

A World Festival to Celebrate Happiness



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Introduction

On Friday March 20, 2015, the “International Happiness Festival 2015” (IHF 2015) will be celebrated in Tokyo.

The word “festival” automatically conjures up images of celebration and happiness and it may sound rather contrived that there is a festival to celebrate happiness, but IHF 2015 will do just that. While festivals typically bring happiness by attaching significance to an event or to objects, IHF 2015 combines the elements of a normal celebration with going deeper into oneself, into that space where happiness is a permanent state of being rather than a momentary bout of pleasure for a few hours.

A Deeper Meaning to Happiness

A lot of research has been done in the world into the concept of happiness. Simplistically stated, the concept has ranged from looking upon happiness as something that is bestowed upon us, like “luck” over which one does not have control, to something that can be pursued and obtained. The pursuit of happiness is often equated to material happiness — that having wealth, health, good relationships and so on is happiness, or at least creates happiness. Spiritual traditions have often pointed out that while material pursuits give pleasure, such happiness is transient and a permanent state of happiness can only be found by going within oneself.

Japanese thinkers have long pondered over the concept of

happiness. I think that the paradox of material well-being resulting in happiness versus happiness being bestowed as a blessing is beautifully caught in the Japanese language in the usage of the words *shiawase* and *koufuku*. To give an example of the usage, while winning *takarakuji* (Japanese lottery) or even enjoying a delicious cup of *soba* noodles creates a sense of *shiawase*, a spiritual retreat into the mountains results in *koufuku*. Having said this, the usage continues to be a matter of debate as some people may shy away from the prominent usage of *koufuku*, perceiving it as being grounded in religious dogma.

A Deeper Meaning to Celebration

Mankind always sees celebration in terms of colors, sounds and laughter. From time immemorial, societies whether ancient or modern, whether tribal, rural or urban, irrespective of language, religion and culture, have had celebrations. Indeed color, music and laughter are almost always visible symbols of a celebration. However, simply remaining with these external symbols makes the celebration itself transient, an activity with a short shelf-life. When taken deeper and combined with inner silence, a wholesome and complete celebration happens. It becomes a “Celebration of Silence” resulting in happiness at a deeper level.

Celebrations in Japan follow certain systems and procedures to maintain form and standard. To give an example, if one is invited to a wedding the gift to the couple is always cash, meant to defray a portion of the wedding expenses, and the amount follows a strict pattern depending upon one’s relationship to the individual. The monetary gift is placed in a special envelope and is handed over at the reception desk at the wedding party. Form and protocol take priority and little is left to chance or to spontaneity.

Irrespective of the procedures followed and the purpose, celebrations are an inner call of the human spirit. IHF 2015 can be said to be a celebration of humanity and of belongingness.

Japan & Festivals

Japan is a land of vibrant festivals. It is estimated that every year several hundred thousand festivals are held in the country. These range in size from a local shrine’s festival to mega festivals drawing thousands of people from across the country and abroad. Festivals invariably have a seasonal flavor and are marked by local community participation, food stalls, music, dance, traditional shrine



Photo: Author

A meeting between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

processions and a lot of merry-making, community spirit, energy and passion. Given that the Japanese are often regarded around the world as constantly working, perfectionist, non-chaotic and serious, that festivals form such an important part of the landscape may come as a surprise.

The word for festival in Japanese is *matsuri*. Research indicates the word is derived from the verb *matsuwaru* which means to connect with the unseen. In this respect, a *matsuri* represents the coming together of nature and the daily human life that is nurtured and supported by it ("Matsuri, Gods and the Land", *Kyoto Journal*, No. 37, June 1998). With IHF 2015, Japan further echoes to the world that, as with any other people, the yearning for happiness is present here and that the traditions of the world that bind us to nature have to be sustained and preserved.

Abe's Thoughts

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has frequently used the word "happiness" in his speeches in stating that he sees making Japan a "happy" country a priority. He has consistently emphasized the importance of developing an optimistic outlook, of reviving a "spirit of happiness" as being necessary for the people's well-being and progress. One of the cornerstones of Abe's economic policies is the belief that when people are optimistic and confident they invest more, spend more and generate a positive cycle to revive a slumbering economy. Thus, in addition to the altruistic aspect of it and the duty of wishing happiness to the governed, making people happy makes practical economic sense.

In April 2013, and also before that in April 2012 when the current ruling Liberal Democratic Party was in opposition, Abe met in Tokyo with the acclaimed humanitarian, spiritual and social leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, founder of the International Art of Living Foundation. Abe had heard about his amazing work to build a peaceful, happy and healthy world. At the meetings, Abe asked him to help promote greater happiness among the Japanese people. Sri Sri responded that his mission is to create waves of happiness in the world and that Japan's contributions to humanity in technology and teamwork can be complemented by spreading a resounding call for happiness from Tokyo. As a result, Art of Living Japan started conducting "Waves of Happiness" programs in the country. IHF 2015 is a further step towards increasing happiness in Japan and the world.

Kokugikan & Sumida Ward — Past, Present, Future

The event venue is the famous *Kokugikan* in the Ryogoku area in Sumida Ward in eastern Tokyo. The hall was built for the national sport of sumo wrestling and only in recent years has it become available on a case-by-case basis for non-sumo events. Ryogoku is synonymous with sumo, and has been featured both in Japanese



Ryogoku in the 17th century

haiku, including compositions by famous poets such as Issa (1763–1828) and Basho (1644–1694), and in paintings, including woodblock prints by Hokusai (1760–1849) and Hiroshige (1797–1858).

Ryogoku Bridge is one of the oldest of the several bridges that connect the east and west banks of the Sumida River. The original wooden bridge had been built in 1659, and marked the connection of the Musashi and Shimosa provinces with Ryogoku, which literally means "two lands" and derived its name from this connection. The construction of the bridge resulted in the huge traffic of people for commerce, entertainment and relaxation.

Hokusai, probably the most well-known of Edo era painters, was born close to the present-day *Kokugikan*. The street where he is supposed to have lived is named after him and pictures of his woodblock masterpieces adorn every lamppost on the street and even one of the public restrooms in the area. In Japan, contrary to this being considered irreverent, it is recognition of how his creations have entered every important aspect of life, and Sumida Ward is now considering a proposal to create a museum dedicated to Hokusai near his home. Many murals based on his work and that of other artists adorn the riverside walk along the Ryogoku bank.

Sumida Ward gets its name from the river that for centuries has been a vital transport line connecting the Kanto area with Tokyo Bay; both a waterway for commerce and an area of relaxation for the people of historic Edo and modern Tokyo. From the eastern bank of the river, the ward stretches eastwards up to the western bank of the large Arakawa River (which is actually the source of the Sumida) and encompasses the historic downtown areas of Kinshicho, Kyojima, Mukojima and Oshiage, in addition to Ryogoku. In the Edo period (1603-1868) and well into the Meiji era (1868-1912) after that, these townships specialized in silk-weaving, handicrafts, sumo, entertainment and nightlife. The Edo Tokyo museum adjoining the *Kokugikan* is an excellent modern study center to get a good



Photo: Author

Hand prints of yokozuna (grand champion sumo wrestlers)

understanding of Tokyo during the Edo period. Somewhat more contemporary features of Sumida Ward are the iconic golden beer-drop structure symbolizing Asahi Beer's headquarters and the Tokyo SkyTree, which in 2011 became the world's tallest tower at 634 meters and can be ascended up to an observatory and restaurant at the 450-meter level providing an undisturbed view of the entire Kanto plain. The structure was built by a private consortium led by the Tobu Corporation as a modern broadcasting and transmission tower that would double up as a contemporary tourist attraction for eastern Tokyo. In addition, this was an image-building exercise for the eastern wards, in order to balance the more trendy image of Shinjuku and Shibuya in the west and majestic Tokyo Tower (patterned on the Eiffel Tower).

Across the Sumida River in Taito Ward is the famous Asakusa downtown district with the landmark Sensoji Temple. The area abounds with festivals, the major ones being the Asakusa Samba Festival, complete with dancers from Rio de Janeiro, and the Sanja Festival, characterized by the carrying of numerous portable shrines (*omikoshi*). On a particular evening in mid-summer, the skies over the river light up with spectacular pyrotechnics at the annual Sumida River fireworks show.

At the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, the *Kokugikan* will be the venue for the boxing and wrestling championships. As the world citadel for sumo, the *Kokugikan* would be the appropriate location for these games. Yet although sumo is usually referred to in the foreign media as "Japanese wrestling", possibly encouraged by Japanese promoters wanting to have the sport gain Western attention, nothing could be more different in concept. In its purest form, sumo is a spiritual practice which used to be performed at shrines. To train as a sumo practitioner required long years of yogic discipline in addition to perfecting the skills and movements. Unlike wrestling, aggression has no place in sumo, which on the contrary is characterized by humility and a sense of surrender. The sumo arena can be

considered a stage where, in a deeper sense, there is neither winner nor loser but both players become one in the larger context of space and spirit.

What Is in IHF 2015 & How to Attend?

The main program of IHF 2015 is on the evening of March 20. For two hours the audience will be treated to an evening of music and dance, culminating in a guided meditation for inner happiness by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

On March 21 and 22, a nine-hour Happiness Program will be held over the two days with sessions being conducted by Sri Sri. Participants will be led through deep stress-cleansing breathing techniques, the core being a process called the Sudarshan Kriya, and will learn about a daily 20-minute practice they can do at home for a healthy inner state of mind and spirit. Millions of people world-wide are practicing this technique to reduce the stress in their daily lives.

Information on how to attend IHF 2015 and the latest event updates are available at the event website: www.happiness-festival.jp

What Will the Festival Achieve?

Happiness Festivals are regularly organized by the International Art of Living Foundation and affiliated organizations in different parts of the world. Three of the major ones in the past outside India — the headquarters of the Art of Living Foundation — were the World Culture Festival in Berlin in July 2011, the Festival of Bagpipers in Sofia, Bulgaria, in May 2012, and the South American Tour for Happiness in October 2012.

The common thread in these festivals is that the characteristic sounds, colors and gaiety of a festival are combined with a plunge into the silence of the self, making the celebration wholesome and complete. Attendees return with a deep sense of belongingness, friendship and a genuine feeling of being part of a One World Family. IHF 2015 is expected to attract several hundred visitors from overseas, especially from Hong Kong, India, Mongolia, Russia, Taiwan and the United States. In addition, it will be webcast live to a global audience of several hundred thousand people.

An Interview with the Director of IHF 2015

The producer and director of IHF 2015 is Swami Sadyojathah (better known as "Swamiji"). Swamiji is from Kerala State in South India and is one of the international directors of the Art of Living Foundation, headquartered in Bangalore, India. Swamiji, who has been based in Tokyo since April 2014 to make the festival a reality, has many years of event production and direction experience and has to his credit several Guinness record-making events in India. I had three questions for him and this is what he had to say:

1) What would you like the festival to achieve?

Swamiji: Japan's rich traditions, culture and philosophy have inspired the world in several spheres and sown the seeds of improvement and change for the best. *Kaizen* (literally "good change"), discipline, teamwork and technology have made Japan happy and prosperous; and Japan has shared these with the world. This is both the goodness and the strength of Japan. The International Happiness Festival 2015 aims to commemorate these human values that have made Japan what it is today.

2) You have organized festivals in India involving several thousand artists with audiences of hundreds of thousands. What are the challenges which you have seen in organizing a Happiness Festival in Japan? Are there any unique aspects in Japan that you would like to mention?

Swamiji: The amount of planning that is required in organizing an event in Japan is very big compared to other countries. For example, I was involved in organizing an event which took place in February 2014 in which more than 100,000 people participated in Thrissur, Kerala State. You will be surprised to know that it took less than two months to produce this event! On the other hand, in Japan every minute aspect has to be taken care of. Right to the placement of a chair, the movement of a car or even the writing of a mail, no stone can be left unturned.

3) Is there any message you would like to convey about Japan to readers of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*?

Swamiji: Yes, I would like to share what Sri Sri Ravi Shankar often says, that the Japanese people have a great message to offer the world. It is a message about teamwork, about cleanliness, about commitment and perfection in everything they do. More and more people from around the world need to learn these qualities. This will help everyone build a better and happier world. When we see a good quality in someone, let us acknowledge it and adopt it as our own, as it is part of the human heritage.

Organizing the Event

As mentioned by Swamiji, organizing an event in Japan is not easy, especially for someone who has not grown up in the Japanese "way of doing things". Like anything in Japan, the name of the game is perfection. There can be no surprises, and planning, tracking, timeliness, coordination and communication are core values of Japanese event production and management. For these very reasons, effort and costs are high and so are audience expectations. The most common word anyone involved in organizing an event in

Photo: Author



Ryogoku Kokugikan with Tokyo SkyTree tower in the background

Japan will encounter is *enshutsu*. Dictionaries will show this word as meaning organization, production, process, systems and many other things. This one word represents the dire importance of producing an event that is packaged well and is seen as professional, right down to the color of the button on the uniforms of the staff who ought to be readily available at the event to answer guests' questions, even if it is one about the location of the restrooms. At the end of an event, the last statement one wants to hear in highly introspective Japan is that the *enshutsu* was poor.

IHf 2015 is being supported by VentureBank, Inc., a leading company in Japan that has several hundred yoga studios in the country under the brand name "Lava".

UN International Day of Happiness

On June 28, 2012, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring March 20 as the International Day of Happiness. To quote Secretary General Ban Ki Moon's messages on those occasions in 2013 and 2014: "The pursuit of happiness lies at the core of human endeavors. People around the world aspire to lead happy and fulfilling lives free from fear and want, and in harmony with nature" and "Happiness is neither a frivolity nor a luxury. It is a deep-seated yearning shared by all members of the human family. It should be denied to no-one and available to all."

It is a fitting tribute to this undeniable aspect of our existence that another unique celebration will be held in Tokyo on the International Day of Happiness in 2015 which will serve as a clarion call of happiness to the world from the Land of the Rising Sun. **JS**

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