The Mother did not want to draw any attention to her personal life; this is why little is known about it. However, sometimes one is curious to know how she prepared herself for her work of building up a spiritual community. This often leads us to the various accounts of her life, to her works and sometimes to the places where she lived. The years that she spent in Japan are largely unknown to us.

On the surface, it was because Paul Richard had found an opportunity to represent some French business houses in Japan that led the Mother to go there but there were surely some inner reasons for her to go to this unusual country. We know that there was always a purpose behind everything that she did. The desire to know more about this phase of the Mother’s life makes us start out on this journey.

Reaching Tokyo one feels that one has come to a place which is important in this quest. There is a general belief that Japan is a highly industrialised country and is totally westernised. This is only a partial truth. Stepping out in Tokyo one has the impression of having come to one of the fashionable capitals of Europe. The same elegant shops, people dressed in smart western clothes, the same wide streets with well-regulated traffic. It is when you start interacting with the people that you realise you are actually in an ancient land of the East, or when you go out of Tokyo and find yourself in the smaller cities that you can feel the deep connection with an inner life. The real Japan lies in the culture of the people and that is largely unchanged. The order and harmony that one feels in public places is very palpable instead of the undercurrent of the aggressive atmosphere of many of the European capitals.

On our second day in Tokyo we go and visit a Shinto shrine which was completed in 1920. This means that it was being constructed while the Mother was living in the city. The Shinto religion was the religion of Japan before Buddhism came from China and Korea in the 6th century. It is a mixture of ancestor-worship and nature-worship and the shrines do not have any idols. There are often large courtyards and gardens...
so that you are far from the road and from anything distracting when you are inside. We were pleasantly surprised to see how the shrines were full of young and old Japanese, praying with joined hands and closed eyes. The large groups of tourists who were there out of curiosity did not seem to disturb them at all.

As we walked under the giant trees growing along the path of the shrine and listened to the sounds of the stream passing under the wooden bridge we started thinking about the importance of those four years the Mother spent in this extraordinary country. We know that when she came here in 1916 the Mother had already met Sri Aurobindo and spent a year in Pondicherry. And that is the most important point to consider. She already knew where her future lay. The years spent in Japan form a short special period which was like a dividing line between two distinct parts of her life. The first part was spent mainly in France with a short stay in Algeria, entirely occupied in her inner preparation and seeking. The second part, spent in Pondicherry, was one of creation and realisation. But the four years in Japan were ones which were spent in deepening this preparation, in surroundings which were somehow halfway between the European life that she was going to leave behind and the Indian life that she would adopt. It was a time she would have all to herself before she was taken up entirely with the life of the collective, the life of the Ashram.

Most of what we know about the Mother’s life in Japan comes to us from what she herself said in the course of her conversations or to illustrate a point during her classes. We catch glimpses of it through photographs of her taken there as well as through the paintings she did while she was in Japan. A great deal comes through her book *Prayers and Meditations*, in the pages written while she was living there. We know that she adapted herself to her new surroundings by learning to speak, read and write the Japanese language. She wore the kimono and adopted the Japanese way of life. She also learnt calligraphy and painting and...
delved into Buddhist thought. She even gave herself a Japanese name — “Hoojiko”.

“Hooji” is the name of the wisteria flowers which, although practically unknown in India, grow in abundance in Japan. They are usually mauve or purple in colour and grow in gracefully hanging bunches on very luxurious creepers. In Europe it is a common sight to see them growing on the outer walls of houses and doorways. Interestingly, the Mother’s spiritual name for wisteria is “Poet’s Ecstasy”. We don’t usually associate poetry with the Mother since she was so dynamic and practical, and spoke disapprovingly of sentimentality. But when we read the pages of her *Prayers and Meditations*, specially those which were written in Japan, we can see that it is pure poetry, pouring out straight from her heart.

The Mother spent three years in Kyoto, so we make this our second destination. This beautiful city had once been the imperial capital of the country and it still remains the cultural capital. The streets are narrower than in Tokyo and winding rather than straight. One can see many small shrines as well as the old Imperial Palace. We hire bicycles and cycle down the streets to be able to better enjoy the quiet street scenes. And we are not the only ones. There are so many, even men in their business suits, who cycle every day. In the evening as we walk through the narrow lanes, we look at the old houses and wonder if they are like the house where the Mother had lived. At first I am a bit disappointed that I don’t know the address of the house where the Mother had lived in Kyoto. I am not sure that it even exists. But after a while I realise that it is more important for me to find the psychological and historical context in which she lived. Trying to understand the culture of the country will lead me to know how it contributed to her work.

There is a notion in Japan that silence is sacred. And Japanese art celebrates this silence in which everything is expressed. In Japanese poetry the *haikus* are written in only seventeen syllables, but much more is told in the silence which is between the lines than in the words themselves. The same principle lies behind the brush and ink paintings where often there are hardly any colours other than the black of the ink. A few strokes are...
enough to depict an entire landscape of mountains and lakes. The blank space suggests more to the viewer’s mind. This concept of suggestion is present in Japanese music, theatre and even in a modern medium such as cinema.

In Kyoto we visit the Daitoku-ji temple complex which includes the Ryogen-in shrine. The speciality of this cluster of shrines is the Zen gardens and we are told that it is here that the ritual of the tea-ceremony was started. We sit for a while in the verandah of one of the shrines and meditate, facing the garden which is covered in moss and surrounded with tall bamboos. I can distinctly smell an incense which reminds me of the Mother’s room. The atmosphere of peace here is so tangible that other tourists also sit down and meditate. Then we walk over to the Zen gardens which are essentially an arrangement of rocks and sand. This is just the opposite of the Indian concept of beauty where there is an exuberance of details. What we see here is a mental idea rather than an emotional need for decoration.

Although, surprisingly, the Mother has said that the Japanese had no spirituality we must not be misled to believe that they were somehow unfeeling or materialistic. What the Mother means is that they are highly mental in everything they do. In those days every aspect of Japanese life was codified and bound by strict rules. We must not forget that actually the Japanese are a highly aesthetic people. The Mother herself says that she found that even the peasants had an aesthetic sense. The real undeclared religion of Japan is “Beauty”. The pursuit of Beauty is a way of life. When one stands in the National Museum of Tokyo one feels that one is in a temple. The sacred silence which surrounds the objects of beauty is like the hush in a place of worship. Not only in the museums but even in the most prosaic place such as the underground stations, beauty has its rightful place. In one of the stations in Tokyo, which is always crowded since it is the stop for a very famous tourist attraction, there is an almost half-kilometre tunnel which connects the platform to the exit point. The entire length of the tunnel is decorated with printed wallpaper showing rose gardens on one side and reproductions of Monet’s painting of water-lilies on the other. What would have been an endless, tedious long walk in an underground tunnel has now been transformed in such a way that the person walking through it feels as though he were strolling through a rose-garden, along the banks of a lily-pond!

The real way to know a country is to know the people. The Mother had several Japanese friends, some of whom she has spoken about. We know that she had a close contact with a couple, Dr. Okhawa and his wife, in whose house they lived in Tokyo. The Mother’s friendship with another couple, Dr. Okata and his wife, who were living in Kyoto, shows us how she always sought out those who were trying to find the Truth in their own
way, outside the path of organised religion. Dr. Okata and his wife were the initiators of a movement which they called the “Still Sitting Movement”. As the name suggests, the followers of this path meditated together. This special form of meditation, Dr. Okata believed, could heal people suffering from various illnesses. The Mother used to meditate with them and must have brought them something special inwardly. She also knew another couple who were followers of the Still Sitting Movement, Dr. and Mrs. Kobayashi. The Mother remained in contact with Mrs. Kobayashi for a very long time and the latter even came to Pondicherry in 1960 to see her.

The great revelation about the Mother’s stay in Japan comes to us through the pages of the book Prayers and Meditations. We see how her inner life continued in the same high and intense note in spite of all the upheavals of her outer life. Since there are clear dates on all the entries, we can trace a chronological line and see the ones written in Japan. We know that travelling half-way across the world and living in conditions totally new to her must have completely altered her day to day pattern of life and yet her words are just as poetic as before and her thoughts just as clear. Through these diary entries we see the beauty of Nature that surrounded her and some little details of her outer life. There is a very significant entry which is dated 3rd September 1919, written in a place called Oiwake. Interestingly, the word “Oiwake” means “a fork in the road” in the Japanese language and indeed the diary entry written there indicates a turning point in her inner road.

The Mother had studied the various religions of the world in the course of her seeking for spiritual knowledge. Her stay in Japan gave her the opportunity to come in contact with Buddhism which is a peaceful path and is practised privately without the need for proclaiming things publicly. The form of Buddhism which is prevalent in Japan is often connected to Shintoism which is really a way of life rather than a religion as such. Her deep contact with Buddhist thought is evident from the fact that she chose the Dhammapada as a text for study years later in her classes in the Playground. We even find an entry in Prayers and Meditations where she records what the Buddha, whom she refers to as Sakyamuni, communicates to her.

One of the most unforgettable things that the Mother recounted about her stay in Japan was the incident about the flu pandemic. This flu killed millions around the world in a short span of time. In recent times when there was talk in the media of the bird flu pandemic which people feared would break out any day, there was continuous reference to that flu pandemic of 1918. People have different theories about what could have been its cause. Reading the Mother’s account is chilling because she gives us the occult reason behind it. She recounts how she herself had caught the flu and only then did she realise that there were actually invisible beings who were attacking healthy people. This was just after the First World War when thousands of healthy young people had been suddenly killed. They were so shocked at having
been thrown out of their bodies that they became vampires and were attacking the living. One cannot remain unmoved when one reads about how the Mother saw with her occult vision one such being, who had only half a head, throw himself on her, wanting to suck out her life. “I gave a big fight,” she says and recounts how she managed to defeat him. Then she remained alone for a couple of days and worked on the occult plane to see that this pandemic could be brought to an end. The Mother recounts how surprised the Japanese were when within two or three days there were no more deaths.

At the end of our walks through the streets of Kyoto we often feel drawn to the many modern cafes of the city. There is one that we prefer over the others. It is much larger than the others but its unique feature is that it has a lot of single tables. In the late evenings we often find these single tables occupied by university students, or young men and women who have just come back from their work, sitting alone and either reading or writing or working away on their laptops. There is an atmosphere of a library and in the pools of light falling from the table-lamps there is a silence that keeps each one in his own world. There seems to be a respect for solitude and in the case of women this suggests that they enjoy a greater freedom than their sisters elsewhere in Asia.

The Mother and Paul Richard were in touch with several Japanese who sympathised with the Indian Independence movement. These were the same people who also strongly felt, as did Paul Richard, that Asia should rise up unified and be free of European domination with Japan as its leader. Through these friends the Mother met Rabindranath Tagore who was touring Japan in connection with his dream project — Vishwa Bharati. He wanted to follow the Japanese model, being Asian and therefore closer to the Indian ethos, rather than the European model for his new creation. We have two images that record this meeting. The first is the photograph of the poet and his friends standing along with the Mother and others in front of the giant statue of the Buddha. The second is the pen and ink sketch the Mother did of the poet. This shows that they did spend a few relaxed informal moments together. But even this brief contact was enough for Tagore to understand the Mother’s power of organisation and her deep knowledge of the inner and outer world. He is even supposed to have expressed the

The Mother with the friends who had come to see her off at Kobe
wish that she come and join him in his work in Bengal. She, of course, knew what lay ahead of her and declined the offer.

The photograph taken in front of the statue of Buddha is always printed with the caption that it was taken in Kyoto but when I see pictures of the large Buddha statue at Kamakura I feel that perhaps it was there that the picture was taken. On the one hand there is no large statue of the Buddha in Kyoto of that stature, on the other hand this statue at Kamakura, known as the Daibutsu or the Great Buddha, is so famous that Tagore would surely have wanted to visit it. We had anyway planned to go to Kamakura but the fact that the question “Could this be the Buddha statue near which the Mother was photographed?” remains at the back of our minds and this makes the visit doubly interesting. We enjoy looking at the statue from every angle and reading up whatever information we can find there. After spending a day in this beautiful town by the sea we come back to Tokyo. Later we compare our pictures with the old picture where the Mother is seen and we can see that clearly the face of the Buddha is different. As all else looks the same we try to find different reasons why the head could be different. A plaque near the statue had indicated that there was an earthquake in the 1960s after which the neck had been altered in such a way that it could better withstand any natural calamity. Could this change in the inclination of the neck have resulted in making the face look different in photographs? Could they have also made slight changes to the face? All these questions remain unanswered but we hope to get to the bottom of this mystery some day.

As we take the train back to Tokyo we look at the rice-fields and the bamboo groves through the window and I try to think of what elements of this wonderful culture the Mother took back with her which might have been useful in creating the special atmosphere of the Ashram. One of the strong points of ancient Japan is the way a great deal was achieved with little material resources. Then there is the Japanese ideal of simple living matched with high thinking. In the early years, life in the Ashram followed this pattern, not the ascetic form of renunciation but the beautiful form of simplicity. This concept of beauty in simplicity is what the Mother brought from Japan to the life of the Ashram and even in the periods when there was little money to financially maintain a community of several hundreds, beauty was never sacrificed. The early years show that contact with Japan. When the Mother thought of building a dormitory for the small community of sadhaks, she chose a team of architects who were connected with Japan and built Golconde. Even today this building has a very Japanese atmosphere. Another element of Japan in the everyday life of the Ashram are the little low tables of the Dining Room which were modelled after one the Mother had brought over from there.

At the end of our journey, as we pack, I know that I have found what I was looking for. The importance that the Mother laid on beauty made us all understand that it is a part of our spiritual quest. Her work was to transform this earthly life into a divine life, to bring down the divine touch into the very physical level. She must have seen a glimpse of that effort in this country. One sees
it even today. There is not only a refinement in the material level but also a refinement in expression and gesture and sentiment. In the ten days that we spent in Japan we did not see anyone raise his voice even once in a public place. Even in the trains we did not hear anyone speak loudly on their mobile phones as people do everywhere else in the world. The Japanese politeness is omnipresent and is genuine and has the weight of centuries behind it. This element of self-discipline and harmonious collective life is also something that is reminiscent of the Ashram life.

The Mother showed the photo taken with Tagore to Sri Aurobindo and said to him, pointing at herself in the photo, that it was Mahalakshmi. Indeed that is the key to everything. In Japan she found refinement, beauty, organisation and harmony. Aren’t these the attributes of Mahalakshmi? She was deeply connected to this aspect of the Divine Mother at that time. And this is what we have received from her — not to turn one’s back to the world but to transform it and to make it more perfect. She knew that she would have a large group of Indians whose lives would be in her care. Not only did she have the responsibility of their spiritual lives but also their intellectual, emotional and physical lives and in order to understand them she had to have some contact with the Asiatic mentality. Those were the war years, so she could not come back to India. But this stay in Japan must have given her an insight into something similar, though not the same kind of mental make-up.

The bullet train glides into the station not even a second later than its schedule and I stand amazed at the level of perfection that this country has achieved on the material plane. Then, when the woman ticket-checker comes towards us I am even more amazed. She apologises several times for the inconvenience she is causing by asking us to take out our tickets, then bowing down deeply she takes three steps backwards before she turns and goes to the next row of seats. There is hope for the world — outer perfection can meet inner perfection.

Behind all that we have lived and learnt at the Ashram there was a preparation in the Mother’s life. Just as the audience never knows how much work goes on behind the stage even as they enjoy the wonderful drama they are watching, so too we have not been able to see the background work that the Mother did before she came here. In this journey, tracing her footsteps, although I have learnt a lot, I know that she will continue to be like the ice-berg of which one can only see the tip. And that tip is enough to overwhelm us and to keep us seeking for many years to come.