

## INTERVIEW

Connecting Japan and Sri Lanka  
Wife of the Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Japan  
**Mrs. Masako Perera**

The Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Japan, H.E. Mr. E. Rodney M. Perera, was appointed as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Sri Lanka to Japan in late October, 2022. We interviewed Mrs. Masako Perera, the ambassador's wife, who has been busy attending various meetings as an immediate force to support the ambassador from the second day of his arrival.

Interview date: January 30, 2023

### **Q1 About your encounter with Sri Lanka**

**My parents live in a temple.** My father was a priest in a temple in Kiryu City, Gunma Prefecture, and we had international relations through Buddhism. I have had a connection with Sri Lanka since I was little. I was raised as an heiress, so I planned to return home after graduating from university. However, I wanted to gain a little more experience in Tokyo, so **in**

**March 1990, I got a job at the Embassy of Sri Lanka** for a short period of time.

At the beginning of March, the embassy contacted me asking me to come to work from the 26th. But **that day was actually my birthday**, so I thought, "I don't want to work on my birthday." However, I couldn't say no, so I went to the Sri Lankan Embassy on March 26th.

On that day, after being introduced to the staff of the Archives, I was at my desk when Mr. Perera, then Second Secretary, asked me to come downstairs to the dining room at 4 o'clock. When the time came, I went to the dining room and to my surprise, **a birthday party was thrown for me.**

I was so surprised and **happy** because I had not expected it at all.

One of the people who **planned it was Mr. Perera**, my host.



**H.E. E. Rodney M. Perera**, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Sri Lanka to Japan, joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka in 1988 and began working at the Embassy of Sri Lanka in 1989 as Second Secretary. After that, he returned to Sri Lanka once and moved to New York. He served as First Secretary of the Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the United Nations in New York. Then, he was stationed in Kenya for about a year and a half as an acting

ambassador to Sri Lanka. Since then, he has served as the Sri Lankan ambassador to Italy, Norway, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the European Union (EU). He moved from Belgium to Washington DC, where he completed a job as Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the United States. He started working as **the Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Japan at the end of October 2022.**

## Q2 Could you tell us about a particularly memorable experience?

My life has been quite impactful and varied, but the one thing that comes to mind for me personally right now is **books.**

### Encounter with "Happiness"

I grew up in a temple, so I was surrounded by Buddhism all my life, but I still felt that Buddhism had not been absorbed into my mind. But as I left Japan and traveled around the world, **I felt something was missing in myself.** I read many books to find out what it was. It was not that I was dissatisfied with something.

When I was stationed in Italy, my daily routine was to read the "International Herald Tribune" after my husband and children left home in the morning.

One day, I came across **a book titled "Happiness" in the new book section**. The author was Matthieu Ricard, a French monk in a monastery in Nepal, who worked with the 14th Dalai Lama and was also a writer and photographer. I immediately called the only bookstore in Rome at the time that sold English books, and ordered the book. About two weeks later, "Happiness" arrived at my doorstep.

Once I started reading it, **I was so fascinated by the content that it was difficult to stop reading.**

When I finished it, I thought, "**Oh my God!**" It is a book that can be read by non-Buddhists, but it is still based on Buddhist philosophy. **At that time, I realized that what was missing in my mind was Buddhism.**

After that, **I decided to study Buddhism again**. Buddhism for me was the teachings of the Shinshu sect of Buddhism that I grew up with. After returning to Sri Lanka from Italy, I spent three years studying a distance learning course to become a Buddhist monk of the Jodo-Shinshu sect. Then, in May 2012, **I became a monk** after completing an eleven-day retreat for the Honganji school of Jodo-Shinshu Buddhism at the Kyoto Buddhist temple.

It was a long way around the world, but I feel like **I have returned to my roots.**

What I think about Japan from an objective point of view.

**There are many good points.**

**However**, I think that **the individual is still weak** compared to the group. Therefore, there still seems to be a tendency that if one asserts oneself too much or stands out too much, the stake that sticks out will be beaten down. I feel that point is hard and fastidious. **It is natural that everyone is different.**

Of course, education and learning styles vary from country to country and school to school. But from now on, I think it will be difficult to study just by memorizing and learning. **Life requires that we find our own problems and solutions.** And everyone lives a different life in a different environment. It really varies.

When I went to a daycare center in Japan. There is an athletic playground in the yard. But **the children had to use their own minds and challenge themselves to get to where they wanted to go.** For example, if you want to go to the top, but there are no stairs, so you have to think of another way around. When I saw the playground equipment, I asked the daycare center teacher, **“Are there any mothers who are against letting their children play on this playground equipment?”** I asked.

In fact, it seems that many parents are actually concerned about it. However, **the daycare center explained to the mothers that they wanted to nurture the children's ability to think for themselves.**

Differences in the way of thinking about “living”

In Japan, there are few people who **live to enjoy their lives.**

They are busy working. Always working. Of course, we need money to live. And to get money, we have to work. However, I feel that the purpose of living life has become to live.

If you go to different countries, your stance will change. **Some people live to enjoy their lives.** Some people take long vacations to enjoy their lives. I have heard from friends that it is difficult to take a week's vacation in Japan.

**I wish more people knew that things change when the country changes.**

### **Q3 Could you tell us about a particularly memorable experience?**

**My husband ended his 32 years of diplomatic service at the end of 2020,** when he completed his term as Sri Lanka's Ambassador to the United States of America. He retired from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka about two years earlier than the mandatory retirement age.

The reason was that he did not agree with the way the then President of Sri Lanka was doing things, and it was difficult for him to represent Sri Lanka in such a situation. Moreover, he felt that Sri Lanka would be in a very difficult situation. And in fact, last year, Sri Lanka was in the most difficult situation that it has ever been in.

Accordingly, on July 20, 2022, a presidential election was held, and Ranil Wickremesinghe became the new president. **On the same day, the President contacted him asking my husband to work for Sri Lanka**

**again.** It seems that my husband thought about the matter by himself for about three days.

After that, he told me and our son that the president had contacted him and that he would like to work as an ambassador to Sri Lanka **if it would be useful for the reconstruction of Sri Lanka.** He told me.

### Sri Lanka and Japan

After Japan's defeat in the Second World War, the San Francisco Peace Conference was held in September 1951, while the plan to divide Japan into four parts was underway. At that conference, the following is a speech by former Sri Lankan President H.E. Jayewardene, then Minister of Finance, who was representing Sri Lanka at the conference.

**“Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love.”**

Using the Dhammapada<sup>5</sup>, the language of the Buddha, **Sri Lanka announced the renunciation of all claims against Japan and appealed for the early return of Japan to the international community.**

**This speech moved the hearts of the Allies, as well as the delegation present at the conference, and Japan escaped a divide and rule.**

**Sri Lanka is a friendly country.** Japan is very important to Sri Lanka today. I am a Japanese and I know both Japan and Sri Lanka and I think I have a lot to contribute to **the strengthening of relations between the two countries.** So **I would like to do my best in my work as the wife of the Ambassador of Sri Lanka.**

**I am also an instructor of international etiquette and manners,** so I would like to teach Japanese people the importance of etiquette and communication.

**There are many things I would like to do.**

The word "Happiness".

Lastly, the word "Happiness".

The Japanese word is "Shiawase". But **happiness is different for each person.** What do you perceive as happiness? **Actually, it's in our hearts.**

**I would like to continue to do what I can do and what I want to do while enjoying the "now, this time".**



ASIA WOMEN LEADERS FORUM

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Ai Sasaki



Wife of the Ambassador  
of Sri Lanka to Japan

Masako Perera



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