

**President's Address at
the 2020 Osaka University Autumn Graduation Ceremony**

On behalf of Osaka University, it is my great pleasure to sincerely congratulate all those undergraduate and graduate students who are about to start a new path in life.

I would also like to thank the family members who supported the students' study and research on their long road to graduation.

In particular, I would like to commend the international students for their extraordinary effort to study away from their own country, overcoming differences in language, culture, and way of life. Osaka University is immensely proud of you for your strength and determination in successfully completing your studies in Japan and adapting to a different culture.

Since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has been raging throughout the world. This mysterious virus is not only a living threat, but has also become an intangible social construct, forcing drastic changes in society.

If it had not been for the pandemic, we would have been simply celebrating your graduation today in the afterglow of the excitement of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. You may feel uneasy about how the situation will develop or have vague anxiety about the future. You may also feel you have left something undone or incomplete during the last months at Osaka University.

The first COVID-19 case was identified in Japan on 16 January 2020. Since then, the numbers of new cases, severe cases, and clusters of COVID-19 infections in Osaka and Japan have been reported every day. We have gotten caught up in these numbers, and they have become a part of our daily life.

Numbers are universal and have the power to persuade us. Due to such qualities, however, numbers can also have a negative effect on us. When we are shown a concrete number, we tend to believe that we know everything about what the number represents and fail to understand the truth or reality behind it.

The death of one person is a tragedy; the death of one million is a statistic.¹

Have you heard this statement before?

Historically, there was a time when such horrible and inhumane statements were used.

When the number of new cases each day is reported, we often see the number merely as a numeric count. We tend to think, "it's less than yesterday" or "the death rate is relatively low in Japan." But in fact the number represents a tragic reality—that people are suffering and dying from COVID-19. Behind the numbers, there are healthcare professionals working day and night to treat COVID-19 cases at the risk of becoming infected themselves; people who are devastated at the sudden loss of their loved ones; people who are found positive after receiving a PCR test and feel extremely distressed; and the family and friends of those who have contracted COVID-19.

At the same time, the pandemic is adversely affecting economic activities, causing higher unemployment.

According to one study, when the unemployment rate rises by 1%, the number of suicides increases by approximately 2,000 in Japan. Although the rate is reported simply as a percentage, it represents people in distress

¹ Tucholsky, Kurt. "Französische Witze." *Vossische Zeitung* 23 Aug. 1925: 148.

who have lost their job and hope for the future. It is difficult to actually picture this reality.

After today, all of you are set to walk your own lives as you become members of society. I only have two requests of you.

The first is that you regularly look at who is behind all the numbers. Picture those people and their situations.

In 2004, Osaka University established the Osaka University Charter as its basic philosophy to inherit the spirit of its foundation and look toward a future of strong development. My first request is summarized in the following declaration of our Charter:

Osaka University will strive to become a vanguard for scholarly research in the world, delving into (1) the truth of matters concerning humans and their varied societies, (2) the truth of all fields related to the environment in which those societies exist, as well as (3) the truth of the interlocking relationships shared by all of the aforementioned.

This is precisely what I ask of everyone here. Please become active members of society who use their imagination to its fullest extent in all situations so that you can see past the numbers, identify the reality and delve into the truth behind them.

I have one other final request.

The other day, I attended an online lecture given by MORIMURA Yasumasa, a world-renowned contemporary artist and Specially Appointed Professor of Osaka University. The COVID-19 pandemic has also dealt a heavy blow to cultural and artistic activities. Professor MORIMURA referred to the cultural policy of the U.S. government during the Great Depression in the 1930s and said “Government-led cultural policy can have negative consequences.”

Under the pressure of the Great Depression, citizens could no longer afford to enjoy culture and art. Thus, the U.S. government launched a policy to employ painters, musicians and photographers to help revitalize artistic groups. This policy seemed to work well at the beginning, but eventually conflict arose between artists and the government. Professor MORIMURA argued that this was due to the government’s failure to adhere to the ironclad rule of “giving money but not instructions,” and this failure resulted in restrictions on artists’ freedom of expression.

Artists take pride in their artistic integrity. For them, it is shameful to compromise their integrity to comply with orders from the government.

Professor MORIMURA’s lecture reminded me of NAGAYO Sensai, a physician who studied at Tekijuku, one of the roots of Osaka University. NAGAYO Sensai is credited with establishing the concept of public health in Japan.

When Japan began its modernization process with the Meiji Restoration in the 1880s, more than 100 years ago, the nation experienced repeated outbreaks of infectious diseases. The Japanese government attempted to use police authority to control the infections, demanding that infected houses be marked by placing signs on the gates. NAGAYO objected to such a coercive policy. He persistently talked with government officials and convinced them that infections could be controlled by the understanding and cooperation of citizens—not by the government’s authority over them. His arguments made officials abandon their heavy-handed policy, and led them to establish a health committee in each municipality to serve citizens’ needs, develop water and sewage systems, and introduce epidemic prevention measures and border controls at ports.

Confident in his beliefs, NAGAYO studied how best to control infections, offered advice as a specialist, and helped

to establish an array of government policies. Infection control measures devised by NAGAYO are being used in Japan today, and this legislation framework still fosters a strong importance for sanitation among Japanese citizens. NAGAYO's principle of life is summarized in the following declaration of the Osaka University Charter.

In both fields of education and research, Osaka University will, in the traditions of its founding schools *Kaitokudo* and *Tekijuku*, continue and advance a free and open-minded citizenry, a citizenry possessing critical thought. Rooted in the essence of academic learning, Osaka University will encourage the spirit of autonomy and independence without flattering any power or authority.

Please remember that you may be expected to contribute to society by making full use of the critical thinking skills and expertise you acquired at Osaka University. You may not always succeed in meeting such expectations, and may sometimes face difficulties. I advise you to express your thoughts in your own words and have the courage to stick to what you think is right. Never forget the spirit of autonomy and independence.

In concluding my address, I would like to share with you my favorite words:

If you are honest and committed, you can accomplish most things.

If you are honest and committed, anything can be enjoyable.

If you are honest and committed, someone will come to your aid.

Those who are honest and committed toward work for the well-being of others bring happiness and respect to themselves.²

What is truly important is that each of us live our lives while looking positively toward the future during this time of COVID-19. We can do this by striving to make our lives better and find greater happiness in our day to day life. We will not be beaten by a virus. Today, though fresh ideas are necessary in the medical field for urgently developing vaccines and effective drugs, they are also needed in other fields and aspects of our lives, including the way we live, communicate with others, and form the image of what an ideal family life should be. I sincerely hope that you will strive to meet such demands of the era as graduates of Osaka University.

EXPO 2025 Osaka, Kansai will be held in five years' time with the theme "Designing Future Society for Our Lives." How will you design the society of the future, and what will it be like? I sincerely hope that each and every one of you will have a bright future, and live a happy life with your family members and friends.

Once again, congratulations on your graduation today.

September 25, 2020

NISHIO Shojiro

President of Osaka University

² GOTO, Seiko. *Ken'i (Authority)*. Gifu: Kibosha Corporation Ltd., 1927.