**The 150th Birth Anniversary Celebration of Swami Vivekananda**

**– Closing Ceremony –**

May 25, Sunday, 2014, (4:00 –7:00) P.M.

Seisen University Auditorium

By

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What I speak of now is an event from my past. Approximately half a century ago, my wife and I spent a year along with our daughter aged three in the city of Madras (now Chennai) in South India, from September 1963 to September 1964. It was a journey arranged via the courtesy of Professor W. Norman Brown of the University of Pennsylvania, and I in the capacity of a Faculty Research Fellow of the American Institute of Indian Studies was enabled to spend a year in the University of Madras, with the kind consent of the reputed Professor T.M.P. Mahadevan. My intention then was to carry out research on a person reported to be India’s foremost thinker, namely Shankara. My wife at the time was also busy preparing her doctoral thesis, which she wrote under the supervision of Professor Brown. Thanks to the goodness of the famed Professor V. Raghavan, she too was enabled to pursue her study on Indian literature and folktales within the same institute, as a Junior Fellow.

On one occasion, a letter with happy tidings arrived at our place by airmail, a letter that was sent by our esteemed Professor Hajime Nakamura. On perusing its contents, we learned that Professor Nakamura was on his way to the USA in response to an invitation he had received from Harvard University, but that he had decided to journey there by way of India. The letter further stated that he expected to arrive in Madras from Ceylon (Sri Lanka), on August 24th. Fortunately however, we at that time had a large-bodied though rickety American-made car that was driven by a man named Challappan, whom we had employed. When the anticipated day finally arrived, we entered our rundown vehicle and drove towards Madras airport to receive Professor and Mrs. Nakamura, and later after seating the two of them in the back of the car, our family, which now consisted of four and a half persons, set off on our long-awaited journey through South India. It was a journey we had planned on undertaking for a long time, a tour we will never forget.

From Madras city we drove southwards, and travelling by way of Kanchipuram we spent the night at Pondicherry, and on the morning of the next day we dropped in for a visit at the Ashram of the religious teacher and guide, Sri Aurobindo. This was a visit we had long planned, and it made a profound impression on us. In the city of Madurai that we next entered, we were blessed to meet and receive *prasada* from the person in charge of the Kanchipuram Math, namely Sri Shankaracharya. Sri Shankaracharya was the head of the Shankara sect of Hinduism, and an individual we were unable to see while at Kanchipuram. He was the most notable conveyor of the sacred tradition of the 8th century thinker Shankara, and a person deeply revered by many. He often received the felicitations of eminent personalities like government ministers, who came to him for advice on a variety of matters.

From Madurai we travelled further south, and eventually reached the spot of what is reputed to be the most gorgeous experience in the world, namely the setting of the sun at Kanyakumari located in the southern-most tip of India, that is, Cape Comorin. It was to view this glorious spectacle that we had headed towards the spot, but as it was past 6:00 PM by the time we reached there, we were deprived of the opportunity of witnessing it. Yet we stood on the seashore under the pale light, contemplating the Bay of Bengal to our right, the Indian Ocean before us, and the Arabian Sea on our left. This particular spot has long been reputed to be a sacred spot for Hinduism, owing to the fact that the waters of three different seas are so to say mingled over here. To the south of Kanyakumari in the distant offing lay the Swami Vivekananda Rock Memorial, but strain our eyes as we may we were sadly unable to acquire a glimpse of it, for the sounds of the waves were all that we perceived. Still, standing unmoving on that shore with eyes shut we were able evoke within our minds the image of Vivekananda, as he spent a night seated on that rock immersed in deep meditation.

After 1880, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) who was deeply traumatized by the passing away of his preceptor Ramakrishna (in 1886) became a *sannyasin* (or total renouncer), and began the life of a wandering mendicant. In course of his wanderings he visited every part of India and eventually arrived at Kanyakumari, and it is said that on Christmas day of 1892, he sat upon that rock and entered into a state of deep meditation. It is also said that this meditation proved to be a vital turning point in his life.

Well, on reflecting upon the history of Indian Thought, we see that India since ancient times has been a nation with a multitude of races, religions, and cultures. In 1206, the Islamic Slave dynasty arose in Delhi, and Islam, of foreign origin, made its way into the country. Heterogeneous religious beliefs, thinking, and cultures that were hitherto unknown progressively pervaded the Hindu religion, and brought about a change within it.

Approximately 500 years later in the year 1600, the British East India Company was established in the city of Kolkata. In 1858, India was ultimately constituted a direct colony of Great Britain, Queen Victoria was declared the Empress of India, and the Indian Empire was born. With this, the religion and thinking of India underwent an inevitable transformation, a transformation that was far more critical than what they had experienced under the earlier Islamic rule, and a major cause behind that was the spread of Christianity within the country. Due to the effects of English education and other similar factors that attended this phenomenon Hinduism received direct contact with Western Thought, and this stimulation in turn paved the way for the development of Modern Indian Reform movements, such as the Brahma-Samaj of Rammohan Roy.

Despite having lived in an ambience such as this, where the nation was so to say submerged within a tidal wave of ever-increasing modernity and westernization, Ramakrishna was virtually untouched by these current cultures, and he was besides an ardent devotee of the Goddess Kali. With the assistance of the itinerant ascetic Totapuri he imbibed the essentials of *nirvikalpa samadhi* and the *advaita* of Shankara, and owing to his having been a spiritual genius, he by dint of earnest effort came to embody within himself the traditions of Hinduism. He immersed himself effortlessly into a state of mystical ecstasy, and it is said that by degrees he came to attain a state of oneness with God. In other words, his soul or *Atman* entered into a state of union with the *Brahman* or Absolute, that is Being(sat)- Consciousness(cit)-Bliss(ananda), a state of *nirvikalpa samadhi* or Non-duality.

Furthermore, he did not limit himself to the deities of Hinduism. Rather, he experienced the life-styles of Christianity and Islam, he had an encounter with the Absolute as conceived by their respective doctrines, and he went on to affirm that all religions had a meaning to their existence, that they were all true, and that they were all one. Although religions may follow diverse paths, yet they all led towards the One God. He declared that the vital point of religion lay in the love of others, and that in our dealings with other people, we should arm ourselves with the spirit of love and service. As we all know, the life and personality of Ramakrishna have been portrayed in the work of the eminent French writer Romain Rolland (1866-1944), in his celebrated book *La Vie de Ramakrishna* (Paris, 1929).

However this illustrious savant Ramakrishna passed away in 1886, and Vivekananda was left without a mentor. While seated immersed in deep meditation on a rock far out into the sea in the south of Kanyakumari, what may have been the thoughts that crossed his mind? Could it be that while pondering over modern religious history and the current situation of India, he was wondering how in a multicultural, multi-religious, and multiracial situation that pervaded the nation at that time, the beliefs and convictions of Ramakrishna could be conveyed and developed? After crossing the endless waters that lay before his eyes, when it came to communicating the beliefs of Ramakrishna to the people of the world, what would be the essence of his communication? Were not these the points that he cogitated over while seated on that rock? As for the essence of his communication, as in the case of his mentor Ramakrishna, did he not look for the essence in the teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads that constitute the basis of India’s thought and culture? Did he not seek it particularly in the Vedantic Philosophy? And even more, did he not seek it in the Non-dualistic philosophy of Shankara? It was on September 1893 that he participated in the world parliament of religions in Chicago.

Mulling over on such issues we returned to our vehicle, along with Professor and Mrs. Nakamura. Although from Kanyakumari Vivekananda journeyed on to Madras, yet we decided to take the opposite road and drove on to Trivandrum, the capital city of the state of Kerala. Thankfully we reached safely at around midnight, stayed a night at the Mascot Hotel, and on the following day we bid farewell to the professor and his wife at the airport. Seeing that I had finally realized without any mishap or untoward incident my lifelong dream of travelling around South India along with the professor and his wife, I experienced a great sense of relief and contentment.

Well, our international society of today reveals the advancement of fast-paced scientific techniques, and this appears to be attended by a radical form of globalization. A multitude of disparate values are observed to blend together, and people seem to be plunged into a free-flowing and muddled situation. Hence, as signified by the September 11th incident friction among diverse religious and ethnic groups have revealed a rapid rise, and conflicts painful to witness and acts of extreme terrorism, are frequent recurrences in various parts of the world.

On noticing situations like this, I am reminded at times of the words of the Lord Buddha who said, “If grudge were to be repaid by grudge, that grudge will never cease. Grudge will cease only when it is discarded. This is an eternal truth.” I also recall Vivekananda, an unknown Hindu monk of 30 years age, who at the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago delivered on September 11, 1983, a speech that was unparalleled and an eye-opener.

Sisters and Brothers of America,

My thanks, also, to some of the speakers on this platform who, referring to the delegates from the Orient, have told you that these men from far-off nations may well claim the honor of bearing to different lands the idea of toleration. I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation, which has sheltered the persecuted, and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to Southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion, which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation. I will quote to you, brethren, a few lines from a hymn which I remember to have repeated from my earliest boyhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings: “*As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.”*

The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in itself a vindication, a declaration to the world of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita: *“Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me.”* Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilizations and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time is come. And I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.

We are now gathered within the hall of Seisen University, in order to conduct the closing of the 150th birth anniversary celebrations of Swami Vivekananda. It is really sad that he died at the youthful age of only 39. Since his demise, more years than a century have already passed and the world has indeed altered a great deal, particularly after the Second World War. However, even now, we can never affirm with certainty that the riots, terrorist incidents and the like now occurring in various parts of the world, are unrelated to religion, which is meant to bring happiness to people. This is indeed a pity. The virtues of tolerance and universal acceptance, which Vivekananda stressed in his above speech, are needed today, and they are also ideas that will be absolutely indispensable in all future religions.

On the occasion of this 150th birth anniversary celebration of Vivekananda, I would like to end my address by recalling his own speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.

Thank you very much.