

Congratulatory Address by President Shojiro Nishio for the 2018 Autumn Graduation Ceremony

Heartfelt congratulations

As President of Osaka University, I would like to express my heartfelt congratulations to all of you. You are about to take another step forward: a new phase in life after completing your studies here at Osaka University. I commend you for your days and years of hard work and effort.

I am also pleased to be able to share the joy with parents and family members present. Let me express my deepest gratitude and respect for their unrelenting support and faith in the value of education and research, without which, most of you would not be graduating today.

Let me say a few words to international students in particular. You have lived away from the comfort of home and studied in an unfamiliar environment, using different languages and adjusting to different living conditions. I wish to praise your mental strength and ability to adapt to and harmonize with cultures that differ from your own.

The incidents over the summer

The crisp winds of autumn are upon us, but I want you all to take a moment to reflect on the record-breaking heat wave of this past summer.

I wonder if you all read the article that appeared in The Nikkei on July 31, in the middle of the summer heat wave.

It was an article that discussed one of our own international students from China who volunteered to help flood victims in Kurashiki, Okayama.

I would like to share with you the thoughts of that student as written in the article:

"I thought all what the disaster victims needed was for their houses to be cleaned up. However, I came to realize the importance of the support for them brought about by the interpersonal relationships created between each of us."

From July 6 to 7, the torrential rains continued to pour down over western Japan. So many lives were lost, so many houses were destroyed, and much of the

cities were left submerged in water. Even now, some transportation networks are still cut off. It was truly a flood that will leave its mark on history. It was in that disaster area that our international student from China chose to go and volunteer.

In addition, on August 16, the Sankei Newspaper published an article about other volunteers from Osaka University—international students from China and Egypt.

I would also like to read a quote from the student from Egypt.

“This volunteer action gave me a chance to reflect on the teachings of my religion. ‘We should help those in need by finding them.’”

I wish to now ask for everyone to please remember the morning of June 18, when just weeks before, a huge earthquake rocked northern Osaka. It was surely frightening to feel the tremors of the ground shaking under our feet.

The earthquake lasted only a scant few moments. However, it was a quake like never before, particularly for those from overseas who aren’t used to experiencing earthquakes as a fact of life.

In the aftermath, the people who came to help international students with different cultural and language needs were neighbors, friends and colleagues of the university, and volunteers in the area.

The student from China also had this to say:

“The Japanese volunteers had treated me like family. That’s why, as an international student, I wanted to help the people of Japan when I had the chance.”

Just a few weeks before, under the shade of panic and unease, students gathered in the devastated areas, and were helped by others. Then, to return the favor to those they didn’t even know, the students traveled to places they’d never been, in some cases without the ease of a common language, to help. Among those volunteers sweating buckets in the intense heat, so many were from Osaka University.

The origins of the word “volunteer” and sense of well-being

A phrase with no basis in nationalism or religion was told to me once. That is “altruistic at heart.”

Recent times have seen the rapid spread of the Internet, and now, quiet local events and the murmurs of a single person can spread worldwide in an instant and

create big waves that, in turn, establish tides. At the same time, globalism and the core principles of each one of our own countries are often in opposition of one another, undermining our efforts to solve problems concerning our economies and humanitarian endeavors, as well as issues involving the entire globe.

However, the volunteers from Osaka University taught us that at the core of our human nature lies a kind of altruism: our desire to help those in need. It shines as perhaps a solution to these worldwide issues.

Do you know the absolute root of the word, “volunteer?”

It comes from the Latin, “volo,” which roughly translates to “want to do.”

In other words, to volunteer is to want to do something yourself, no matter how much the sun blazes down on you, no matter if the work seems to go on forever. To volunteer is to act of your own volition. And when it's all said and done, that sense of relief and accomplishment is its own reward.

After the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, there were government studies done into how the sense of well-being in the people there changed.

According to that research, more people answered their level of happiness had risen rather than decreased.

In addition, there was also a statistically significant rise in the level of happiness among those who made donations to the earthquake victims, even if they experienced no change in the overall satisfaction of their life.

The results shocked economists, sociologists, and psychologists. This may be because one of the major principles of traditional economics says that a person's behavior is guided by their own self-interest. However, new research is being put into use using recent indicators in the field of behavioral economics regarding altruism and a person's sense of happiness.

It could be said that each individual's definition of “happiness” is subjective, and maybe has less to do with one's “satisfaction of life,” and more to do with “a sense of altruism” or “a sense of being connected with others.”

Motivation for those in the private and academic sectors

I would like to go back again to the origins of the word “volunteer,” to “volo,” a root that shows intent, a “want,” “desire,” or “wish” to do something, or a desire to act.

In other words, it expresses a person's sentiment of self-realization. A volunteer is one who wants to do something for someone, or something for the greater good. Of course, expressed desire can also be for oneself, by saying, “I will.”

Both of these sentiments define a person's desire for self-fulfillment.

The research activities you have all put into practice since the beginning of your time here began with that simple phrase: "I will." "I will solve this problem." "I will clarify this phenomenon." The degrees you all receive today are the culmination of all those research activities that began with "I will," thus ending the first phase of your journey. In the next, you will all now go out into the world and spread your wings as scientists and specialists with the knowledge and degrees you have obtained at Osaka University. I am sure many of you here will continue your research in a company or public organization. I implore you to demonstrate to the world the strength of knowledge you have garnered here.

While you continue on your new path of self-fulfillment and discovery, you must realize what goes hand-in-hand. Responsibility. That also means the responsibility towards society you all have as scientists and specialists.

So what does it mean to have social responsibility as scientists and specialists?

Osaka University's Senior Executive Vice President, Professor Tadashi Kobayashi, is an expert in Science Communication. He once asked a question to attendants of a forum open to the public.

"What kind of specialist is a good specialist?"

The audience responded, "someone who thinks along with me."

Their answer means that a good specialist is not someone who makes life easier for them, who finds solutions to problems, or explains how things work.

Their answer indicates that a good specialist looks in the same direction as the people do, at times pulling up a desk, and thinking together with them. They drip the same sweat, cry the same tears.

Scientists and specialists search for truth, and, at the same time, pursue within society that one thing. I think you all may know what that one thing already is, as I alluded to it in the beginning of my speech—the heart of a volunteer.

You must picture the victims of the disasters, standing on a street corner while smoke and ashes dance around them, standing on the empty lot where their homes had been; where their street, their parent's house, and memories had washed away, looking through the places where their windows had been, while tatami mats logged with water float. The victims perhaps just yearn for the "people" who would come and be with them. Those people may be as shaken as the victims are, but help

pick up the pieces. Whether or not you're scientists or specialists, it is necessary to see the world from the point of view of the people on the street and to feel the same wind blow between us.

Whenever I hear of students who discover the true essence of human nature volunteering at disaster sites, my heart swells with pride. I cannot express the happiness I feel when I hear a student saying "I realized the importance of finding out the real needs of victims by communicating with them" during their volunteer activities. If you really are the kind of person who can go out and do such activities, I believe you can grasp what it means to have a responsibility toward society as a scientist or specialist.

In closing

Last but not least, my best wishes to your good health. Go out and spread your wings. Come back when you have a chance. We are all looking forward to seeing you again.

If you are ever faced with doubt, we are here to help you work through it and give you that little push you might need. When you become successful, we would like to hear you come tell us your story. There will always be a place for you here, so go out into the world with confidence and begin your own journey.

As scientists and specialists, remember to take care of your own wants and desires, and weigh your own personal "wills" to the "wills" of the people. As citizens of this global world, please make it full of happiness together with its people.

Once again, congratulations to you all.

September 25, 2018
President of Osaka University
Shojiro NISHIO