



An Interview with Akio Matsumura

by Nancy Roof

Editor's Note: The post-war reconstruction in Japan so deeply impressed Akio Matsumura that he has spent his career building bridges to people across continents and cultures. In the 1970's he became involved with the United Nations Population Fund and spent several decades in the world body, including a full-time advisor to the Secretary-General of the United Nations Development Programme, the U.N.'s second-most powerful agency.

Collaborating with Mikhail Gorbachev, he conducted the first fund-raising efforts of the Green Cross International. In this endeavor he became Secretary General of the organization and worked closely with the Government of the Netherlands led by Prime Minister Lubbers, who granted funding and identified a secretariat in The Hague.



Akio created the Global Forum of Parliamentary and Religious Leaders, one of the world's foremost groups in fostering dialogue between the realms of faith and government. This group has been instrumental in the personal development of numerous national leaders across the globe.

Throughout his career he has brought together the unlikeliest of people: Arafat and Rabin, Chinese government officials and the Dalai Lama, and many more. No word in English describes his unique talent: it is something beyond mediation, emanating from a respect he commands borne of the reality he is a true citizen of the world.

This interview, ranging from his life's work to current global trends, was conducted by Nancy Roof in February.

NR: I want to start this interview by asking you to just spend ten minutes telling us about your story.

What is the need for competition if our destiny is already set in our life?

Well, when I was a young man a powerful current passed through me. When I was 18 years old it was a critical age for young men to compete and enter university. I became ill and was hospitalized for three months. This shocking experience at the hospital gave me a lesson: I didn't choose this illness. I came to the following interpretation that only one percent of my generation may have this sad experience at such a critical time in the life. In other words only one percent may have some other advantage which 99% my friends didn't have without this experience. This belief led me to have openness for my future. And the openness made me wonder why we compete against a person. What is the need for competition if our destiny is already set in our life? I became more of a fatalist.

So basically I became much more conscious of the value of individuals in comparison to Japanese tradition that has created a strongly consensus-based society. How do you see yourself? What are your strong points and weakest point? We have to understand both sides, and which is other side of the coin. I became more interested in culture. While you're interested in culture, you may realize that religion is a part of this package.

When I was thirty-four years old, which was 1976, in London I came to conclusions after much thought about three issues:

- 1) Is it not true that we live under two sets of law: the government's law and the spiritual law?
- 2) Who is causing war?
- 3) What is the missing link at the UN?

I came to the conclusion that all three are associated with parliamentarians and spiritual leaders.

We should look at the human issues from the aspect of physical value and spiritual values together, practical context and spiritual context, short term and long term . This is the critical component for the human development. I decided to establish the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary leaders in conjunction with the 40th anniversary of the UN in 1985.

It was not an easy road to practice this theory. How to put aside the political and religious leaders' egos? How to encourage the spiritual dimensions without the religious dogma debate? And how to encourage the leaders' participation as individuals in their capacity as individuals? To all of them, this was the biggest challenge.

My entire point is this: I made a speech more than 23 years ago at the UN .

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I predicted a new type of confrontation would come in the 21st century. In the 20th century we saw wars over political ideology. So, either Japan surrenders, Germany surrenders, or you had colonization—in all of this all you had the government entity on hand for the surrender, or not .

In this new type of confrontation, political, ethnic and religious affairs are conflicts far more complicated than political ideology. This is the one issue I wish business leaders to clearly understand concerning the new situation we will face this century. There is no miraculous quick solution on this issue except the development of personal contacts in the key regions and the appreciation of the richness of diversity of culture. The public image presented by companies and their leaders would be important elements for the consumers to consider.

NR: And yet the politicians understood?

Politicians understood. Religious leaders understood. Scientists understood. Many, many, many others understood. But not businessmen, because their minds are too tangibly-oriented mind.

So, I decided to meet with someone among the highest ranks of businessmen and yet who has not met me at all., who could give me his observation about what I would bring to the situation.

It was suggested I meet with Dr. Robert Lee , co-founder of Lee Hecht Harrison, one of the largest international management consulting firms in the US.

I said, "Dr. Lee, today I have a two-hour appointment with you. I will present my concepts to you for one hour; I will stop in exactly one hour. And then, will you please ask me questions for another hour, from your point of view, from a businessman's point of view? My question is whether my concepts and achievements could be attractive to the business world, or not. That is my bottom-line question."

After my hour was up he said, "Mr. Matsumura, in my life,"—he's about seventy-five years old, and a professor and he said, "I've met thousands of chairmen and presidents of companies. But I never met a single person like you who has two assets.

"One, I never met someone like you, who has horizontal contacts around the world with top drawer people from the field of politics, all religious faiths, scientists, artists, and the UN and international organizations.

"Second and equally important," he said, "I have been working for many years toward the concept that the spiritual-cultural dimension , without religious dogma, should be considered when we deal with human issues.

We should look at the human issues from the aspect of physical value and spiritual values together...

This concept will be more needed now than ever particularly in US. There is growing need for the business world to understand this concept for the sake of human development."

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I decided at that point to see if I could serve the chairman of a company as a diplomatic advisor to find solutions that transcend business, nations, culture, and even spirit. In most of the world, the 'solution space' is where all these come together. Only in the West do we look strictly at the material side of things.

As the world enters the 21st century the emphasis in relationships is shifting from transactions to an emphasis on ethics, values, and spirituality. It is becoming a world in which culture and spirituality should not be merely acknowledged but become the cornerstone of business practices. If businessmen do not appreciate this spiritual-cultural dimension, then we will have more trouble in international business.

"So you have two important assets to the businessman's point of view," Mr. Lee said. "The horizontal connection and the spiritual concept which is badly needed in America now, particularly."

I said to him, "What do you mean by that in practical terms?"

He said, "For example, Shell Oil or Intel invests huge amounts, several hundred million dollars in, let's say, India, or Africa, Nigeria. They recruit top Ph.D.'s, economic experts, to see the blueprint for strategy for the investment. However, their experts will have limited knowledge of the local people's reactions."

"So always, in headquarters they plan for trouble overseas. Because headquarters can't see both sides. They cannot see the local reaction or point of view. Present your perspective to indicate the missing link between strategy, the headquarter point of view, and local community's point of view. If somebody can get such advice, it is a sure investment."

"At the same time, if a company invests in India, they may have also many employees in India. They might say 'We already have an expert there.' But not at the level that Mr. Matsumura communicates. Even at the top level they will not speak frankly. But you, Mr. Matsumura, your connection is the *concept* of connection. Local people will tell you very frankly what they like and what they don't like, which headquarters in America doesn't hear."

"So that's why you can see the missing link from market value and strategy point of view. That's why your horizontal connection will provide you with the missing link, which hundreds of experts with a Ph.D. cannot produce."

When I met the first time with Mr. Mark Moody-Stuart, Chairman of Royal

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Dutch/Shell Oil Company in order to invite him to the Central Asia Regional Conference at Konya in Turkey, 1997, the following conversation occurred:

"Mr. Moody-Stuart, you do not need us when you meet with any president of Central Asian countries. You make business agreements with Presidents on oil production. However, the problems are not with the central governments, but at the local community level where you drill for oil. Local communities are not necessarily in agreement with their own president's business contracts with Shell. Shell Oil Company with \$185 billion in revenue cannot bring the local communities to sit down at one table. We, without financial power, could invite the local communities, and people from different religious backgrounds to come together to discuss regional economic development. This is the different function each has. Business participation is crucial for the human development."

NR: What is the benefit to business is the real question.

My question is this: I admire your country enormously. It's 180 degrees different from my country. Japan has a sense of tradition and consensus building, and a high consciousness of protocol. Your country is not tradition-oriented, not protocol-conscious, and not devoted to consensus-building. It rests on individual ability. So it's a 180-degree difference. And there is merit to both sides. That's a strong point that America has, which I don't have in my country. The weakness is ignorance — ignorance of the rest of the world. Maybe we can say a superpower can ignore. Maybe. But it's basically ignorance of the rest of the world.

NR: And your experience is worldwide for many, many years. Not only your connection with the UN, but the traveling and the connections and the access—

What I would wish to tell America is that you have to understand a new type of confrontation. If they don't understand, they're going to have business trouble overseas. It's not like the First and Second World Wars. It's not a political ideology war. It's religious/ethnic conflict, a new type. You have to understand the spiritual/cultural dimension. Otherwise, you may have a huge gap with the local people. I am a strong believer that things may be changed and forwarded by individuals. The concept should be produced by the individual but not by the institution.

Any traditional taboo would be transcended only by the individual. I may not represent the typical character of Japanese nor the UN bureaucrat. I am seeking the meaning of spirituality all the time.

NR: No, for sure.

When it comes to intangible outcomes, [business-people] have difficulties seeing the value in them. They expect tangible and visible results based on mathematical theory.

My question is whether my concepts and achievements could be attractive to the business world, or not.

I am therefore challenging to inspire businessmen to create a unique public image and practice of leadership. For example, the new chairman of a major company decided to establish the post of the diplomatic advisor, and attend the overseas market strategy session in India. Consumers will see him as the new type of leader who understands the spiritual and cultural local issues and would contribute to consensus building. Consumers see his management style with a fresh perspective and will see a new, higher quality in his products as well. And chairmen have to provide a public image for their company. It's public relations. The public sees that the new Chairman is making an effort to understand *this* century, not the last century. That's how I see it.

NR: How do you see the role of businessmen in creating a better world or a more peaceful, harmonious world compared with politicians? There is a lot of controversy and discussion about this. Which group is going to be the leaders of the Third Millennium?

I don't see any miracle solution, whether it be the President of the United States of America, whether it be the Secretary-General of the UN, or any position, to solve this tendency toward this new type of confrontation, which I predicted 23 years ago. I didn't predict what happened to the Trade Center. I predicted the phenomenon, tendencies, the character of the conflict. That is because I believed in volcanic energy. Human behavior already has produced volcanic energy. It is produced by human beings; human beings here at the present cannot stop it. Only God.

Over the four or five million years of human history there has been no single year the entire world was at peace. So, in a way, war has been with us a much, much, much, much longer time, and peacetime does not exist in practical terms. But overall, to me, attitude is the point. Attitude produces your perception. So if you get the perception wrong, whatever you say, even if you use exactly the same word, people will not accept it. People will not be persuaded based on theory. Human emotion is not based on theory. Human emotion is human emotion.