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The uniqueness of the Climate Crisis

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In the past 50 years, I have been involved in pollution control measures (air, water, wastes) as a government official, and, after I retired from the government, in advocacy activities for global environmental issues (global warming and climate issues) as the representative of an NPO. Particularly in the past two decades, critical environmental issues (adverse climate change, massive decrease of species/populations, and environmental hormones/hazardous chemicals) have placed a great financial burden on our society, not just the actual physical damages directly inflicted on us. Therefore, I cannot help focusing on these new aspects of the environmental crisis.

Earlier this year, the COVID-19 attacked the human sphere out of blue. The corona pandemic seems to be a terrible consequence of the expanded human activities. The expansion of the global economy has been promoting free transportation of people, goods, and money all over the world, and finally allowed humans to go beyond the boundary into the realm of nature.

While staying home the last few months due to the COVID-19 "curfew", I was thinking about various crises that surround us - a huge earthquake, a missile, or a meteorite coming down on you. In addition to the above, some people will worry if another burst of a nuclear power plant will devastatingly ruin our economy, and others may fear their losing jobs after the pandemic.

However, the global environmental crisis is uniquely and fundamentally different from such usual crises as I raised above. Huge earthquakes, wars, and great economic depression are not something that we consciously sought for. We want to avoid them at all costs, but they may happen for a certain reason. On the other hand, the climate crisis is the result of our sane desire for a better living. Humans always have been seeking material richness, physical convenience, and comfort. Then, after enthusiastically working for a better life for hundreds of years,

we stepped over the limit of the Earth and now we found ourselves amid a tremendous crisis. Our efforts to raise living standards resulted in an environmental crisis that will totally devastate our own life. This unique characteristic of the environmental crisis, however, would give us hope for the future. What does it mean?

Human development, as its natural result, brought about economic changes both in volume and quality. Nevertheless, the global environment was relatively stable until the 1970s, when the world population was somewhat less than four billion and the global economy was much smaller by an order of magnitude. This means that the global environment (air, land, ocean, and ecology) was barely sustainable 50 years ago.

This fact is worth remembering. If we can reduce the environmental burden to this level, we may be able to survive. Therefore, what we should do now is to minimize the burden (CO₂ emission, excessive use of chemicals, deforestation, land development, etc.) as soon as possible. We should shift energy resources, establish a system to screen technological development from the environmental viewpoint, review our mass-consumption lifestyle, and try all possible measures to build a new sustainable society.

While staying home in the past few months, I found out that, among all crises surrounding us, only the environmental crises can be overcome if we have the guts to review traditional values and change our ways of life. Now is the time to turn crisis into opportunity. Based on what I learned through our NPO activities, I firmly believe that the opportunity resides in the environment-oriented society.