

2024 Kan'ichi Asakawa Award
Student Paper Contest for International Understanding and Exchange
High School / Highest Award

The First Step

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As someone who dreams of working for an international cooperation organisation in the future, I was under the impression that “international exchange” meant how each individual tackles global issues occurring in the world. I have long been interested in studying abroad, not only because I believe it would improve my English by exposing myself to real-life English, but also because I expect it would allow me to grow as a person by immersing myself in a different culture. I imagine that being in an environment that is incomparably more diverse than Japan would basically leave an impression on me.

This past August, I had two fascinating experiences.

The first one was when a friend of mine, who was hosting an exchange student from the United States, invited me to a gathering. It was quite an opportunity for me. Although I was initially nervous, I decided to take the plunge and talk to her. To my pleasant surprise, I found that communication wasn't as difficult as I had expected. I felt a sense of joy during our conversation. I realised that trying to communicate was more important than grammatical accuracy or perfect vocabulary. We had lively discussions about our favourite music, school life, and trending makeup styles, which reminded me that we were high school students. Later, we went to see the fireworks together. This second encounter, I was able to talk to her as if we were old friends. This experience taught me that international exchange was fundamentally an exchange between individuals. I realised that I may have had an overly rigid preconceptions about what “international exchange” should be.

The second experience was watching a documentary film about Dr. Tetsu Nakamura, which was recommended by my father, who knew of my interests. I thought I knew something about Dr. Nakamura, as he was mentioned in our English textbook. I knew about his initial visit to Pakistan as a member of a mountaineering club had led to his involvement in providing medical care in areas with inadequate healthcare systems. His work later shifted to Afghanistan and he engaged in non-medical endeavours like civil engineering projects. However, watching the documentary made me realise that I knew little about “international exchange”.

The film showcased Dr. Nakamura working as a resident of the local community along with

his philosophy of “deeds, not words”. Although he was a doctor, the film portrayed him in many other roles: a community leader, an architect, a carpenter, and a creator who brought various ideas to life. The impact of these non-medical roles was so profound that I just see scenes of his medical work occasionally.

The documentary conveyed Dr. Nakamura’s remarkable achievements. Yet, what struck me the most was how he integrated himself fully into the local community. At times, I lost sight of him on the screen because he dressed, ate, spoke, and laughed just like the local people. He appeared, not as someone offering aid but as a part of the community, striving to improve their shared lives. This taught me that the foundation of international exchange lied in engaging with the cultures and spirits of others, not merely interaction between individuals. I felt my internal definition of “international exchange” evolving.

Dr. Nakamura had a unique approach to building relationships, that is exposing himself openly and honestly to the local people. Whenever a stranger appears, people naturally want to learn who they are. Dr. Nakamura must have faced many questions and answered them when he initiated his own exchanges. As shown in the Japanese words “doubt creates demons”, a lack of understanding about others can lead to unnecessary fear, caution, or hindered constructive interaction. Dr. Nakamura's approach, as shown in the documentary, served as a model for ideal international exchange.

If we turn our eyes to the world, there are countless events where a lack of mutual understanding has resulted to unfortunate conflicts. The war between Russia and Ukraine and the clash between Palestine and Israel are prime examples of such conflicts. Although these issues are ongoing with no promise of resolve anytime soon, it seems to me that both sides have a reason not to back down. Given the historical context, I understand that these situations are not so simple. Nevertheless, I believe that it might be possible to find a way other than military confrontation if both sides could expose themselves and engage in sincere dialogues.

It seemed to me that the life of Dr. Nakamura demonstrated that such an approach is possible. His words, “men no longer needed to carry guns ...Afghan men smiled in the fields... Families gathered around warm dinner tables. Human life returned. Peace has a power greater than war”, left a lasting impression on me. I believe we must continue seeking this path, no matter how difficult it may be.

Looking back on the exchange with the American student at my friend’s house this past August, I remember feeling frustrated as I struggled to express myself during our initial introductions, and realised that I had not given much thought to myself and the things around me. While this lack of self-awareness and language skills created a barrier, in my case, cultural and religious differences often serve as walls dividing people in global issues. This is why international exchange is vital today. The very core of international exchange lies in fostering connections between cultures and spirits; and what makes the difference is helping

others understand who you are while you understand who they are.

I now see many things I must do to become an active global citizen. Starting with what is close to me, I want to deepen my understanding of my own culture and spirit as well as that of others.