nihonshoki* (Chronicles of Japan, c.720), there are mythical stories that depict how Izanagi performed *misogi* to get rid of *kegare* in the land of darkness and the country was founded as a result. For example, *Kojiki* mentions that when Izanagi performed *misogi* in

the sea, two gods of calamity were born, followed by three gods who set things to rights. Around that time, many gods and goddesses, such as Amaterasu Omikami, appeared. This is the myth concerning the foundation of Japan. It is interesting to note that the concept of hygiene such as *kegare* or *misogi* is directly related to the foundation of the nation and that such a foundation was backed by the gods who bring calamity or help recover from it.

Since plague was not uncommon, people were always confronted by it and tried to overcome it together, which made them aware of their bond as the people of Japan and gradually unified the land as a nation. Moreover, the purification process for the recovery of people can be said to be rational from the perspective of a measure against infectious diseases.

Yamagishi: At that time when herbal remedies were not effective, there was no way of coping with the plague except to perform a faith cure. It is likely that people earnestly prayed for a cure and got purified so that the curse of plague would be quelled. In addition, as people believed that plagues were caused by the misrule of leaders, large-scale prayers were performed and the name of an era was changed to eliminate the cause. It is easy to imagine that a great number of people died of unknown plague and that the entire society was too exhausted to cope with the outbreak. It is well known that Rushana Daibutsu (Great Buddha) was built at Todaiji Temple in Nara to ward off the disease and that Gozu Tenno was enshrined and the festival held to secure protection from the plague at Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto. It is clear that people were united through their connection with gods and the Buddha and placed their faith as a spiritual foundation.

Ishigami: In the Heian period (794–1185), many people began to believe that the plague was caused by *mononoke*. Just as Murasaki Shikibu described that *mononoke* appear in the darkness of the mind, court writers may have thought that the plague originated from within human beings. Since the literary works of the Heian period were written within a closed society, it can be considered that they reflected the cause of mysterious phenomena inside the human mind rather than outside. On the other hand, Abe no Seimei and other Yin-Yang practitioners advocated *monoimi* (to refrain from visiting or going out for a certain period of time) and *katatagae* (to go in a different direction and head for the destination). It can be said that they were the most advanced infectious disease specialists of that time in a sense, but even so, the main methods of coping with the plague seemed to remain prayers and incantation.

The Philosophy of ‘Purification’ and Faith in the God of Medicine

Yamagishi: Ancient Greece was also confronted with serious bouts of plague. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides reports on a plague that occurred in the midst of the War, which shows how the plague shook up Athens at that time. As in Japan, the plague exhausted the people and plunged society into chaos. Thucydides writes as follows:

By far the most terrible feature in the malady was the dejection which ensued when any one felt himself sickening, for the despair into which they instantly fell took away their power of resistance,... [H]onour made them unsparing of themselves in their attendance in their friends’ houses, where even the members of the family were at last worn out by the moans of the dying, and succumbed to the force of the disaster.²

This plague became the cause of fall of Athens, and it shows that plagues have had a great impact on the world.

Ishigami: Plato, who was almost a contemporary of Thucydides, wrote a dialogue called *Phaedo*, in which the word ‘catharsis’ (purification) is mentioned a lot. The word refers to the separation of the soul from the body defiled by the senses; and philosophy is said to be precisely this separation (purification) of the soul from the body. Subtitled as ‘The Immortality of the Soul’, in it, *Phaedo* discusses the eternity of the soul talked on the day of Socrates’s death. Socrates teaches his disciples, who fear and grieve death, that death is just a new beginning in various ways. Plato may have wanted to show how calmly Socrates faced death as a philosopher and mentor, while he advanced the hygienic concept of defilement and purification as a prescription against ideological infection of the soul, or in other words, a method of fighting erroneous ideas.

Just as the term ‘healing’ has been widely used in modern society, the term ‘clinical philosophy’ has also been prevailing in the field of philosophy. Philosophy is a discipline essentially and closely related to medicine. Aristotle, a disciple of Plato, was born into a family of physicians and attached importance to the empirical and experiential way of thinking. He pondered over movement of the soul in terms of form (principle of definition) and matter (material) and considered the expansion of the soul form as the progress of life. He states in his *Poetics* as well, “[T]ragedy purifies the feelings themselves.”³ It can be said that catharsis, originally a term meaning authoritative and religious

ritual, was positioned in the philosophical context by Plato and Aristotle.

Going back to *Phaedo*, the final scene is closed with Socrates's will. His last words to his friend Crito were: "Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?"⁴ Asclepius, a god of medicine, is said to have been invoked and greatly worshipped in Athens in response to the epidemic that broke out during the Peloponnesian War. A rooster was the common offering to the god. Incidentally, the staff of Asclepius is used as the current symbol of the WHO. Although there are several interpretations of this narrative of Socrates's last moments, we can see that philosophy and medicine are closely connected. Philosophy may today connote thinking of something in a complicated way, but it was originally deeply connected to human life.

Living the Trials God Gave Us

Yamagishi: Now Dr Ishigami mentioned *misogi* or purification and the offering of a rooster, but the Old Testament also has a ritual procedure for cleansing a person of defiling skin disease by offering a small bird. If a person was suspected to have a defiling skin disease, he would be taken to a priest who would decide whether or not to leave him outside. If the person did have a defiling skin disease, the sacrifice of one small bird would be offered and another bird would be released to free the person from the sin that caused the disease. Once the person was free from the sin, the priest would then pronounce him 'clean'. In the Old Testament, isolating the patient and then reintegrating him into the community is described as a faith practice to free him from sin, but it seems to be a very rational way of coping with the situation.

Ichikawa: The teachings of the Jewish Bible, especially the third Book of Moses or the Book of Leviticus, specified methods of treating leprosy and coping with other cases. People took these to be absolute revelations of God and cherished the way of life prescribed by the teachings. They accepted the plague as the will of God and sought its cause in sin, asking, "Why did God cause us suffering through this plague?" Then they tried to interpret the plague in various ways: as due to the sins of an individual, his/her ancestors, his/her society, or God's punishment as a sign. It is important to note that the people suffer due to divine will so that they can eventually experience salvation and cultivate the Jewish spirit. For example, the Book of Exodus closely relates to the plagues and clearly shows how people learned from their sufferings.

Although the direct cause of the Israelite exodus is said to be a calamity that killed only the Egyptians and the firstborn livestock, it was probably a plague. The Israelites, a minority group in Egypt,

were regarded as dangerous and treated as slaves by the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh persecuted the Israelites, but not to the point of exile. The Israelites on their part seem to have thought that serving as slaves was more comfortable than leaving Egypt. It is only when Israelites were exiled that their true feelings of complaint were revealed. God spread the plague to Egypt so that the Pharaoh could exile the Israelites who were not affected by the calamity. Exiled to the desert and in danger of their lives, they complained to Moses, asking, “Why did you bring us out here to die in the wilderness?”⁵ It can be interpreted that God intentionally gave the Israelites a death-defying trial in order to make them develop a spirit of self-restraint.

Plague as an Opportunity toward Inward Self and Reason

Ichikawa: Dr Yamagishi said earlier that pestilence is one of the three calamities along with warfare and famine that threaten human life. Inevitable and causeless calamities occurred everywhere [in the past], but the important thing is to learn how people responded to these calamities and discuss how we should view it. In ancient times, people believed that the cause of unknown calamities was a curse or the will of the gods, and tried to cope with them through incantation and sacrifices (offerings). It is not appropriate for us to dismiss such beliefs as erroneous and futile.

As we give priority to scientific insights in modern times, we tend to look at calamities and their solutions from the perspective of a cause-and-effect relationship in natural science. However, if we do so, the contribution of human beings, especially human ‘evil’, would be left out of the discussion. In a time when modern scientific insights were still limited, people could not understand the cause of calamities and attributed them to the retribution of god or supernatural beings. They tried to figure out the cause in various ways and finally faced the ‘evil’ aspects of human beings such as the darkness of the human mind or sin. In this sense, I think that the plagues and other calamities befalling ancient people can be seen as a great opportunity for them to look inward.

Ishigami: I think so too. There is no doubt that calamities and illnesses are a great opportunity for human beings to face their inner world, and there we can see something beyond the cause-and-effect relationship that exists in natural science. However, if the aspects beyond scientific understanding are alone emphasized, they would inevitably take on a mystical character. So, I would like to ask you, Prof. Ichikawa, how do modern Jewish people understand the ritual procedures concerning

severe skin diseases in the Book of Leviticus mentioned earlier?

Ichikawa: This provision in the Book of Leviticus is considered to be the basis for the importance Jewish people placed on cleanliness and maintaining a hygienic environment in their society. This may also be the reason why the number of dead was small in Jewish society during the Black Death epidemic of medieval times. In modern times, the scientific concept of hygiene is more widely accepted by Israeli and American Jews. Therefore, it can be said that the way modern people interpret the provision is quite different from the way pre-modern people perceived it. I think it is necessary to focus on how more or less religious Jewish people read the Bible and to figure out what God is like to these people.

The Bible is full of descriptions of a personal God who behaves like human beings and has the same emotions. The prayer books also depict a personal God. On the other hand, there is a deeper view that God is beyond personality and is totally beyond the understanding of human beings. Here, we can see the concept of an ‘infinite God’, which is perhaps influenced by Greek philosophy. For example, the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who followed the philosophy of Aristotle, stressed that God should be viewed as a being without body or personality. For human beings, there are two divine aspects: God with a personality and God as an originally transcendental being beyond personality. From either aspect, God is regarded as absolute. In the 12th century, at the same time as Maimonides, Jewish mysticism or Kabbalah began to emerge and the concept of ‘Ein Sof’ was introduced to describe an infinite God. ‘Ein Sof’ literally means without end. In this sense, the ritualistic treatment of skin diseases in the Book of Leviticus would no longer be considered as the idea of ancient people who were not very familiar with the concept of hygiene. The laws set forth by the eternal and infinite God contain a universal significance that transcends time. So, it can be interpreted that human beings just do not understand the significance.

Religious people feel that they cannot explain hygiene and medical aspects from the scientific perspective over the teachings of an absolute God. However, this does not prove the teachings to be incorrect and people never look to anything other than God for reasons why they should ultimately act according to the teachings. It is the basic position of religious people that they cannot question the ultimate reason for what the absolute God has revealed to the prophets. Judaism especially has been a ‘religion of the Torah’, but the meaning and interpretation of the Torah today differ between various groups. For example, while

the ultra-Orthodox group regards the Torah as God's revelation itself, conservative and progressive groups interpret the Torah as a historical legacy that the ancient people provided and changed according to the times. As I mentioned earlier, the ultra-Orthodox do not place their faith in scientific insights, but on the other hand, some groups do accord importance to scientific insights and remove anything scientifically unacceptable from a commandment of God. In addition, some biblical scholars and other researchers discuss whether the content of the teachings is appropriate from the scientific perspective.

Ishigami: It is easier to grasp things from the scientific perspective, but religion shows something important that cannot be grasped from the lens of science. However, it does not mean that we can ignore the scientific perspective for that reason.

For example, in medieval Japan when the samurai gained power, a realistic view that emphasized reason and experience gradually became stronger. We can also see this realistic view in religious teachings. During the Kamakura period (1185–1333), Nichiren set forth the principle of three proofs (documentary proof, theoretical proof, and actual proof) as the standard for judging the validity of any given teachings. It is specifically to choose a teaching based on its validity, such as whether the teaching is based on documents such as sutras, whether it is compatible with reason and logic, and whether its content is borne out by actual results when put into practice. The principle shows a clear scientific perspective and seems to be a kind of criticism against religion or religious groups that controlled people's mind through mysticism and magic. In this scenario, Nichiren presented a method for verifying the validity of a religion in such a way that everyone could understand it.

We cannot say that a scientific perspective covers everything but I think we should at least regard it as important within the scope of reason. In the West, the focus on such a scientific perspective became stronger after the Renaissance.

When Human Beings Look Inward

To the Renaissance: Literature Showing the Strength of the Spirit

Ishigami: The Black Death plague epidemic of the 14th century swept through Europe and it is said that the lives of about a quarter of its population were claimed by it. Quite some time ago, science historian Yoichiro Murakami described the situation in his book *Pesuto Dairyuko*

(The Plague Epidemic, 1983) which greatly inspired me. The epidemic was indeed an opportunity to make a great change. The works of poets and writers such as Giovanni Boccaccio and Francesco Petrarca were created in the midst of these changes.

Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1348–53) is a story about a group of 10 men and women who run away from the plague to the suburbs of Florence and spend 10 days telling stories to pass the time. The book is full of humorous stories of failure

and absurdity, but what is noteworthy is that at the beginning of the story, the plague epidemic in Florence is described in great detail. Although the story stresses the tragedy of the plague, it is as a whole written like a report with a calm touch. I wondered why Boccaccio depicted the epidemic situation at the beginning. To me, it revealed his attitude not to be defeated by the plague and to face it head on. I think, as many people close to him were infected and died one after another at that time, he wrote *The Decameron* in order to comfort and encourage people.

It can be said that Boccaccio took a positive action in writing a humorous work to comfort and encourage people who were dealing with anguish, grief, and exhaustion as they faced death. In the modern context, such action can be to enhance the 'resilience' of people in distress through laughter. In his book *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient* (1979), the American writer Norman Cousins, with whom President Ikeda once had a dialogue, wrote about his own experience of remarkable recovery from an incurable collagen disease through listening to funny stories. We can see the similarity over the different time periods in the way of invigorating the life of people who are tormented by anxiety and anguish that come from the uncertainty of death.

The poet laureate Petrarch, Boccaccio's friend, is said to have lost his lover to the Black Death and mentions in his writing that the plague

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Six Tuscan Poets by Giorgio Vasari (1544).
Third figure from left is Petrarch, and to his right are Giovanni Boccaccio and Dante Alighieri ©Bridgeman/PPS

epidemic changed his attitude toward life. Petrarch is credited with having created an ‘introspective literature’ with the plague epidemic, giving an opportunity for literature to make people look into one’s mind. Through the writings of Augustine, Petrarch was awakened to the idea that human beings should look at not an outer world, but their inner world. Since then, he explored ‘what is self’ and tried to grasp ‘the self as a traveler in a constantly changing world’. This seems similar to the Buddhist view of impermanence, but it is certain that Petrarch’s shift in perspective toward human beings or his own self became an element of the Renaissance spirit.

The plague epidemic forced people to confront death, but people like Petrarch sublimated this confrontation into what we call humanities or human studies. While ordinary people would be overwhelmed by the tragedy, writers and poets created a driving force so that people could look inward and grasp the nature of human beings. This is why the Renaissance is also called a ‘discovery of mankind’. After this period, the concept of *Memento mori* (Remember that you [have to] die) in Latin spread and became a motif in art and literature. I think this concept shows the fact that we are always facing death, and thereby the lesson that we should live a more valuable human life.

The Progress of Religion: Rethinking Human Beings and God

Ishigami: The Black Death plague epidemic was also an opportunity for people to get religion back for humanity. As death became more familiar to people, there was a growing anxiety among people that they would be thrown into hell after death. Taking advantage of this anxiety, churches made so-called ‘exoneration’ a rampant business. They advertised that by paying a high price, people could buy exoneration from their sins and not have to worry about anything after death. It is well known that Martin Luther in Germany and Erasmus in the Netherlands were highly critical of such corrupt Catholic churches and institutions.

In addition, they brought to the people translations of the Bible, which had been, till then, the exclusive preserve of the church. For example, Erasmus retranslated the original of the Greek New Testament, and Luther followed Erasmus in completing the German translation of the Bible from Greek and Latin. These attempts represent a conscious, humane movement in the world of religion.

Yamagishi: In medieval Europe, the plague gave people an opportunity to develop an attitude to look at human life and the human spirit itself. It is thought that the plague diminished religious authority, especially that of the Catholic Church, driving Protestants such as Luther to

the Reformation. Also, we should not forget the persecution of the Jewish people by Christians that occurred during the same period. My understanding of this is that the Christian hatred of Jewish people shifted the blame for the plague epidemic to Jewish people and persecuted them (pogroms of the plague), but how did the Jewish people themselves grasp this persecution?

Ichikawa: At the time when the plague was spreading throughout Europe, Christians living around Jewish communities learned that there were very few deaths within the Jewish population as opposed to the Christian population; they suspected that the Jewish people were poisoning the wells to kill Christians. General historians may explain that Christians ended up seeing Jewish people as ‘devils’ and erupted in hatred against them, which resulted in such persecution. From a Christian standpoint, the plague must generally be seen as a punishment or trial given by God. This tells us how people fixed a secular cause (poison in this case), directed their uncontrolled emotions at a certain group, and made the group a scapegoat. However, as long as we take this view, what we can learn from the history of infectious disease would be limited. In other words, it is only when we understand the perspective of people who survived persecution that something meaningful can be learned from history. Just as we take a [cultural or religious] view that the plague epidemic brought about a new literature and made the Renaissance flourish, we can have a meaningful discussion about the effect of persecution in the context of religion. Seeing the fact that the Jewish people were persecuted and expelled due to diseases, we can say that the history of the Exodus was repeated during this period.

The Jewish people who had been living in Western Europe, mainly in the Rhine region of Germany, moved to Eastern Europe after this expulsion. I understand that especially during this time, Poland, in the process of gaining power as a kingdom, allowed many Jewish people to settle within its borders. I have come to believe that we should focus on the history of Jewish people who moved to Poland in the 14th or 15th century to understand the overall history of the Jewish people in Europe. Later in Poland, Jewish society was formed with strong religious communities. The Jewish people who took the persecution of the past as a trial given to them by God began to study and practice in detail the divine teachings of the Torah with much devotion.

Since then, in the Jewish community of Poland, the study of the Talmud (collection of ancient Jewish laws and traditions) became popular and their lives flourished based on the study. What was actually behind such a history would have been the crucial death-defying

experience of Jewish people. Moses's Book of Exodus also depicts how the people of Israel faced death and eventually returned to God. Thus, Jewish teaching itself expounds that people strengthen their spiritual power in times of trial and tribulation and this is proven by the historical event of the persecution due to the Black Death. In modern times, Poland emerged as a country where the largest number of Jewish people settled and entered a period of religious vitality. But on the other hand, due to this unexpected prosperity, they had to encounter genocide at the hands of the Nazis. In other words, the plague epidemic created a history of persecution by Christians that was followed by religious progress in Poland, in turn followed by another persecution by the Nazis. The problem with the Black Death does not only show how the Jewish people migrated. The plague had a profound impact on the way of life of the Jewish people who lived in faith, and in a sense, may have determined the future path that Jewish people should choose.

'Illness of Life' and Joy of Life and Death

Yamagishi: I believe that historical trends such as the Renaissance, Reformation, and religious progress arising from persecution in medieval Europe were actually seen in Japan as well. In particular, if we look at how Nichiren thought and survived the Kamakura period when severe famine and plague ravaged the populace on a large scale, such historical trends in Japan would become clear to us.

Ishigami: Nichiren refers to the plague that occurred at that time in many writings. For example, in his letters, 'The Treatment of Illness'⁶ and 'The Two Kinds of Illness'⁷, Nichiren categorizes illness into "illness of the body" and "illness of the mind". The latter letter is written to Saemon, better known as Shijo Kingo, who was Nichiren's follower and a physician as well. The 'illness of the body' refers to physical illness and can be cured by skilled physicians. On the other hand, Nichiren explains, "[i]llness of the mind differs greatly in severity"⁸ and states that the plague that had occurred in the recent past was an illness of the mind. I suppose Shijo Kingo reflected deeply on what he had learned from the teachings of Nichiren about the many 'illnesses of the mind' apart from 'illness of the body'.

In modern times, when we are trying to explain infectious diseases in a scientific way, it is hard for us to think of them as an 'illness of the mind'. 'The Treatment of Illness' details the history and causes of epidemics, but it is important to grasp that 'mind' as used by Nichiren is not just the psychological or spiritual entity that modern people tend to narrowly define it as, but a greater force on the scale of the universe.

As Nichiren explains, illnesses of the mind differ in severity and arise from various causes. Thus, it seems that illnesses of the mind can be understood more appropriately if the mind is considered not only as psychological realm but also as life force on the scale of the universe. From this perspective, an illness of the mind can be designated as ‘illness of life itself’ and a profound law or philosophy is necessary to cure the disorder of life.

If we view plague from the modern perspective, it is, in a narrow sense, an illness caused by certain bacteria or viruses. In other words, plague is subject to medical science and should be coped with through medical treatments and vaccines. On the other hand, plague that has no cure in medical science is regarded not as a so-called physical illness but illness in a broader sense. In this case, what is infected is not the body but the mind. The mind can be broadly regarded as a place of law or philosophy.

From this point of view, we can understand why Nichiren cites ‘ignorance of the correct law’ and ‘slandering of the correct law’ as causes of ‘illness of the mind’. These words can mean in a broader sense that the plague is caused by not understanding the cause-and-effect relationship or intentionally denying it. Nichiren emphasizes the necessity of grasping the fundamental cause behind things, that is, to perceive the law or philosophy — the Lotus Sutra for Nichiren — over self and life in order to cure illness diagnosed in a broader sense. As the Lotus Sutra depicts the Buddha as an excellent physician in a parable, we can say that a person familiar with the fundamental Law is a true savior of the world from plague.

Yamagishi: At that time, there was widespread pessimism all over Japan and a tendency to lament rather than accept and confront reality. At least, there must have been a reluctance to face the reality of death due to the plague and get prepared to leave for a next, better lifetime. However, Nichiren directed his attention toward people who were suffering from the plague and were tormented with anxiety, and tried to address the root cause behind the plague. While taking into account the possibility that the plague was an illness of the body, Nichiren went on to interpret it more broadly. In particular, he pointed out the cause of the plague that lies within human beings, which is similar to the development of the inner life we observed in the Renaissance.

Furthermore, I found that Nichiren, who had survived many hardships for the sake of the people, had much in common with Luther and the persecuted Jewish people who sought a religion for humanity. Nichiren was repeatedly threatened with death and exiled by the rulers and the

priests colluding with them, because his correct teachings could not be understood by them, or rather, the teachings went against the vested interests of the rulers. Nichiren himself teaches that if one intentionally propagates the Lotus Sutra at a time when it is difficult for people to understand it, they will be persecuted. This is exactly what the Lotus Sutra expounds. In other words, the legitimacy of Nichiren's life and the correctness of his Law were proven by persecutions that Nichiren himself underwent. Furthermore, just like the concept of *Memento mori* and the death-defying experiences of the Jewish people mentioned earlier, plagues and persecutions are directly related to the issue of death. Nichiren, who confronted the issue of death, saw that the trend of the time was that people were reluctant to accept death and wanted to avoid all engagement with death. He said, "Having received life, one cannot escape death. Yet though everyone ... recognizes this as a fact, not even one person in a thousand or ten thousand truly takes the matter seriously or grieves over it."⁹ Nichiren also mentions that death is just a departure into the next phase of life to establish the state of happiness. Teaching an abiding joy in death as well as life, Nichiren demonstrates that a joyful life lived for the sake of the Law without fear of death would lead to another joyful life. Then he expresses compassion toward his followers and their families who experienced illness and death, and reaches out to encourage them. "[W]inter always turns to spring,"¹⁰ the well-known passage from his teachings, was also written as an encouragement to a lady who had lost her husband. It can be taken as words filled with hope and conviction that difficulties may befall us, but we can surely overcome them if we exert ourselves in accordance with the correct teaching.

Questioning Life and Death as Human Beings and Passing forward the Wisdom to Future Generations

History of Division and Persecution and Infectious Diseases

Yamagishi: From our earlier discussion on the Black Death and pogroms against the Jewish people, we can grasp a modern history of division and persecution through focusing on infectious disease. Now, I would like to introduce two publications that show how division in human society worsened infectious diseases.

The first publication, *Kikin, Ekibyō Shokuminchi Tochi: Kaihatsu no Naka no Eiryō Indo* (Famine, Plague, and Colonial Rule: British Raj in Development, 2002) by Dr Kohei Wakimura, is a history of epidemics during the British Raj in India. In India, infectious diseases such as

cholera, plague, smallpox, malaria, and influenza frequently occurred from the late 19th to the early 20th century. Dr Wakimura mentions that the mortality rate increased under the British Raj not only due to the spread of diseases (especially malaria) but also as the effects of famine. The colonial government had already decided not to interfere in Indian customs, thereby not improving the hygiene practices and not taking any effective countermeasures. Thus, the prevalence of infection worsened. Dr Wakimura concludes, “In South Asia, basic and potential issues related to nutrition and health care (hygiene) have not been adequately yet solved today in the early 21st century.... It can be surely said that the history of famine and plague occurred during the British Raj is not yet the distant past.”¹¹ Knowing that the vulnerable are neglected in Indian society even today, I wonder whether or not the situation has changed for the better since Independence. At present, India seems to be repeating the narrative of its past experiences with infection.

The second publication is about the Nazi persecution of and typhoid infection among the Jewish people. It consists of a collection of notes titled, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, written by historian Emmanuel Ringelblum. While most of the records of the ghetto were burned, these notes were buried deep underground and later discovered amongst the ruins. Ringelblum, one of the 500,000 Jewish people who were confined in the ghetto and whose

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Kohei Wakimura, *Kikin, Ekibyō Shokuminchi Tochi: Kaihatsu no Naka no Eiryō Indo* 飢饉・疫病・植民地統治 開発の中の英領インド (Famine, Plague, and Colonial Rule: British Raj in Development) (Aichi: The University of Nagoya Press, 2002)

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Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974)

real-life stories are depicted in these notes, was executed. A note dated August 26, 1941, tells us:

There is a marked, remarkable indifference to death, which no longer impresses. One walks past corpses with indifference. It is rare for anyone to visit the hospital to inquire after a relative. Nor is there much interest in the dead at the graveyard. Next to hunger, typhus is the question that is most generally absorbing for the Jewish populace. It has become the burning question of the hour.¹²

So extreme were their circumstances that the Jewish people felt benumbed at the sight of the dead bodies long before typhoid set in. It is said that those in Israel today who retain the memory of the typhoid epidemic in the ghettos have accepted the coercive measures taken by the government against the Coronavirus infection. If this is true, we can say that there are many people who are willing to learn from their past experiences of infectious diseases. We should contemplate how death from hunger and plague can be made meaningful by learning lessons from them.

Ichikawa: The notes by Ringelblum that Dr Yamagishi has now introduced include materials such as diaries, brief records, anti-Nazi underground pamphlets, and photos. They were intentionally buried and hidden underground in three locations by Jewish historians such as Ringelblum, who were ready to stake their lives, and were supported by many in the Warsaw ghetto, in order to leave behind a true history for coming generations. They are currently called the ‘Ringelblum Archives’, parts of which are displayed in the last section of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. I have been there once, but the impression the displays left remains clear in my mind. These notes reconfirm for me the faith of the Jewish people who try to set their own hopes on other survivors even at the risk of death and to be witnesses of history. I also feel that the passion of Ringelblum toward preserving the history of Poland is a valuable asset, and I would like to reframe the history of Poland as a history of the coexistence of Jews and Christians beyond the perspective of the nation state.

Death for the Jewish People

Yamagishi: I can sense the strong desire of the Jewish people to want the world not to forget the history of large-scale loss of lives on account of pestilence, hunger, and slaughter, and their mission to leave this history for their next generation. How do the Jewish people view death?

Ichikawa: In the 20th century, the European Jews were uprooted and annihilated by Nazi Germany. It is said that the Jewish population has not yet regained its numbers of that time, which shows us on what scale the Jews were slaughtered. It has also been said that it is too difficult to discuss such unimaginable tragedy. Survivors used to feel too apologetic and guilty toward the dead to face the tragedy as their own experience. However, the Jewish people who survived will never ever forget the event, and they must constantly confront it even now. As far as I can remember, with the publishing of *Night* (1960) that Elie Wiesel wrote based on his experiences in a camp, people who had been silent began to unveil their experiences and feelings. Whether they have been in faith or not, I believe that they have always been asking themselves why others had to die and why they survived.

Emmanuel Lévinas, a Jewish philosopher, also managed to survive the Holocaust in France while European Jews were on the brink of extinction and his relatives were all murdered by the Nazis in his homeland of Lithuania. Shortly after the war, he spent three years studying the Talmud in depth with Monsieur Chouchani, a wise Rabbi, and was exposed to the essence of Jewish teachings. He was convinced that Judaism would survive as long as one authentic Rabbi would stand up. I believe that Lévinas found hope for the future of the Jewish people even after they were burned to ashes in the Holocaust. I even think that the matter of death for the Jewish people is ultimately epitomized by this thought of Lévinas. As Jewish teachings are essential to the lives of the Jewish people, they think that they can overcome and survive a crisis with one correct-minded leader even if their teachings face difficulty surviving. An authentic mentor and disciple never stop spreading their teachings and advancing together as one. The idea of ‘self-mastery’ advocated by Dr Arnold Toynbee is still alive in such a relationship of mentor and disciple. This idea refers to a state in which a disciple studies under their mentor and becomes fulfilled as a person of greater self who contributes to the lives of others.

The Bible says “God tested Abraham’s faith” at the beginning of the famous story of Genesis¹³, the sacrifice of Isaac, and we cannot find such a verse anywhere else. God again and again made a promise to Abraham (father of the nation of Israel) that he would multiply Abraham’s descendants beyond number, like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. However, as Abraham strengthened his faith, God commanded him to offer Isaac, his only son, to God as a sacrifice. The Bible intentionally mentions this command as a ‘test’. It was literally a test. So did Abraham really come to fear and honour

God? God gave him a trial as a test. At that time, Abraham was willing to obey God's command without hesitation. Even if he was forced to make a critical decision that would affect the survival of his lineage, he obeyed it absolutely. Having confirmed Abraham's commitment, in the end, God held Abraham's hand back from sacrificing his son. Judaism teaches leaving the matter of human life and death to the judgement of the absolute God and believing it to be just no matter how seemingly 'absurd' death is. For the Jewish people, this teaching holds the meaning that they live their lives according to the law and leave the matter of their life and death to the final judgement of God. I guess that, in particular, people who experienced the Holocaust may interpret the test of Abraham in this way.

Yamagishi: In the lecture 'Mahayana Buddhism and Twenty-first Century Civilization' delivered by President Ikeda at Harvard University in the US, he emphasizes the Mahayana teaching of a 'greater self', and Prof. Ichikawa once contributed an article about it, praising President Ikeda's lecture highly. In his article, Prof. Ichikawa says, "When we stand on the concept of a greater self, the vision for dialogue of humanity and interrelationship of all things might shine the light of 'hope' to those who are sensitive to the stagnation caused by modern civilization amidst the pessimism at the end of the century."¹⁴ I think this comment is exactly what Dr Toynbee meant by the idea of 'self-

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mastery' required by religion, which is consistent with the way of life of the Jewish people who choose to move forward even if they are left alone.

Facing Life and Death of the Individual

Ichikawa: I mentioned earlier how difficult it is to treat the Holocaust as our own affair, but how would we feel if it happened to us? How would the world look if you were infected with the Coronavirus now? I might first look back on my own life and wonder if I was able to fulfill my mission as a human being, before considering the path the world should take in the future.

Yamagishi: In fact, I have also asked myself the same question of how I would live if I or a family member were infected with the virus and I wanted to ask you both that as well. Let us take a look at a certain hospital in India to see how a person infected with Coronavirus and a medical worker actually feel.

Dr B was on duty in a COVID-19 ward when a 46-year-old man was wheeled in with severe breathing difficulty.

The man was scared for his life and kept repeating one question: "Will I survive?"

The question was followed by a plea: "Please save me, I don't want to die."

Dr B assured the man that he was going to do "everything possible to save him".

These were the last words spoken between the two men. The patient was put on a ventilator, and died two days later.

The doctor, who works in a hospital in the central Indian city of Indore, vividly remembers the 30 "terrifying minutes" after the patient was brought to his hospital: "He kept holding my hands. His eyes were full of fear and pain. I will never forget his face."

His death deeply affected Dr B: "It ate away my soul from the inside and left a lacuna in my heart."¹⁵

Confronted with his own mortality and the fear of it, most likely the patient dies alone, unattended by his family. The doctor struggles under the extreme stress of facing the fear of Coronavirus infection. Most cases of infection may be minor, but in any case, I think it is all about the attitude our minds take at the critical moment. As Prof. Ichikawa said, it is important not only to discuss the matter of life and death in an abstract way, but also to focus on life and death at the level of a single

individual or our own selves.

Ishigami: As in Plato's *Phaedo*, which I talked about earlier, death is considered to be one of the most important considerations in the genre of philosophy. Our own death is a most unique event, and looked at strictly, one cannot intervene in the death of anyone else. As Nichiren states, "[You] should first of all learn about death, and then about other things."¹⁶ it is only we ourselves who can solve the matter of our own death. So, I think that the essential issue of life is the way we should face ourselves.

Think of death as a moment in life, not as the end of life. In that sense, death is an event that can happen anytime. What is important is for me to cherish my life in the present moment. Then, I believe that we can regard death as one process or a period of rest from carrying out the work of life. In other words, we should think of death as one event that includes our thoughts and actions, not just as a single moment that can be separated from life. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote a famous clinical report *Death: The Final Stage of Growth* (1974) and Leo Tolstoy wrote a novel called *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) in which he clearly describes the state of the human mind in the face of death. The essential point of both works is that human beings keep growing till the last moment. In this sense, we should view death in a positive way as an opportunity for personal growth.

Although I said earlier that only we ourselves can solve the matter of our own death, in fact, the moment when we face the death of others can be also an opportunity for our own growth. I recently reread Albert Camus's *La Peste* (The Plague, 1947) and I think I uncovered one big clue. His philosophy is said to be a 'philosophy of the absurd'. In his novel, he focuses on how individual human beings take an action in response to the 'absurd' event of death caused by the plague. Since *La Peste* is set in a port town in French Algeria, it depicts the way of life in a closed society. Camus, who was said to be an anti-Nazi resistance fighter, is also said to have developed the story of *La Peste* in contrast to the Nazi ghettos.

In fact, SGI President Ikeda once mentioned the characters of Camus's *La Peste* in a speech. Dr Bernard Rieux is described as a sincere person or doctor who tries to treat each individual by getting close to them and listening to their problems. Raymond Rambert, a journalist, who has left his girlfriend in Paris, tries to leave for France quickly when the plague strikes. However, as he gets to know how people are suffering from the plague, he feels ashamed of himself for pursuing only his own happiness. He decides then to fulfill his mission

as a journalist and write articles about what is happening in reality. In this way, Camus writes about the progression of how each character faces reality and lives life.

The way human beings behave in response to ‘absurd’ events is a very serious topic. At the beginning of *La Peste*, Camus writes that everyone was thinking only of themselves. However, in the face of death, each person understands how it is important to ‘do one’s own work sincerely’ and ‘care for others’. Only then will there be solidarity between individuals. What Camus is trying to say is that, as we face each situation sincerely, we actually end up fighting against the evil or inhumanity that lies within ourselves.

Although human beings are considered as animals who philosophize every event and take action based on ideas, we are not aware of this fact in the course of our daily lives and are usually controlled by our desires. However, unexpected catastrophes such as an epidemic provide us an opportunity to return to our original selves. I believe that we can develop ourselves by sincerely facing today’s Coronavirus disaster from our own standpoints.

The Connection of Mentor and Disciple, Life Stage, and Life and Death

Ichikawa: ‘Absurd’ death is caused not only by infectious diseases, but also cancer, warfare, and accidents. I think that, in these cases, we certainly need spiritual support. More importantly, we should find this spiritual support in the idea of the oneness of mentor and disciple. For example, members of the Soka Gakkai and SGI always meet with their mentor in mind, connect the self with their mentor as one, and find courage to challenge anything with a stand-alone spirit. I think that having a person we call our mentor in our mind and preparing the mind for every situation are important keys for thinking about life and death. With such preparedness and conviction, we would ‘never fear no matter what might happen’ and will feel that ‘we can go beyond life and death’.

In recent times, a lot of people tend to pursue only secular happiness and do not want to die. In other words, people have now forgotten the profound philosophy of overcoming absurd death. In this scenario, I found great significance in the World Youth General Meeting (September 27, 2020) held online by SGI youth members from all over the world. SGI President Ikeda referred to the General Meeting as the assembly on Eagle Peak, a great network of Bodhisattvas of the Earth emerging at the gathering. This idea indeed coincides with what Mr Josei Toda, second president of the Soka Gakkai, experienced in prison, exactly

when founding president Mr Tsunesaburo Makiguchi passed away. As Mr Toda read the Lotus Sutra, he was awakened to the truth that the Buddha is life itself. Having chanted earnestly to deepen his understanding of the Lotus Sutra, Mr Toda finally realized that he was one of Bodhisattvas of the Earth in solidarity. Mr Toda's realization resounded with the significance of the World Youth General Meeting, which, to me, was very impressive. I believe that this General Meeting, where President Toda's world became a reality, was the most magnificent event in the 60 years since President Ikeda's first trip overseas, reminding us of the eternity of life and the oneness of mentor and disciple.

Yamagishi: President Toda read the verse of the Lotus Sutra — “those persons who had heard the Law dwelled here and there in various Buddha lands, constantly reborn in company with their teachers”,¹⁷ — at his level of life and identified himself as a Bodhisattva of the Earth. President Toda had the conviction that he would always be together with his mentor Makiguchi, which made him awaken to his mission as a Bodhisattva of the Earth. Following that, President Ikeda's strong conviction as a disciple of President Toda and his hopeful encouragement to individuals made it possible to build the present network of peace. It is coincidental that it is in this year, which marks the 60th anniversary of President Ikeda traveling overseas with a picture of President Toda in his breast pocket, that the global solidarity of the oneness of mentor and disciple and the oneness of life and death has come to fruition.

Ishigami: I think that the concept of ‘oneness’ raised by Dr Yamagishi directs us to the theory of life. As I mentioned, we have literally entered an era in which we must think about everything from the dimension of ‘life’. The oneness of life and death and oneness of body and mind are expressed at the level of life. I believe that President Toda's awakening to the truth that ‘the Buddha is life itself’ is significant enough to open up the era of life. The reason why President Ikeda called the 21st century the ‘century of life’ may also be based on the significance of his mentor Toda's awakening.

Prof. Yuval Noah Harari of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem recently published a book titled *Kinkyu Teigen: Pandemikku Kiko to Intabyu* (Emergency Proposal: Pandemic — Contribution and Interview, 2020), in which he emphasizes the importance of global cooperation. Prof. Harari points out that “[i]f this epidemic results in greater disunity and mistrust among humans, it will be the virus's greatest victory. When humans squabble — viruses double.”¹⁸ On the other hand, he expresses the hope that, “[i]n contrast, if the epidemic results in closer global

cooperation, it will be a victory not only against the coronavirus, but against all future pathogens.”¹⁹

Prof. Harari’s words hold a strong message that human solidarity at a profound level is required at this time. He also points out, “I think the biggest danger is not the virus itself.... The really big problem is our own inner demons, our own hatred, greed and ignorance,”²⁰ giving the message that it is important to win the battle against the demons that interfere with human solidarity. What Prof. Harari calls ‘demons’ exactly matches the Buddhist teaching of the three poisons (greed, anger, and foolishness), fundamental evils inherent in life. Prof. Harari proposes that we should work on thinking about the meaning of life, which is in line with President Ikeda’s proposal that this century should be the ‘century of life’.

Yamagishi: Prof. Harari stresses that humankind that survives the Coronavirus pandemic would have reached a great turning point in history. This can mean that we as humankind should turn the point. I think we should first start with ensuring the dynamism where we consider life and death and life force, and trust others, as Dr Ishigami mentioned today. More specifically, it is a dynamism wherein we see our own unique life and death, ensure our preparedness of mind, and have trust and sympathy for others even faced with ‘absurd’ events. The ‘new normal’ lives that we should aim at entail not just a change in lifestyle. It is not until we take our own philosophical turn that we will live our new normal lives. In this sense, I see great significance in the fact that today’s talk has given us an opportunity to treat the matter of life and death as our own. Without the Coronavirus disaster, we would not have had a talk like today’s and might not have philosophized life and death.

The Spirit One Must Bequeath the Future World

Yamagishi: I have learned that people who practice Judaism are supposed to follow the teachings of God even if they face ‘absurd’ events, especially death. In your book *Isshinkyō bunmei karano toikake Todai Komaba renzoku kōgi* (Questions from the Monotheistic Civilization: Serial Lectures of Komaba Campus at the University of Tokyo, 2003), you highlight the guiding principles that Jewish people have acquired as their wisdom: seeing the weakness of human beings, facing death in an extreme situation, and questioning the meaning of human life. You also mention three basic thoughts of Judaism on how to respond to adversities and persecutions: (1) hope is entrusted to the survivors and people who will be coming in the next era, (2) Jewish commandments are not for death but for life, and (3) survivors should

be witnesses of history. There seems to be a lot that we can learn from the future-oriented teachings of the Jewish people such as entrusting the next generation with their spirit, living according to the law, and witnessing history for the future.

Ichikawa: The Jewish people were forced to face ‘absurd’ death as a minority. The meaning that can be found in this is that ‘they entrust the future generation even if it costs them their lives’, something that people since ancient times have believed. It is also used in the Bible to stress the importance of living according to the divine teachings and handing over such a way of life to future generations.

Yamagishi: What Prof. Ichikawa mentions are exactly the points that President Ikeda raised in his lecture on the Jewish people, so I would like to introduce it briefly. This is a lecture from the Makiguchi Memorial Human Rights Lecture Series organized by the Simon Wiesenthal Center at the Museum of Tolerance, Los Angeles. Dr Ishigami, you were actually there, right?

Ishigami: Yes. It was in 1996 when I was residing in the US. A Jewish professor of Claremont McKenna College invited me to the lecture, but I did not know the details at that time. After reaching the venue, I realized that the lecture would be delivered by President Ikeda. President Ikeda talked about how the victims of persecution are at the same time the very people who open up a new era. I remember that President Ikeda quoted the words of some Jewish people and President Makiguchi to make the point that living a life of facing adversities is a humanistic way of living.

Yamagishi: President Ikeda refers to President Toda’s words, “One must learn from the indomitable spirit of the Jewish people”, and states:

Indeed, I feel that there is much to learn from the strength and courage that has enabled the Jewish people to overcome endless persecutions and tragedies over the centuries. As they have risen above each of the trials that has beset them, the Jewish people have learned, have remembered, and have passed on their wisdom and spiritual strength to succeeding generations. The courage to remember is at the same time the compassion to teach.²¹

Their passion for passing on such an indomitable spirit is something that we should share right now in the time of the Coronavirus pandemic. We should not stop handing down the wisdom of humankind from mentor to disciple, from parents to children, and from forerunners to succeeding generations.

Conclusion: Questioning Oneself, Learning from Religion

Yamagishi: In this talk, we have examined the way people lived their lives throughout history in order to discuss how we should live our lives in the time of Coronavirus. The long quarantine made me stop and think: I realized the value of certain aspects of my daily routine I had taken for granted or not ‘seen’ pre-COVID-19. For example, during the course of the pandemic I got an opportunity to see so-called essential workers risk their health and lives, and I questioned myself whether or not my work can save someone. I also understood that wearing a mask acts to save the lives of others and distancing myself from others is the best way of showing consideration for their lives. It might be invaluable for us to use unprecedented circumstances to stop, question our casual approach, and realize some previously unnoticed truths.

Ishigami: Yes. In fact, we may take some very precious time out of our lives now to do so. There are still many things that we should further think and learn about, and we should also work to deliver what we have learnt to others. It is said that Isaac Newton conceived his theory of universal gravitation when he took leave from university due to the Black Death outbreak in London and stayed isolated in his hometown. The phenomenon of the current global pandemic seems to make us broaden our perspective on what is important to the whole of humanity, and realize that there are important issues to be addressed around us.

Ichikawa: I think it is necessary for us to reflect upon the golden saying of people in faith now more than ever. Religion takes someone’s death for granted [in a good sense] and offers teachings on this theme to people. Nichiren expounds that “[l]ife is limited; we must not begrudge it”²² through chapters of the Lotus Sutra; this teaching is also carried in the Analects of Confucius. In a world where the trend is people wanting to live as they desire without thinking about anything, it is important to ask the question what living life means to us and prepare ourselves for the critical moment. Moreover, it is important to encounter a mentor whom we can relate to in oneness through teaching and learning. As Lévinas and Chouchani show us, a deep relationship of mentor and disciple can connect with the core of religion and offer the opportunity to deepen the meaning of life within oneself.

Yamagishi: Apart from the Coronavirus pandemic, it is almost definite that mankind will witness a ‘critical moment’ once again. How can we conduct our lives at that moment? It will depend on what we ask of ourselves and how we see ourselves in our daily life. ‘Seeing’ ourselves

is a kind of prayer for people in faith. What is important in this situation is to connect to a person who can make us look deeper into and enrich ourselves. This is indispensable for living lives beyond the bounds of religious practices.

It may be said that, for the moment, we have reached a natural conclusion in this talk. But the more important point is that we must begin here and now, carrying forward what we have discussed so that the insights arrived at are applied in society in a real sense and an in-depth discussion continues into the future.

Dr Hidekazu Nishimura, a virologist who stresses the importance of being afraid in the correct way gives some words of advice to kids:

All I want you to do is to keep your eyes on and keep in your mind what adult people are doing right now and what is happening in society. Please think over whether they were right and what was wrong, and carry what you think down to people who come further. By doing so, the world can get the strength to defeat such disease.²³

As adults, we hold a huge responsibility for future generations. Now, the Institute of Oriental Philosophy takes a vow not to forget its mission as a research institute for humanity, deepen the humanistic way of life, life and death, and the nature of religion, and spread them across society. We are all determined to further join hands with Prof. Ichikawa and conduct our own daily research in our fields of choice. Thank you very much for today.

Notes

- ¹ This talk was held online on October 16, 2020.
- ² Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. by Richard Crawley (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., INC., 1950), 133.
- ³ Joe Sachs, 'Aristotle: Poetics', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed January 11, 2022, <https://iep.utm.edu/aris-poe/>.
- ⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, *sparknotes, accessed January 11, 2022, <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/phaedo/full-text/phaedo/>.
- ⁵ 'Exodus (14:11)', *Holy Bible* (New Living Translation), accessed January 11, 2022, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2014:10-12&version=NLT>.
- ⁶ Nichiren, 'The Treatment of Illness', *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* volume 1 (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999), 1111–1115.
- ⁷ Nichiren, 'The Two Kinds of Illness', *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* volume 1 (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999), 919–921.
- ⁸ Nichiren, 'The Treatment of Illness', 1111.

- ⁹ Nichiren, ‘Conversation between a Sage and an Unenlightened Man’, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* volume 1 (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999), 99.
- ¹⁰ Nichiren, ‘Winter Always Turns to Spring’, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* volume 1 (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999), 536.
- ¹¹ Translated from Japanese. Kohei Wakimura 脇村孝平, *Kikin, Ekibyō Shokuminchi Tochi: Kaihatsu no Naka no Eiryō Indo* 飢饉・疫病・植民地統治 開発の中の英領インド (Famine, Plague, and Colonial Rule: British Raj in Development) (Aichi: The University of Nagoya Press, 2002), 250.
- ¹² Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum* (New York: Schocken books, 1974), 194.
- ¹³ ‘Genesis (22:1)’, *Holy Bible* (New Living Translation), accessed January 11, 2022, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%2022%3A1&version=NLT>.
- ¹⁴ Translation from Japanese. ‘SGI Kaicho no “Habado Daigaku koen” eno shikisha no koeo shokai SGI会長の「ハーバード大学講演」への識者の声を紹介 (Comments of Intellectuals on the Lecture Delivered by SGI President Ikeda at Harvard University), 聖教新聞 *Seikyo Shimbun* (Seikyo Newspaper), October 22, 1993, 3.
- ¹⁵ Vikas Pandey, ‘India Coronavirus Doctors: Notes on Hopes, Fear and Longing’, *BBC News*, accessed January 11, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52377965>.
- ¹⁶ Nichiren, ‘The Importance of the Moment of Death’, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* volume 2 (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 2006), 759.
- ¹⁷ ‘The Parable of the Phantom City’, *The Lotus Sutra*, trans. by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 140.
- ¹⁸ Yuval Noah Harari, ‘In the Battle against Coronavirus, Humanity Lacks Leadership’, *TIME*, March 15, 2020, accessed January 11, 2022, <https://time.com/5803225/yuval-noah-harari-coronavirus-humanity-leadership/>.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Anna Carthaus, ‘Yuval Noah Harari on COVID-19: ‘The Biggest Danger is Not the Virus Itself’’, *DW*, April 22, 2020, accessed January 11, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/virus-itself-is-not-the-biggest-danger-says-yuval-noah-harari/a-53195552>.
- ²¹ Daisaku Ikeda, ‘Makiguchi’s Lifelong Pursuit of Justice and Humane Values’, *A New Humanism: The University Addresses of Daisaku Ikeda* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 242.
- ²² Nichiren, ‘Aspiration for the Buddha Land’, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* volume 1 (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999), 213.
- ²³ Translation from Japanese. ‘Korona de gaman shiteiru kimi e “Otona wa kowagari” nanda コロナでがまんしている君へ「大人はこわがり」なんだ’ (For Those Who Bear in the Time of Coronavirus: ‘Adults Are More Scared’), *Asahi Shimbun*, July 25, 2020, accessed November 9, 2020, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASN7Q525DN77UPQJ00Q.html>.

About the Attendees

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