Natural Disasters & Buddhist View of Life

Haiti Quake & 15th Anniversary of Hanshin Temblor

By Masakazu HOSODA

When news of severe damage caused by the calamitous earthquake in Haiti was gradually spreading, Japan was observing the 15th anniversary of the Great Awaji-Hanshin Earthquake.

At 5:46 a.m. on January 17, 1995, a massive quake with a magnitude of 7.3 hit Kobe, a historical and modernistic port town of international flavor comparable to Yokohama. Kobe lost its urban functions and more than 6,000 of its residents perished. Fifteen years hence, its infrastructure has been virtually restored. But 40,000 people who lost homes in the disaster still live in temporary public housing, more than 40% of them over 65 years old and living alone. By the end of 2009, 62 of them died unattended. It is safe to say that victims of the devastating quake still suffer from trauma.

Photo: Kyodo News

A truck lies severely damaged on Jan. 17, 1995, after the collapse of an elevated highway triggered by the Kobe temblor.

When we think about massive natural disasters from the viewpoint of culture and civilization, we can see that the unique Japanese sense of nature and the unique Japanese way of understanding the climate, which are quite different from the Western sense of nature, have been passed down unbroken to this day.

The famous aphoristic remark that natural disasters strike when we are about to forget the last one is attributed to Torahiko Terada (1878-1935), a geophysicist and natural scientist who served as a professor at the University of Tokyo. Terada was also a man of literature and, as a disciple of the great writer Soseki Natsume, was a renowned *haiku* poet, essayist and encyclopedic intellectual rare in Japan in the Meiji era (1868-1912). What Terada wanted to say in his aphorism about natural disasters was not merely that Japanese people are forgetful or natural calamities are apt to be forgotten in Japan because they come in long cycles.

In a penetrating analysis of Terada's aphorism, theologian Tetsuo Yamaori said that by witnessing the 1922 Great Kanto Earthquake, Terada realized that in a country where nature is more unstable than in Europe with the frequent occurrence of typhoons and quakes, people's sense of nature is underlain by the Buddhist view of life as something transient and empty. Put another way, the Japanese sense of nature is that nature can neither be suppressed nor controlled and that there is no alternative but to yield to the fury of nature.

Such a view was inherited by philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji (1889-1960), another disciple of Natsume. In his masterpiece *"Fudo,"* translated as *"Climate & Culture"* in its English version, Watsuji considered Japanese people's unique sense of nature on the basis of his deep study of Western philosophy.

I summarize Watsuji's view in my own way like this: *Fudo* (climate) is not merely an objective condition but the way people find themselves in a given environment. Japan has a rich climate with four seasons clearly distinguished. But the Japanese climate, dictated by such natural phenomena as typhoons and quakes, has "gentle passion and combative indifference."

For 15 years since the Hanshin temblor, people in Kobe have yielded to the wrath of nature in a modest manner and endeavored to restore the city's functions in such a way as to make them flexible enough to coexist with nature.

Before dawn on January 17, 2010, some 8,000 people gathered before the Earthquake Memorial Monument in a Kobe park inscribed with the names of the victims, lighted bamboo lanterns forming the numbers "1995" and "1.17" and offered silent prayers at 5:46 a.m., the time the quake struck.

They must have mourned the victims of the Kobe disaster while praying that the souls of Haitian quake victims would rest in peace. JS

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