

What Can We Do for Japan (and Beyond)?

Nobo Komagata, March 28, 2011 (minor revision: April 13, 2011)

I have been thinking about what I can do for the victims of the recent triple disaster in Japan. As a Japanese living outside Japan, we have been asked by many people whether our family is safe and what they can do for the victims. Especially for the people outside Japan, monetary donation seems the most practical way of helping. But how much? The choice of an amount between zero and the entire asset seems arbitrary. Without a good answer, I started to think that writing an essay might be my way of “acting” for the people in Japan, and possibly also for the people outside Japan.

News media reported a number of stories about how people helped one another, even sacrificing their own lives, when the tsunami struck the coastal area of northeast Japan. Even after losing their loved ones, survivors appear to be unbelievably patient and resilient. Since many survivors were isolated at various make-shift evacuation sites, they had to spend days with extremely limited amount of food, heating, and communication with outside. Despite this, survivors even expressed gratitude that they are still alive and receive help from others. One person was quoted, "I feel so fortunate. We are able to eat at least once a day." In addition, there was no report of looting. Everywhere, people are still helping one another. Many of those who are helping the victims at many shelters are victims themselves.

People seem to be patiently coping with the nuclear situation as well. Hundreds of workers at the crippled nuclear power plant are still trying to minimize radiation. Many residents and farmers near the power plant are forced to stay indoor, destroy their crops contaminated with radiation, or leave their homes. The vice president of the power company which owns the power plant visited a shelter and apologized for the accident. The evacuees neither complained violently nor exploded with anger.

The earthquake shook a very large area including Tokyo and shut down the entire public transportation for days. The Tokyo metropolitan area, more than five times larger than New York City, was completely paralyzed and people either spent the night where they were working or walked home, even through the night. It was reported that their reaction was quite orderly. In addition, many everyday items are lacking in all over Japan. Still, people say that they are lucky considering what the disaster victims are going through. When a large sport arena was designated as a shelter for evacuees, hundreds of people showed up as volunteers. While the officials were overwhelmed with the response and unable to manage the situation, volunteers self-organized

themselves and started to help the evacuees. In fact, more people have been willing to volunteer than called for.

All sorts of support are being provided from all over the country and the world. The Tokyo government collected over 10,000 packages to be sent to the affected area. People in the Kobe area offer material and logistic help based on their own experience with the 1995 Kobe earthquake. The U.S. military provided machinery desperately needed when the normal mode of transportation and communication were unavailable. Chinese businesses collected a large sum of cash and brought them in suitcases to the Japanese consulate in Shanghai, thanking Japan for helping them during the catastrophic 2008 Great Sichuan earthquake.

However, not all stories are encouraging. There are some cases of donation scams in Japan and a bank theft in the middle of a tsunami-struck community. As for the nuclear crisis, information transparency is a huge issue; on this point, the Japanese government blames the power company which owns the crippled power plant. At the same time, the Japanese government has been criticized for its slowness and ineffectiveness in response to the triple disaster. The Japanese are often considered good at slowly building unanimous consensus but not as good at acting swiftly in case of emergency. Compared to foreign media, the Japanese counterparts seem to tone down the danger of the nuclear situation. Although this might be a measure to prevent panic, the lack of complete, objective information may eventually anger the people in Japan.

In fact, the patience of many people is running out. The workers at the nuclear power plant are exhausted from long hours of difficult tasks. Recently, some are said to have expressed anger in their personal email. So far, people are still patient. But if people suppress negative feelings, they may suffer from prolonged mental problems. In addition, many victims already suffer from survivor's guilt, which can be a major obstacle for healing. There also are issues rooted in the "group" mentality of many Japanese communities. For example, even when better shelters become available in remote locations, those who want to leave their land are often criticized as abandoning their community and can become the target of discrimination by the people who stay behind.

After radioactive materials were found on farm produce near the nuclear power plant, many Japanese consumers immediately avoided products from the entire prefecture (state) where the power plant exists, including the produce from areas not affected by radiation. Some people from the prefecture were refused to stay at a hotel, because the hotel manager was paranoid about radiation. In Japan, there even is a sad tradition of discriminating victims, including the victims of the atomic bombs dropped during the World War II. Ironically, the war was a consequence of the inability of the Japanese people to accurately understand the situation of that time and stop their military government from invading other Asian countries and Pacific islands.

For some, the current situation in Japan appears not as a natural disaster but as a human disaster, because over-development and excessive economic pressure have been pushing the limit on many fronts. For example, the power company which owns the crippled power plant has been criticized for neglecting safety. There was a warning based on archaeological records showing that tsunamis of a similar magnitude have struck the same area. The lesson of the 2010 Sumatra earthquake/tsunami was not reflected either. Another nuclear power plant also damaged by the earthquake is not causing a radiation problem due to a tsunami, thanks to a higher seawall. However, protection from tsunamis is extremely costly, still with no guarantee. One coastal community has built massive seawalls of 33 feet high spending approximately 50 million dollars and almost 50 years. Even these seawalls have been exceeded and partially destroyed by the tsunami. The only certain thing seems that unexpected events beyond our control will happen.

Looking back, what we have been experiencing is just a snap shot of this simple fact: nothing stays the same. This happens in many ways. The New York Times writes that "history is on Japan's side." That is, the country will rebuild and regain her strength. This is most likely true. However, we should never forget the simple fact of impermanence. Japan has been recognized as an economic power with advanced technology. But as the people in Japan struggle with and eventually overcome the disaster, we can learn more from the spiritual side of their effort, including their attitude toward the uncontrollable and suffering, but also from their shortcomings as described above.

While the people in Japan suffer in a scale never seen before, we can easily see that they are not the only ones who suffer. If we look carefully, suffering is everywhere. In North Korea, right next to Japan, over six million people are reported to be suffering from hunger. Although not so well known, some people in Idaho have been suffering from radiation from nuclear power plants and experiments. In many, many places in the world, people have lost their loved ones for all sorts of reasons. Can we all say that we ourselves are free from suffering? It is our choice to see things as they really are without being stuck with routines. What we need now, then, may be reducing suffering starting from where we can: ourselves, our family, our friends, our acquaintances, and so on, still thinking of the people in Japan. As we live in an ever shrinking global community, we could eventually reach people living all the way across the globe.