**Vedanta Society of Japan**

25 May 2014

Address by *Swami Suhitananda*,

General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission

Dear friends,

I had to undergo a microsurgery for a fracture in lumbar bone on 3rd March 2014 in a hospital at Mumbai in India. While I was recuperating, I got a book titled *Ideals of the East: The Spirit of Japanese Art*written by Kakuzo Okakura. The author begins the book with a very significant sentence: “Asia is one”. A little later he writes “Japan is a museum of Asiatic civilization; and yet more than a museum, because the singular genius of the race leads it to dwell on all phases of the ideals of the past, in that spirit of living Advaitism which welcomes the new without losing the old. The Shinto still adheres to his pre-Buddhistic rites of ancestor worship; and the Buddhists themselves cling to each various school of religious development which has come in its natural order to enrich the soul.”

 Okakura continues, “The dawn of history reveals them as a compact race, fierce in war, imbued with traditions of solar descent and Indian mythology, with a love of poetry and a great reverence for womanhood.”

 Vedanta Society of Japan has published a small book named “The Holy Trinity and the ideals and activities of the Ramakrishna Order” in 2001. In that book a small chapter has been reserved for ideals and activities of Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission. The ideal is something abstract. But that ideal has been made practical through its subtitles – such as relief, medical service, work for women and youth, attention to weaker section, spiritual and cultural work and foreign centres.

 When Swami Vivekananda visited Japan in 1893, some were struck by the similarity of his face with that of the Buddha. Swamiji was highly impressed by certain traits in Japanese character: (a) patriotism, (b) hard work, (c) power of assimilation, (d) cleanliness, (e) aesthetic sense, etc.

Japanese consul in Calcutta, Okakura and Josephine McLeod, a friend of Swami Vivekananda, made attempts to bring Swamiji to Japan in 1902 to spread universal religion. But that did not materialize owing to Swamiji’s failing health.

 However, Japan was later on visited by Swami Trigunatitananda and Swami Abhedananda, two direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, and also by Rabindranath Tagore, Rashbehari Bose, and Subhash Chandra Bose from 1903 onwards. Swami Shankarananda, a disciple of Swami Brahmananda and the 7th President of the Ramakrishna Order, and Swami Sadananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, also visited Japan in later years.

In 1931 Romain Rolland’s biography of Swamiji was translated into Japanese.

 Inspired by Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj, the Vedanta Society of Japan was formed in 1958 under the leadership of Prof. Nikki Kimura and Mr. V. S. Rao. Today I am fortunate to speak in a function organized by the Society functioning under the leadership of Swami Medhasananda.

**Is Swami Vivekananda relevant after 150 years of his birth?**

 Although more than one hundred and eleven years have passed since Swami Vivekananda gave up his body, his life and message continue to have great relevance to this day. Referring to this fact, the distinguished historian and indologist A. L. Basham wrote: “The passing of the years and the many stupendous and unexpected events which have occurred since then suggest that in centuries to come, he (Swami Vivekananda) will be remembered as one of the main moulders of the modern world.”

In a letter written to Miss McLeod in 1906, Sister Nivedita wrote, “You see, when we who understood Swamiji and remember him are dead, there will come a long period of obscurity and silence, for the work that he did. It will seem to be forgotten, until, suddenly, in 150 or 200 years, it will be found to have transformed the world.”

Today we are living in a world of global civilization. Advancements in information and communication technology, globalization of economy and other factors are bringing people of the world closer together than even before. All over the world there is now greater awareness of human rights, social justice, gender equality and other issues. There is now greater understanding of the importance of religious harmony and of the dangers of religious fundamentalism. Another significant trend is the upsurge of interest in spiritual life, especially among the younger generation, all over the world. There is now a growing awareness that a spiritual perspective is a great help in facing the problems of life, in achieving success and in making life meaningful. The intelligent people throughout the globe are searching for a religion which is not confined within a church, or a temple or a mosque. Aided by print and electronic media, this trend has become a global spiritual movement covering education, health, medicine and even economy and politics. Millions of people now practise meditation, yoga, Zen and other spiritual disciplines.

As early as 1897, Swami Vivekananda stated: “Even in politics and sociology, problems that were only national twenty years ago can no more be solved on national grounds only… They can only be solved when looked at in the broader light of international grounds. International organizations, international combinations, international laws are the cry of the day.”

Recently UNESCO had organized a commemorative function in connection with Swamiji’s 150th Birth Anniversary. In that function Ms Irina Bokova, the Director-General of UNESCO, said in her speech that “What better subject to explore today than the universal message of Swami Vivekananda? [In this world] where societies are increasingly interconnected, but also increasingly fragmented.”

We have to keep in mind that, although Swamiji was a patriot to the core of his being, love for his motherland did not prevent him from identifying himself with the whole of humanity. Christopher Isherwood said, “Vivekananda’s nationalism was not nationalism in the smaller sense, it was a kind of super-nationalism, a kind of internationalism sublimated.”

**Contributions of Swami Vivekananda to different fields:**

**Harmony**: The keynote of Swamiji’s message is harmony. Swamiji tried to bring about harmony of the ancient and the modern, harmony of the East and the West, harmony of religions, harmony of religion and science.

**Concern for human society**: Swamiji was an illumined seer who could see far into the future of humanity. With his deep concern for the human welfare he started Ramakrishna Mission and endowed it with a great vision. This fact has been admitted by Federico Mayor in 1993, who was then the Director-General of UNESCO. While inaugurating a special exhibition at UNESCO to commemorate the centenary of Swami Vivekananda’s participation in the Parliament of Religions, he said that he was struck by the similarity in constitutions of Ramakrishna Mission formulated in 1897 and that of UNESCO drawn up nearly 50 years later.

**Religion**: Next to his concern for man, his chief concern was religion. His liberal attitude with regard to religion can be seen from the following words: “I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of every one. Not only shall I do all these, but I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future.”

**Service**: Touching upon another global perspective of Swamiji, Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, writes, “His dedication to service, and the service of the poorest and most vulnerable in society in particular, reminds us that we are at our best when we are at our most selfless.”

**Peace**: There are both internal and external causes that threaten peace in the world. As far as we can see, the message of harmony of religions that Swami Vivekananda learnt from his master Sri Ramakrishna and preached relentlessly in the West is the only lasting solution to the problem of religious disharmony. In support of this view I can do no better than quote the statement of the famous British historian, Arnold Toynbee. More than forty years ago, Toynbee wrote, “At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is an Indian way. The Emperor Ashoka’s and Mahatma Gandhi’s principle of non-violence and Sri Ramakrishna’s testimony to the harmony of religions: here we have the attitude and spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family…’

Now I would like to highlight the impact of Swami Vivekananda on a few world thinkers.

1. **Annie Bardach** writes on March 29, 2012, in **Wall Street Journal**, an American daily that has circulation higher than the New York Times, “What did J.D. Salinger, Leo Tolstoy, Nikola Tesla, and Sarah Barnhart have in common? The influence of Swami Vivekananda, the pied piper of the global yoga movement.”
2. **Nikola Tesla**: Tesla was charmed to hear about the Vedantic Prana and Akash and the Kalpa from Swami Vivekananda and considered them to be the only theories that modern science can entertain.
3. **Leo Tolstoy**: After reading Swami Vivekananda’s Raja Yoga, Leo Tolstoy once said, “Yesterday, I read Vivekananda the whole day.” He also said, “It is doubtful in this age that another man has ever risen above this selfless, spiritual meditation.”
4. **William James**: About Swamiji, Prof. James said, “The man is simply a wonder for oratorical power…the Swami is an honor to humanity. ”
5. **Rockefeller**: Swamiji exerted a good deal of influence on John D Rockefeller when they met in Chicago. Swamiji told him that the money he had accumulated was merely a channel provided to him by God to do good to the world. Rockefeller gave his first large donation to Swamiji, though unwillingly. Later he established Rockefeller Foundation which has spent billions of dollars for the cause of public welfare.
6. **Max Muller**: Swamiji paid a visit to Prof Max Muller’s home in 1896. After their meeting, despite heavy rain and storm Prof. Max Muller went over to the station to see off Swamiji. Swamiji asked him, “Why are you taking so much trouble?” At this the Professor answered, “Opportunity to meet the most worthy disciple of Sri Ramakrishna won’t come time and again.”
7. **Jamshedji Tata**: Swami Vivekananda and Tata met each other while sailing from Yokohama to Canada in 1893. Vivekananda blessed Jamshedji and remarked, “How wonderful it would be if we could combine the scientific and technological achievements of the West with the asceticism and humanism of India.” Tata later started an institute in India for scientific studies which is now world-famous.

All these people had personal acquaintance with Swami Vivekananda. Now we shall see how great men of later times perceived Swamiji.

1. **Dr. Sukarno**, the first president of Indonesia, wrote in the foreword to the book “Voice of Vivekananda”: "Swami Vivekananda! What a man! He was one of the men, who gave so much inspiration to me - inspiration to be strong, inspiration to be a servant of God, inspiration to be a servant of my country, inspiration to be a servant of the poor, inspiration to be a servant of mankind. He it was who said, 'We have wept long enough; no more weeping, but stand on your feet, and be men!’”
2. **U Thant**, former Secretary-General of United Nations (1962-1971), said: “Swami Vivekananda was the greatest spiritual ambassador of India, if I may say, in the history of India. And for that matter, in the history of Asia.”
3. **Subhash Chandra Bose**: “I was barely fifteen when Vivekananda entered my life, then there followed a revolution within and everything was turned upside down. … It is needless to add, however, that as long as I live I shall be absolutely loyal and devoted to Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.”
4. US President **Barack Obama** in his address to India's Parliament on 8 November 2010 said: “It's the richness of faiths celebrated by a visitor to my hometown of Chicago more than a century ago - the renowned Swami Vivekananda. He said that, ‘holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.’”
5. **Mr. Shinzo Abe**, Prime Minister of Japan, in his address to the Indian Parliament on 22 August, 2007 said these words: "’The different streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea.’ It gives me tremendous pleasure to be able to begin my address today with the words of Swami Vivekananda, the great spiritual leader that India gave the world. Vivekananda came to be acquainted with Tenshin Okakura, a man ahead of his time in early modern Japan and a type of Renaissance man. Okakura was then guided by Vivekananda and enjoyed also a friendship with Sister Nivedita, Vivekananda's loyal disciple and a distinguished female social reformer. … I would like to quote, if I may, Vivekananda again, part of the conclusion of deeply meaningful remarks he delivered in Chicago in 1893. He said, ‘help and not fight, assimilation and not destruction, ‘harmony and peace and not dissension.’”
6. One Russian poet has composed on Swami Vivekananda: “It has been rightly said of him:

He was like a naked sword,

His thought was ringing like a steel blade,

Glistening, sparkling, fluttering.

A stroke, another stroke!