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THE MESSAGE OF INDIA

TO JAPAN

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A LECTURE

DS
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T343
1916

BY

SIR RABINDRANATH TAGORE

DELIVERED AT THE IMPERIAL UNIVERSITY OF TOKYO

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1916

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THE MESSAGE OF INDIA TO JAPAN

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WHEN a request comes to me to address a public meeting, I feel very great reluctance to accede to it. For the most part of my life I have cultivated writing poetry, and you know that poetic imagination is a shy bird, it builds its nest in seclusion, away from the eyes of the multitude. But when I feel that it is your kindness which makes it possible for you to offer this request to one who is a stranger to your shores, when I know that this is a graceful way of acknowledging me as your guest, then I cannot but thank you and accept your invitation.

The first thing which is uppermost in my heart is the feeling of gratitude which we all owe to you,—we whose home is in Asia. The worst form of bondage is the bondage of dejection which keeps men hopelessly chained in loss of faith in themselves. We have been repeatedly told, with some justification, that Asia lives in the past,—it is like a rich mausoleum which displays all its magnificence in trying to immortalise the dead. It was said of Asia that it could never move in the path of progress, its face was so inevitably turned backwards. We accepted this

accusation, and came to believe it. In India, I know, a large section of our educated community, grown tired of feeling the humiliation of this charge against us, is trying all its resources of self-deception to turn it into a matter of boasting. But boasting is only a masked shame, it does not truly believe in itself.

When things stood still like this, and we in Asia hypnotised ourselves into the belief that it could never by any possibility be otherwise, Japan rose from her dreams, and in giant strides left centuries of inaction behind, overtaking the present time in its foremost goal. This has broken the spell under which we lay in torpor for ages, taking it to be the normal condition of certain races living in certain geographical limits. We forgot that in Asia great kingdoms were founded, philosophy, science, arts and literatures flourished, and all the great religions of the world had their cradles. Therefore it cannot be said, that there is anything inherent in the soil and climate of Asia that produces mental inactivity and atrophies the faculties which impel men to go forward. For centuries we did hold torches of civilisation in the East when the West slumbered in darkness, and that could never be the sign of sluggish mind or narrowness of vision.

Then fell the darkness of night upon all the lands of the East. The current of time seemed to stop at once, and Asia ceased to take any new food, feeding upon its own past, which is really feeding upon itself.

The stillness seemed like death, and the great voice was silenced which sent forth messages of eternal truth that have saved man's life from pollution for generations, like the ocean of air that keeps the earth sweet, ever cleansing its impurities.

But life has its sleep, its periods of inactivity, when it loses its movements, takes no new food, living upon its past storage. Then it grows helpless, its muscles relaxed, and it easily lends itself to be jeered at for its stupor. In the rhythm of life, pauses there must be for the renewal of life. Life in its activity is ever spending itself, burning all its fuel. This extravagance cannot go on indefinitely, but is always followed by a passive stage, when all expenditure is stopped and all adventures abandoned in favour of rest and slow recuperation.

The tendency of mind is economical, it loves to form habits and move in grooves which save it the trouble of thinking anew at each of its steps. It tries to give permanent shapes to ideas, setting up walls around them to protect them from the incursions of the new. To a certain extent this is necessary. For all our ideas must be given their opportunities to prove themselves and they must be secured from all interruptions. All the old civilisations of the world have slowly built up their idea-forms,—their social ideals, state ideals, religious ideals,—these being their solution of life's problems taking definite shapes. These are permanent contributions to human culture,

they will have to be tested over and over again in new circumstances, they will be given up and forgotten, but will then sprout up again from under their obscurity, showing unexpected vital strength.

Yet ideals once formed make the mind lazy. It becomes afraid to risk its acquisitions in fresh adventures. It tries completely to enjoy security by shutting up its belongings behind fortifications of habits. But this is really shutting oneself up from the fullest enjoyment of one's own possessions. It is miserliness. The living ideals must not lose their touch with the growing and changing life. Their real freedom is not within the boundaries of security, but in the highroad of adventures full of the risk of new experiences.

One morning the whole world looked up in surprise, when Japan broke through her walls of old habits in a night and came out triumphant. It was done in such an incredibly short time, that it seemed like a change of dress and not like the slow building up of a new structure. She showed the confident strength of maturity and the freshness and infinite potentiality of new life at the same moment. The fear was entertained that it was a mere freak of history, a child's game of Time, the blowing up of a soap bubble, perfect in its rondure and colouring, hollow in its heart and without substance. But Japan has proved conclusively that this sudden revealment of her power is not a shortlived wonder, a chance product

of time and tide, thrown up from the depth of obscurity to be swept away the next moment into the sea of oblivion.

The truth is that Japan is old and new at the same time. She has her legacy of ancient culture from the East,—the culture that enjoins man to look for his true wealth and power in his inner soul, the culture that gives self-possession in the face of loss and danger, self-sacrifice without counting the cost or hoping for gain, defiance of death, acceptance of countless social obligations that we owe to man as a social being,—the culture that has given us the vision of the infinite in all finite things, through which we have come to realise that the universe is living with a life and permeated with a soul, that it is not a huge machine which had been turned out by a demon of accident or fashioned by a teleological God who lives in a far away heaven. In a word modern Japan has come out of the immemorial East like a lotus blossoming in an easy grace, all the while keeping its firm hold upon the profound depth from which it has sprung.

And Japan, the child of the Ancient East, has also fearlessly claimed all the gifts of the modern age for herself. She has shewn her bold spirit in breaking through the confinements of habits, useless accumulations of the lazy mind, seeking safety in its thrift and its lock and keys. Thus she has come in contact with the living time and has accepted with an amaz-

ing eagerness and aptitude the responsibilities of modern civilisation.

This it is which has given heart to the rest of Asia. We have seen that the life and the strength are there in us, only the dead crust has to be removed; that we must nakedly take our plunge into the youth-giving stream of the time-flood. We have seen that taking shelter in the dead is death itself, and only taking all the risk of life to the fullest extent is living.

Japan has taught us that we must learn the watchword of the age, in which we live, and answer has to be given to the sentinel of time, if we must escape annihilation. Japan has sent forth her word over Asia, that the old seed has the life germ in it, only it has to be planted in the soil of the new age.

I, for myself, cannot believe that Japan has become what she is by imitating the West. We cannot imitate life, we cannot simulate strength for long, nay, what is more, a mere imitation is a source of weakness. For it hampers our true nature, it is always in our way. It is like dressing our skeleton with another man's skin, giving rise to eternal feuds between the skin and the bones at every movement.

The real truth is that science is not man's nature, it is mere knowledge and training. By knowing the laws of the material universe you do not change your deeper humanity. You can borrow knowledge from others, but you cannot borrow temperament.

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But in the first incertitude of new knowledge we not only try to learn, but we try to imitate. That is to say, with the science that we acquire we try the impossible feat of acquiring the teacher of science himself, who is the product of a history not our own. But in that vain attempt we merely copy his manners and mannerisms, those outer forms which are expressions of his historical identity, having their true meaning only with regard to himself. Of course, there are forms which are not merely personal but universal, not historical but scientific, and these can be and have been borrowed by one nation from the other with great advantage. But at the imitative stage of our schooling we cannot distinguish between the essential and the non-essential, between what is transferable and what is not. It is something like the faith of the primitive mind in the magical properties of the accidents of outward forms which accompany some real truth. We are afraid of leaving out something valuable and efficacious by not swallowing the husk with the kernel. But while our greed delights in wholesale appropriation, it is the function of our vital nature to assimilate, which is the only true appropriation for a living organism. Where there is life it is sure to assert itself by its choice of acceptance and refusal according to its constitutional necessity. The living organism does not allow itself to grow into its food, it changes its food into its own body. And only thus can it grow strong and not by

mere accumulation, or by giving up its personal identity.

Japan has imported her food from the West, but not her vital nature. Japan cannot altogether lose and merge herself in the scientific paraphernalia she has acquired from the West and be turned into a mere borrowed machine. She has her own soul which must assert itself over all her requirements. That she is capable of doing so, and that the process of assimilation is going on, have been amply proved by the signs of vigorous health that she exhibits. And I earnestly hope that Japan may never lose her faith in her own soul in the mere pride of her foreign acquisition. For that pride itself is a humiliation, ultimately leading to poverty and weakness. It is the pride of the fop who sets more store on his new head-dress than on his head itself.

I have not had the opportunity of coming into intimate touch with Japan and forming my own opinion of what she truly is, where is her strength and where lie her dangers. For a person like myself belonging to the East, her present problems and her methods of solution of those problems are matters of utmost interest. The whole world waits to see what this great Eastern nation is going to do with the opportunities and responsibilities she has accepted from the hands of the modern time. If it be a mere reproduction of the West, then the great expectation she has raised will remain unfulfilled. For there are

grave questions that the Western civilisation has presented before the world but not completely answered. The conflict between the individual and the state, labour, and capital, the man and the woman; the conflict between the greed of material gain and the spiritual life of man, the organised selfishness of nations and the higher ideals of humanity; the conflict between all the ugly complexities inseparable from giant organisations of commerce and state and the natural instincts of man crying for simplicity and beauty and fullness of leisure,—all these have to be brought to a harmony in a manner not yet dreamt of.

We have seen this great stream of civilisation choking itself from debris carried by its innumerable channels. We have seen that with all its vaunted love of humanity it has proved itself the greatest menace to Man, far worse than the sudden outbursts of nomadic barbarism from which men suffered in the early ages of history. We have seen that, in spite of its boasted love of freedom, it has produced worse forms of slavery than ever were current in earlier societies,—slavery whose chains are unbreakable, either because they are unseen, or because they assume the names and appearance of freedom. We have seen, under the spell of its gigantic sordidness, man losing faith in all the heroic ideals of life which have made him great. We have seen him pelting those ideals with the mud of sarcasm, which has

accumulated in the vast system of sewerage, the product of his separation from the purifying influence of great Nature.

Therefore you cannot with a light heart accept the modern civilisation with all its tendencies, methods and structures, and dream that they are inevitable. You must apply your Eastern mind, your spiritual strength, your love of simplicity, your recognition of social obligation, in order to cut out a new path for this great unwieldy car of progress, shrieking out its loud discords as it runs. You must minimise the immense sacrifice of man's life and freedom that it claims in its every movement. For generations you have felt and thought and worked, have enjoyed and worshipped in your own special manner; and this cannot be cast off like old clothes. It is in your blood, in the marrow of your bones, in the texture of your flesh, in the tissue of your brains; and it must modify everything you lay your hands upon, without your knowing, even against your wishes. Once you did solve the problems of man to your own satisfaction, you had your philosophy of life and evolved your own art of living. All this you must apply to the present situation and out of it will arise a new creation and not a mere repetition, a creation which the soul of your people will own for itself and proudly offer to the world as its tribute to the welfare of man. Of all countries in Asia, here in Japan you have the freedom to use the materials you have gathered

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from the West according to your genius and your need. You are fortunately not hampered from the outside, therefore your responsibility is all the greater, for in your voice Asia shall answer the questions that Europe has submitted to the conference of Man. In your land the experiments will be carried on by which the East will change the aspects of the modern civilisation, infusing life in it where it is a machine, substituting human heart for cold expediency, not caring so much for power and success as for harmonious and living growth, for truth and beauty.

I cannot but bring to your mind those days when the whole of Eastern Asia from Burma to Japan was united with India in the closest tie of friendship, the only natural tie which can exist between nations. There was a living communication of hearts, a nervous system evolved through which messages ran between us about the deepest needs of humanity. We did not stand in fear of each other, we had not to arm ourselves to keep each other in check; our relation was not that of self-interest, of exploration and spoliation of each other's pockets; ideas and ideals were exchanged, gifts of the highest love were offered and taken; no difference of languages and customs hindered us in approaching each other heart to heart; no pride of race or insolent consciousness of superiority, physical or mental, marred our relation; our arts and literatures put forth new leaves and flowers under

the influence of this sunlight of united hearts; and races belonging to different lands and languages and histories acknowledged the highest unity of man and the deepest bond of love. May we not also remember that in those days of peace and goodwill, of men uniting for those supreme ends of life, your nature laid by for itself the balm of immortality which has helped your people to be born again in a new age, to be able to survive its old outworn structures and take on a new young body, to come out unscathed from the shock of the most wonderful revolution that the world has ever seen? I cannot help thinking that it is only the divine in man that can perform this miracle of transmuting the old into the new, the weak into the strong, the insult into a glorious victory. And that divine in you was born, not in these sordid days of screeching machinery and gigantic selfishness, not amidst the blatant lies of statecraft and the smug self-satisfaction of prosperous hypocrisy, but in the dawnlight of that heroic manhood when heaven came nearer the earth, and man had faith in his own soul and the soul whose revelation is the world.

As for us Indians we have our own problem before us. It is the problem of the world in miniature. India is too vast in its area and too diverse in its races. It is many countries packed in one geographical receptacle. It is just the opposite of what Europe truly is, namely one country made into

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many. Thus Europe in its culture and growth has had the advantage of the strength of the many, as well as the strength of the one. India, on the contrary, being naturally many, yet adventitiously one, has all along suffered from the looseness of its diversity and the feebleness of its unity. A true unity is like a round globe, it rolls on, carrying its burden easily; but diversity is a many-cornered thing which has to be dragged and pushed with all force. Be it said to the credit of India that this diversity was not her own creation; she has had to accept it as a fact from the beginning of her history. In America and Australia, Europe has simplified her problem by almost exterminating the original population. Even in the present age this spirit of extermination is showing its fangs, in another manner,—in California, in Canada, in Australia,—by inhospitably shutting out aliens through those who themselves were aliens in the lands they now occupy. But India tolerated difference of races from the first, and that spirit of toleration has acted all through her history. Politically, this has brought disaster to her, as it is sure to bring to other vast empires, sooner or later, who are burdened with unwieldiness; dragging in its train multitudes of races bound by no natural tie but only by the same iron chain of one common rule. But fortunately India in her ancient days never attempted, except for very brief periods, to impose the rule of the one over the many. She has all along

been trying experiments in evolving a social unity within which all the different peoples could be held together, yet fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their own differences. The tie has been as loose as possible, yet as close as the circumstances permitted. India tried her best to respect the social freedom of all the individual sections of the population contained within her boundaries, while claiming allegiance to one social autocracy. This has produced a stupendous organisation, named Hinduism, which it is almost impossible to define. It contains under its shelter manners and customs and creeds, varied and contradictory. But it has a spirit pervading all India too subtle to be pointed out with fingers, yet too real and living to be doubted or ignored. It has given freedom, yet has guided. If we must know where this spirit abides, it is not so much in ritualism and customs,—it is in ideas. It is through this community of ideas that a Bengali recognises a Madrasi as his Hindu brother, though outwardly their differences are as great as possibly can be. To my mind this gives the key to the true solution of the race problem, which is the one great problem of Man's history. Diversity of races there must be and should be, whatever may be its drawback, and you can never coerce nature into your narrow limits of convenience without paying one day very dearly for it. Man will have to respect differences, even where they are small, and in those who are small themselves. And

through those differences an ideal unity must always inwardly act,—the unity whose basis is the consciousness of Man's spiritual oneness,—the consciousness that there is one great history, which is Man's history, having its innumerable roots in the histories of all races of the earth, the consciousness of unity which urges us to give freedom to other races than our own to fulfil their highest possibilities, feeling sure that it will come back to us in the common treasury of humanity. The political civilisation which has sprung up from the soil of Europe and is overrunning the whole world, like some prolific weed, is based upon exclusiveness. It is always watchful to keep at bay the aliens or to exterminate them. It is carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies, it feeds upon the resources of other peoples and tries to swallow their whole future. It is always afraid of other races achieving their eminence, naming it as a peril, and tries to thwart all symptoms of greatness outside its own boundaries, forcing down races of men, who are weaker, to be eternally fixed in their weakness. Before this political civilisation came to its power and opened its hungry jaws wide enough to gulp down great continents of the earth, we had wars, pillages, changes of monarchy and consequent miseries, but never such a sight of fearful and hopeless gluttony, such wholesale feeding of nation upon nation, such huge machines for turning great portions of the earth into mincemeat,

never such terrible jealousies with all their ugly teeth and claws ready for tearing open each other's vitals. This political civilisation is scientific, not human. It is powerful because it concentrates all its forces upon one purpose, like a millionaire acquiring money at the cost of his soul. It betrays its trust, it weaves its meshes of lies without shame, it enshrines gigantic idols of greed in its temples, taking great pride in the costly ceremonials of its worship, calling this patriotism. And it can be safely prophesied that this cannot go on, for there is a moral law in this world which has its application both to individuals and to organised bodies of men. You cannot go on violating these laws in the name of your nation, yet enjoy their advantage as individuals. This public sapping of the ethical ideals slowly reacts upon each member of society, gradually breeding weakness, where it is not seen, and causing that cynical distrust of all things sacred in human nature, which is the true symptom of senility. You must keep in mind that this political civilisation, this creed of national patriotism, has not been given a long trial. The lamp of ancient Greece is extinct in the land where it was first lighted, the power of Rome lies dead and buried under the ruins of its vast empire. But the civilisation, whose basis is society and the spiritual ideal of man, is still a living thing in China and in India. Though it may look feeble and small, judged by the standard of the mechanical power of modern days,

yet like small seeds it still contains life and will sprout and grow, and spread its beneficent branches, producing flowers and fruits when its time comes and showers of grace descend upon it from heaven. But ruins of sky-scrapers of power and broken machinery of greed, even God's rain is powerless to raise up again; for they were not of life, but went against life as a whole,—they are relics of the rebellion that shattered itself to pieces against the eternal.

But the charge is brought against us that the ideals we cherish in the East are static, that they have not the impetus in them to move, to open out new vistas of knowledge and power, that the systems of philosophy which are the mainstays of the time-worn civilisations of the East despise all outward proofs, remaining stolidly satisfied in their subjective certainty. This proves that when our knowledge is vague, we are apt to accuse of vagueness our object of knowledge itself. To a Western observer our civilisation appears as all metaphysics, as to a deaf man piano playing appears to be mere movements of fingers and no music. He cannot think that we have found some deep basis of reality upon which we have built our institutions.

Unfortunately all proofs of reality are in realisation. The reality of the scene before you depends only upon the fact that you can see, and it is difficult for us to prove to an unbeliever that our civilisation is not a nebulous system of abstract speculations, it

has achieved something which is a positive truth,—a truth that can give man's heart its shelter and sustenance. It has evolved an inner sense,—a sense of vision, the vision of the infinite reality in all finite things. Its life is there,—the life with all its hunger and thirst, with its aspirations. Life itself is aspiration. It must always be reaching after an inexhaustible something,—and if in one man the object is wealth and power, he must not imagine that in another it is mere vacuity because it is not visible to him.

But he says, "You do not make any progress, there is no movement in you." I ask him, "How do you know it? You have to judge progress according to its aim. A railway train makes its progress towards the terminus station,—it is movement. But a full-grown tree has no definite movement of that kind, its progress is the inward progress of life. It lives, with its aspiration towards light tingling in its leaves and creeping in its silent sap."

We also have lived for centuries, we still live, and we have our aspiration for a reality that has no end to its realisation,—a reality that goes beyond death giving it a meaning, that rises above all evils of life bringing its peace and purity, its cheerful renunciation of self. The product of this inner life is a living product. It will be needed when the youth returns home weary and dust-laden, when the soldier is wounded, when the wealth is squandered away and

pride is humbled, when man's heart cries for truth in the immensity of facts and harmony in the contradiction of tendencies. Its value is not in its multiplication of materials, but in its spiritual fulfilment.

There are things that cannot wait. You have to rush and run and march, if you must fight or take the best place in the market. You strain your nerves and are on the alert, when you chase opportunities that are always on their wings. But there are ideals which do not play hide and seek with our life; they slowly grow from the seed to the flower, from the flower to the fruit; they require infinite space and heaven's light to mature and the fruits that they produce can survive years of insult and neglect. The East with her ideals, in whose bosoms are stored the ages of sunlight and silence of stars, can patiently wait till the West, hurrying after the expedient, loses breath and stops. The East knows that she is immortal, and she will appear again and again in Man's history with her draught of life. Europe, while busily speeding to her engagements, disdainfully casts her glance from her carriage window to the reaper reaping his harvest in the field, and in her intoxication of speed cannot but think him as slow and ever receding backwards. But the speed comes to its end, the engagement loses its meaning and the hungry heart clamours for food, till at last she comes to the lowly reaper reaping his harvest in the sun. For if the office cannot wait, or the buying and selling,

or the craving for excitement, love waits and beauty and the wisdom of suffering and the fruits of patient devotion and reverent meekness of simple faith. And thus shall wait the East till her time comes.

I must not hesitate to acknowledge where Europe is great, for great she is without doubt. We cannot help loving her with all our heart, and paying her the best homage of our admiration,—the Europe who, in her literature and art, is pouring an inexhaustible cascade of beauty and truth fertilizing all countries and all time; the Europe who, with a mind which is titanic in its untiring power, is sweeping the height and the depth of the universe, winning her homage of knowledge from the infinitely great and the infinitely small, applying all the resources of her great intellect and heart in healing the sick and alleviating those miseries of man, which up till now we were contented to accept in a spirit of hopeless resignation; the Europe who is making the earth yield more fruit than seemed possible, coaxing and compelling the great forces of nature into man's service. Such true greatness must have its motive power in spiritual strength. For only the spirit of man can defy all limitations, have faith in its ultimate success, throw its searchlight beyond the immediate and the apparent, gladly suffer martyrdom for ends which cannot be achieved in its lifetime and accept failure without acknowledging defeat. The root of the greatness of a people lies in the subconscious soil of its nature. There, in the

hidden heart of Europe, runs the purest stream of human love, of love of justice, of spirit of self-sacrifice for higher ideals. The Christian culture of centuries has sunk deep in her life's core. In Europe we have seen noble hearts who have ever stood up for the rights of man irrespective of colour and creed; who have braved calumny and insult from their own people in fighting for humanity's cause and raising their voices against the mad orgies of militarism, against the rage for brutal retaliation or rapacity that sometimes takes possession of a whole people; who are always ready to make reparation for wrongs done in the past by their own nations and vainly attempt to stem the tide of cowardly injustice that flows unchecked because the resistance is weak and innocuous on the part of the injured. There are these knight-errants of modern Europe who have not lost their faith in the disinterested love of freedom, in the ideals which own no geographical boundaries or national self-seeking. These are there to prove that the fountain head of the water of everlasting life has not run dry in Europe, and from thence she will have her rebirth time after time. Only there, where Europe is too consciously busy in building up her power, defying her deeper nature and mocking it, she is heaping up her iniquities to the sky crying for God's vengeance and spreading the infection of ugliness, physical and moral, over the face of the earth with her heartless commerce heedlessly outraging man's sense

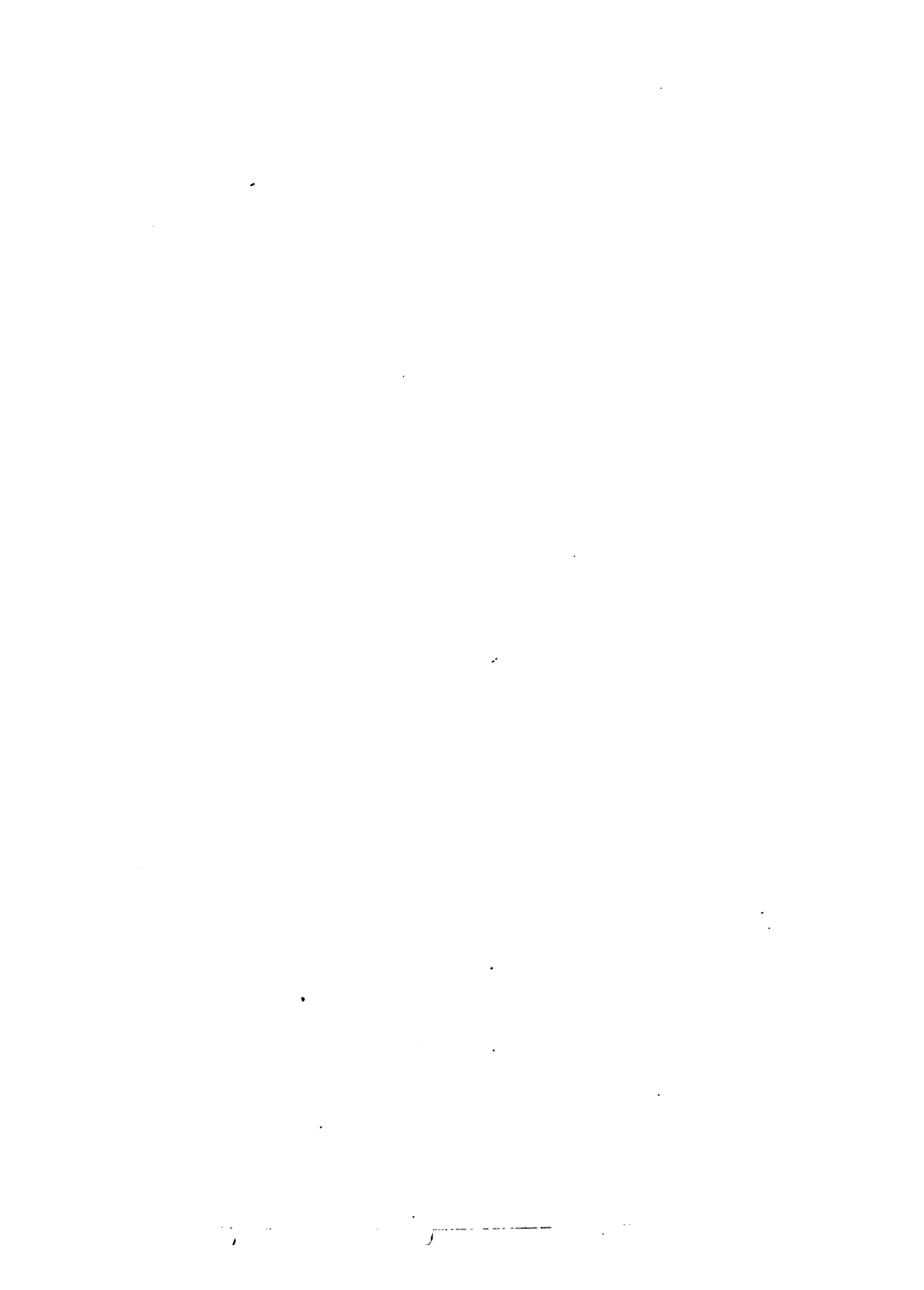
of the beautiful and the good. Europe is supremely good in her beneficence where her face is turned to all humanity; and Europe is supremely evil in her malefic aspect where her face is turned only upon her own interest, using all her power of greatness for ends which are against the infinite and the eternal in Man.

Eastern Asia has been pursuing its own path, evolving its own civilisation which was not political but social, not predatory and mechanically efficient, but spiritual and based upon all the varied and deeper relations of humanity. The solutions of the life problems of peoples were thought out in seclusion and carried out behind the security of aloofness, where all the dynastic changes and foreign invasions hardly touched them. But now we are overtaken by the outside world, our seclusion is lost for ever. Yet this we must not regret, as a plant should never regret when the obscurity of its seed-time is broken. Now the time has come when we must make the world problem our own problem; we must bring the spirit of our civilisation into harmony with the history of all nations of the earth; we must not, in foolish pride, still keep ourselves fast within the shell of the seed and the crust of the earth which protected and nourished our ideals; for these, the shell and the crust, were meant to be broken, so that life may spring up in all its vigour and beauty bringing its offerings to the world in open light.

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In this task of breaking the barrier and facing the world Japan has come out the first in the East. She has infused hope in the heart of all Asia. This hope provides the hidden fire which is needed for all works of creation. Asia now feels that she must prove her life by producing living work, she must not lie passively dormant, or feebly imitate the West, in the infatuation of fear or flattery. For this we offer our thanks to this land of the rising sun and solemnly ask her to remember that she has the mission of the East to fulfil. She must infuse the sap of a fuller humanity into the heart of the modern civilisation. She must never allow it to get choked with the noxious undergrowth, but lead it up towards light and freedom, towards the pure air and broad space, where it can receive, in the dawn of its day and the darkness of its night, heaven's inspiration. Let the greatness of her ideals become visible to all men like her snow-crowned Fuji rising from the heart of the country into the region of the infinite, supremely distinct from its surroundings, beautiful like a maiden in its magnificent sweep of curve, yet firm and strong and serenely majestic.

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