

Swami Vivekananda 150th Birth Anniversary Closing Ceremony

25 May 2014 - Seisen University Auditorium

Welcome Address

by Swami Medhasananda

Dear Friends, by using analogies of nature, we may describe Swami Vivekananda's first appearance on the world stage in 1893 ^{sudden} was like a comet causing a tremendous sensation. his message ^{was} illuminating and energising. souls steeped in ignorance and weakness ^{was} like the shining sun; ^{his ideas} providing a means of attaining harmony to the divergent elements of the world ^{was} like the indivisible sky above; and, finally, Vivekananda shines like a polestar, guiding humanity that has lost its way, onto the right path. Consequently, his impact, sometimes vibrant, and at other times silent, has been bringing about a transformation in the realm of ^{thoughts}, not only in India, but the whole world as well.

His unique contribution is now being recognised ^{publicly} and ^{privately} by the peoples of many countries, including Japan, on the occasion of the celebration of his 150th birth anniversary. In Japan this anniversary has been observed for one continuous year, coming to an end today with this ceremony.

Dear friends, on behalf of the Organising Committee instituted by the Vedanta Society of Japan, a branch of the Ramakrishna Mission headquartered in India, and myself, I heartily welcome you all to this closing celebration.

We feel blessed by the holy presence of Revered Swami Suhitanandaji, General Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, whose participation today in spite of his busy schedule has made us immensely happy and inspired.

We cordially welcome him and look forward to his comments concerning Swamiji.

We are also very happy that Her Excellency Smt. Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa, Ambassador of India, has graced this occasion as our Chief Guest. While organising the various programmes and events of our year-long celebration of Swamiji's 150th birth anniversary, the Indian Embassy, under the leadership of Her Excellency, has been our constant support and inspiration. We cordially welcome your Excellency.

We also cordially welcome Professor Sengaku Mayeda, President of the Hajime Nakamura Eastern Institute and Professor Emeritus of Indian Philosophy, at the University of Tokyo. Professor Mayeda is a distinguished scholar who has been recently awarded the prestigious Padmashree Award of India in the field of Literature and Education, and we are honoured to have him as a main speaker today.

Just as Gautama Buddha is not only for Buddhists, or Jesus Christ only for Christians, or even Hazrat Muhammad only for Muslims, they are collectively the most precious of the heritage of all humankind in comparison to any material heritage. Similarly, Vivekananda, though a Hindu monk born in India, is also for all. On the occasion of Swami Vivekananda's 150th Birth Anniversary celebrated around the world, we have observed that people of all ages, professions, faiths and countries of the East and West have gathered to pay homage to the hallowed memory of Swamiji who inspired them.

Although today's gathering is not that large, people of various backgrounds and different nationalities have assembled here to take part in our programme and we heartily welcome them all. Tributes to Swamiji will also be offered by distinguished guests from various stations of life and belonging to various faiths today, including; H.E. Madan Kumar Bhattarai, Ambassador of Nepal; Reverend Hakuei Yamaguchi

of the Nounin-ji Temple of Chiba Prefecture; Father Cyril Veliath, a Jesuit Priest and Professor at Sophia University, Tokyo, and one of the most enthusiastic and resourceful members of our Celebration Organising Committee; Swami Sadyojaatah of the “Art of Living Foundation” headquartered in India, and Mr. Ryuko Hira, Chairperson, Managing Board, Institute of Sathya Sai Education and Honorary President of the Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry Japan.

Celebration of this event in Japan is of special significance. As you may be aware, Swamiji had visited this country on his way to attending the first World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, where he made his historic appearance giving a spectacular speech on religious harmony. He had a profound love and appreciation of Japan, its people and culture, and wanted his countrymen, especially its youth, to imbibe some of the sterling qualities he had observed of the Japanese.

Okakura Tenshin, the famous art critic and savant of Japan had gone to India to invite Swamiji to revisit Japan and stayed with him for a certain period of time in 1902. But many are not aware that the first foreigner who had lived in the monastery at Belur Math, our headquarters, under the personal care of Swami Vivekananda, like a brahmachari to study Sanskrit, for about five months and later lived in the Brahmacharya Ashram of Santiniketan under the personal care of Rabindranath Tagore, was a young Japanese named Shitoku Hori who had accompanied Okakura to India and was loved dearly by both Swamiji and Tagore.

Swamiji could not revisit Japan though invited by some distinguished Japanese, including the celebrated Meiji Emperor. That Japan occupied his mind on even on the last day of his mortal existence is revealed is revealed from his following significant remark on July 4, 1903, “I want to do something for Japan” he declared.

Swamiji's visit to Japan and Okakura's, as well as Shitoku Hori's, visit to India laid the foundation of a bridge between Japan and India in Modern times with far reaching consequences, further strengthened by the poet Rabindranath Tagore and other prominent Indians and Japanese.

Present day Japan is in urgent need of regaining self confidence; of setting out goals to reach for both the individual and the national life; and to start working towards reaching them as Prime Minister Abe observed in his message sent to us on the occasion of the Opening Ceremony of the this 150th Birth Anniversary. In this regard, Vivekananda's inspiring messages of self-confidence, peace and harmony based on moral and spiritual values can be of tremendous importance to the Japanese.

Hence the organising committee planned an ambitious year-long calendar of events throughout Japan to familiarise residents with Swamiji's ideas, adopting various programmes and projects, most of which, in spite of our limited resources, have been implemented. I now offer a brief summary of these events as follows:

The Opening Ceremony of the Celebration was held at the Indian Embassy Auditorium on the 9th of June 2013, and H.E. Smt. Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa also graced that occasion as the Chief Guest. Swami Atmajnananandaji of the Vedanta Society of Washington D. C. and Professor Yasuaki Nara, and eminent scholar, were main speakers. Highlights of the Cultural Programme included a compilation of songs, narrations, a video-show, etc., on the 'Love of Vivekananda' under the direction of Mr. Ranjan Gupta.

A similar programme was held later in Osaka for people in the Kansai area on the 30th of November 2013. Among the main speakers were Mr. Aseem R. Mahajan, Consul General of India for Osaka-Kobe; Mr. J. S. Dayal, President

of the Indian Chamber of Commerce; Mr. Keishin Kimura, President of the Japan Yoga Therapy Association; and Professor Akio Tanabe of Kyoto University. Another programme was held in Kumamoto for the people of the island of Kyushu on the 12th of April 2014. The main speakers were Mr. Takashi Masaki, a distinguished author and peace activist and Swami Medhasananda.

An exhibition highlighting the historical Japan-India relationship and the life and message of Swami Vivekananda was organised at the Indian Fair called 'Namaste India' in Yoyogi Park in Tokyo September 28th and 29th, 2013 and inaugurated by former Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori. This exhibit was again installed and inaugurated by Her Excellency Ambassador Wadhwa at the Indian Embassy Art Gallery and open to the public from the 3rd to the 6th of April 2014 drawing a large number of viewers.

A seminar on Swami Vivekananda and Okakura Tenshin was also hosted by the Indian Embassy on the 26th of March 2014, chiefly in collaboration with the Vedanta Society of Japan, but also in cooperation with 'Discover India' and 'Tagore 150.' Her Excellency Ambassador Wadhwa offered 'Opening Remarks' and speakers included Swami Tyagananda of the Vedanta Society of Boston, Swami Medhasananda of Japan, Dr. Kuniko Hirano of Sophia University, Tokyo, Dr. Kana Tomizawa of Tokyo University and Professor Takashi Okakura, the great grandson of Okakura Tenshin.

The Society also distributed winter garments and fruit among the destitute, who Swamiji taught us should be looked upon as gods and be served accordingly.

The Society published four books and a DVD related to Swamiji. It also published two special issues of its bimonthly magazine in Japanese with many thoughtful articles and photos. The Society also published and distributed

hundreds of inspiring and informative books related to Swamiji in Japanese among the people on the occasions noted earlier and have also arranged to distribute these books to educational institutions and public libraries in collaboration with Embassy of India.

It is heartening to observe that the aim of all the activities summarised above to acquaint the people of this country with the elevating ideas of Swamiji, so that they can get guidance from him in leading an ideal life of wisdom, strength and peace, has been more or less fulfilled by the concerted efforts of so many and, above all, by the grace of Swamiji.

It would not be out of place to also mention our Vedanta Society collaborated with the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of the Philippines and the Vedanta Society of Korea ^{which} both celebrated the 150th Birth Anniversary of Swamiji in a grand way in Manila and Seoul respectively last year. ~~⊗~~ In both of programmes the local Indian Ambassador joined other distinguished guest speakers. At the Manila event Mr. Fidel Ramos, former President of the Philippines and Swami Bodhasarananda, then President of the Advaita Ashrama of India, a branch of the Ramakrishna Mission, both spoke.

Here I would like to mention here, with a heavy heart, that Professor Tsuyoshi Nara, a celebrated scholar and humanist, as well as Vice-President of this Celebration's Organising Committee, passed away in January of this year. We recall, with a deep sense of appreciation and gratitude, Professor Nara's invaluable contributions to spreading the message of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Vedanta in this country.

Ceremonially today we close the yearlong extensive programmes on Swamiji. But it's not really an ending but the beginning of a new phase of continued study, propagation and practice of Swamiji's teachings with greater energy and enthusiasm.

I conclude my welcome speech with the following comment: The history of the

Modern World has shown that Capitalism has failed, the experiment with Communism has also been unsuccessful, and now, together, we have to move forward to an era of pluralism and harmonism. Swami Vivekananda was

⊗ Purpose of this collaboration was to help spreading the life-giving message in the countries of Asia which deserves special attention of our organisation.

the champion of these spirits. Not only was Swamiji an advocate of harmony in all areas of individual and collective life, but he also provides us a philosophy of harmony. This is based on the unity of existence in the plane of consciousness as postulated by Vedanta philosophy of India, which is ancient, yet profound, universal and harmonistic.

Thus, *Both* as citizens of a given country, ~~and~~ also as global citizens, we need both Vivekananda and Vedanta today to give practicality to the 'One World Concept' by bringing about the psychological unity of the conflict-ridden world - which is now merely physically united. Because there is no better option to respond to the challenges of effectively interacting among the peoples of the world, brought to each other's close proximity by the advanced technologies of today, than cultivating the spirit of harmony and pluralism.

Finally, I again heartily welcome you all to this celebration and pray to Swami Vivekananda to shower his blessings on all of us.

Thank you !

Arigato Gozaimashita!