

A Pen Sketch of a Remarkable Teacher

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First impressions

He emerged from the side door and strode on to the stage at King George's Hall, University of Colombo. Slightly built, dressed in well-tailored trousers and coat and wearing a well selected neck tie. His hair, parted in middle and well combed back, not one out of place. With one sharp penetrative look through his thick rimmed spectacles, there was total silence in the hall.

His last lecture had been on the Mangala Sutta. His interpretation of each one of the thirty eight blessings was so absorbing and inspiring.

We undergraduates of 18 and 19 years at the time were just a few days in the University. Most of us who came from remote areas of Sri Lanka were still getting accustomed to our new environment, looking around with a kind of wonder at everything and everybody, including the massive, imposing University buildings.

We had just submitted our Pali tutorial. Our lecturer Mr. Jotiya Dhirasekera, commenced talking in a crisp, precise manner, commenting generally on our submissions. He mentioned two essays that struck him as exceptionally good. It seemed strange to us, who were unaccustomed to having our answers read

aloud at an assembly, when he started reading our essays, the first of which was a male student's.

Then he started reading another essay which he said was of a female student. With the natural curiosity of the fair sex, I still remember the surreptitious glances among the girls, at each other. They always sat on one side of the aisle, the boys on the other side. The sly glances at each other were to gauge by some slight expression as to whose essay was being read out.

I sat with my eyes straight ahead of me, looking at nothing. At the end of the lecture, our tutorials were returned. The girls were lingering behind, checking on who was the fortunate one who had received glowing tributes from the smart young lecturer.

I was on my way to my hostel in Lauries Road with my friend Kusuma Suraweera who was my room-mate. Kusuma also began to wonder aloud about the second tutorial, trying to guess whose it could have been. I could maintain my silence no more. I told her it was mine. I still remember the expression of joy and wonder on my friend's face. On reaching our hostel, I looked at my tutorial. I could not believe my eyes. When I saw written at the end of my essay just above the lecturer's signature 'Excellent' in a small neat hand.

In school the only remarks we had seen in our exercise books were 'Satisfactory', 'Good' or 'Very Good' even though the answer was of exceptional standard. What struck me most at that moment was the magnanimity of my teacher, which even exceeded my own feeling of joy at my performance. I was overwhelmed with admiration and respect for someone who could be so lavish in his appreciation. That was the first lesson I learnt from my teacher, whose example I followed in my later years as a teacher myself, and with what valuable dividends. Such praise from a respected teacher strikes deep into the core of one's being, awakening inner reserves of strength. This sometimes makes one capable of doing the impossible. This is demonstrated by the following incident

which I relate with humility.

Having done Pali, English and Sinhala for my first exam, I opted for a general degree in these subjects. The Time Table had been made with Pali and English at the same time, as alternate subjects. Students had to select one or the other. I could have selected another subject which did not entail deep and detailed study, and the problem would have been solved. But I wanted to do both English and Pali, for both were my favourite subjects. Time Tables were not going to be altered for the sake of a single student. That anyway was impossible, leave alone in a vast institution like the University, but even in a school Time Table. With an inborn obstinacy which I had inherited, and a determination of purpose acquired as I grew older, I stuck to my decision of offering both Pali and English. Whatever the obstacles with the Time Tables, and whatever the difficulties I may have to face, I did not change my decision. Sometimes I attended English classes, sometimes Pali classes.

Professor Ludowyck entering the class would look round and would ask "Who is this problem child? ", and then I would stand up like a timid school girl. I still see in my mind's eye vividly the expression of compassion on the Professor's face, when he gently said, "Nothing can be done, my child. We have tried. You have a choice. Select another subject." I would say very softly "Thank you" and sit down, my determination as firm as before. Due to that first impetus with the approbation of my teacher, I had the confidence I could answer my Pali question paper very well. And I was successful in both subjects at the final examination.

At this point I would like to mention another incident which I recall with sorrow as well as with joy. It is about a fellow student whom my teacher held in great affection and regard. He got the highest marks in Pali at the first examination in Arts in the University, winning the Waidyasekera Prize. He had been requested by Professor Malalasekera to complete his degree in Oriental Studies to be absorbed into the Department of Oriental Studies as a lecturer. This student who had done Pali, Sinhala, Latin and Greek, opted to do an honours degree in

Western Classics. Having obtained a First Class Degree with the highest mark in the University at the final examination, he was awarded the Moulana Prize. He was invited to join the Department of Western Classics. But his goals lay elsewhere. This student was D.B.I.P.S. Siriwardhana who in later years became my husband.

The teacher-pupil relationship continued throughout the years, although there were long periods during which we had no contact with our teacher. My husband and I and many of his students could rely on him for advice, counsel and specially for guidance in matters pertaining to the Dhamma. He was always ready and willing to give of his services. The teacher-pupil relationship is a sacred bond which the Buddha exalted.

These rare qualities of head and heart which students absorbed from Dr. Dhirasekera were no doubt due to the genuine appreciation and approval of his own mentors of whom he spoke with great respect and affection, making special mention of Professor G.P.Malalasekera and Professor O. H. de A. Wijesekera. Majoring in Sanskrit and obtaining a First Class in the final examination, he was taken aback when Professor Malalasekera requested him to join the Pali Department. Dr. Dhirasekera had said " Sir, I have majored in Sanskrit. I have done only two sections in Pali. Will it be in order ... ". " Don't be too clever, man. I know what I do." With these words of Professor Malalasekera, Professor of Pali and Dean of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, he decided to throw in his lot with the Department of Pali. So young Dhirasekera had been given an Assistant Lecturer's post in the Department of Pali.

Flash back

My teacher told me the moment his revered Guru, Professor Malalasekera invited him to join the teaching staff of the University, his mind flew back instantly to the little boy of twelve years who had done all his studies up to standard five in the medium of Sinhala in the village school of Rahula Vidyalaya in his home town

of Tangalle in the deep South. Having come from a rural background and a cultural milieu hitherto uncontaminated, and living in close association with the temple, he found himself now in an elevated position, in the highest seat of learning in Sri Lanka.

Moving over triumphantly from schooling in the vernacular, six years of English education at Christ Church College in Tangalle, still in his rural setting, earned him a First Division in the Junior School Certificate Examination in 1938. Reminiscing lovingly his mother's words while he was still a young lad, he mentioned how he had been delivered into the world in 1921, into a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society by the hands of an aged hunchback Tamil midwife. The last of nine children, he grew up in his home town for full eighteen years in harmony with Tamils, Burghers and Muslims. He emphasized that he was then a multi-ethnic person and still continues to be one.

At eighteen, he takes leave of his life in the village. With two years preparatory learning in metropolitan Colombo, he then passed the London Matriculation examination and was ready to be admitted to the then University College at Thurstan Road / Reid Avenue in 1941, with Professor S.A. Pakeman as its Principal. With the arrival of Sir Ivor Jennings in 1942, Sri Lanka witnessed the establishment of its first university in Colombo.

At the University of Ceylon - Colombo

We have already narrated about the growth of young Dhirasekera within the University as a student and as an exemplary teacher. He generously contributed to what he believed, even in those pioneering days, should be the diversely rich socio-cultural life of university students. A recognized personality from that older generation of students, Professor Tissa Kariyawasam, has faithfully recorded his performance both as an actor in and a producer of Sinhala dramas at the University. Under the guidance of his Guru, Professor Malalasekera, he also piloted the activities of the Buddhist Brotherhood. From his early University days

in Colombo as a student, he lovingly recollects his friendship with comrades like Sam Wijesinghe, Neville Kanakaratne, Percy Collin Thome and Lucien de Alwis. Neville and Percy shared university life with him in Cambridge too from 1949 to 1951. He laments that the latter two are no more with us, but he is glad to be able to say "Hello" to his old friend Sam from time to time, even now.

At the end of his three years' teaching in Colombo, Professor Malalasekera came up with the magnificent idea that on his probationary study leave he should proceed to the University of Cambridge. Hearing of this, Sir Ivor, the Vice Chancellor, fully endorsed the suggestion, particularly in view of the plans to establish a residential university in Peradeniya in the near future. He felt the need for the younger teachers of the University here to get to know more about and get accustomed to the scope and content of residential life in a university.

Regarding the area of his studies and research abroad, Professor Malalasekera had thought that he should study languages like Chinese and Japanese, along with history of Buddhism in those countries. This, he had visualized would be the best foundation for an International School of Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka. It is this same line of magnanimous thinking which prompted Professor Malalasekera in later years to found the World Fellowship of Buddhists. This change of direction, of course, meant for young Dhirasekera that he would have to return after two years without a Ph.D. But courageously he accepted this. Even after fifty years, my teacher is ever grateful to his Guru for this change of direction. He tells us that some of the brilliant results of his Buddhist research in later years would never have been possible without an ability to read Chinese sources in their original.

He also says with conviction today that the opportunity of being with world renowned authorities on Buddhist studies like Sir Harold Bailey of Queens' College, Cambridge, to which he himself belonged, was a great stimulant in his intellectual pursuits. In the company of personalities like that, he said he was reminded of life in universities like Taxila in India under *Disapamok Achariyas*

who treated their pupils with loving care and magnanimity. Sir Harold would invite Dr. Dhirasekera to any and every tea party arranged for visiting Professors from many countries who were engaged in Buddhist research. Often he would find an invitation card from Sir Harold put in among his mail.

Talking of his first glimpse of Cambridge, something he rejoiced in, was to see in his college compound "a host of golden daffodils, tossing their heads in sprightly dance." Now, even at the ripe old age of 83, he tells us with joy that this evoked memories of the English classes he had with Professors Ludowyck and Passe, studying Wordsworth in the good old days of University College in 1941 in Sri Lanka. He is a person very sensitive to the beauty of nature, and I believe, looking around the Narada Center, to anything beautiful. Often he has quoted to me the inspired outpourings of the early Buddhist monks and nuns in the Thera- and Therigāthās, responding to beautiful sylvan surroundings. The Venerable Sariputta has declared, he would often tell us, *Ramaṇīyāni araṇyāni yattha na ramati jano* = "Delightful indeed are forest glades where the average man finds no delight." Our teacher always endeavoured to elevate us above the average and he often thanked us for our responsive support.

A residential university in Peradeniya - over to new pastures

Life in the residential university at Peradeniya from the year 1952 onwards turned out to be a very chequered one, both to the student and the teacher. It was also challenging.

In 1969, then 48 year old lecturer Dhirasekera proceeded to Canada on his sabbatical leave, on the invitation of Professor A.K.Warder whom he had known since 1959, to teach Buddhism at the University of Toronto. Both friends, we are told, were equally delighted at their renewed meeting and Professor Warder forthwith offered his friend a permanent position to teach Buddhism, both at the University of Toronto and at its Graduate School. He was also to be cross

appointed to the Department of Theology. With a generously offered travel grant, Professor Dhirasekera came back home in 1970. He resigned, he tells us, with his deeply ingrained awareness of the Buddhist concept of *anicca* (impermanence), from his teaching position in Sri Lanka which he had held since 1946 with utmost dedication. To him, then, it was a final good bye, since he had no idea whatsoever that Sri Lanka would reclaim him one day. He left for Canada, he tells us further, sadder and poorer in the loss of his dear friend Professor K.N.Jayatilaka, who died quite an untimely death during Professor Dhirasekera's brief visit to the island in order to resign from the University and make a permanent move to Canada.

Canada - a new haven

Back in Toronto, my teacher says now with great joy that for the first time in his academic career, his ambition of sharing the wisdom and ideals of Buddhism with students of other disciplines like science, medicine and engineering, was fulfilled. At the University of Toronto, nearly two or three hundred students from other different faculties came to his first year lectures on Indian Buddhism. He is sad but not a bit surprised that even now, as late as the third millennium, this sort of academic restructuring is not even contemplated in Sri Lanka. But he is sure that the ill-effects of this kind of academic imbalance are certainly felt, though not adequately addressed, in this part of the world.

He assures us that students who came from other disciplines most often gained the highest grades. It was also these students who felt most the impact of these studies on their lives. Most universities in the world today, in America, England and Australia respect the value of this multi-disciplinary science and humanities combination. During his first year, a computer science student of Polish nationality wrote his semester paper on Mind, Meditation and Nirvana, choosing the title of his essay after attending only six lectures of the course. He got the highest marks that season.

Professor Dhirasekera's success at the University of Toronto continued unhindered. He taught well, much to the liking of his students, some of who write to him letters of appreciation even today. His colleagues enjoyed his comradeship, some of them even from the Faculty of Theology wanting to know more about Buddhism. In that balmy academic atmosphere, in the company of stalwarts like Anthony Warder, he pursued his research as well. He is proud of his review of K.R.Norman's *Elders Verses I*, which he wrote for the *Journal of American Oriental Studies* 1970. But even academics have their families to look after. Not all Sri Lankans react alike to the climatic harshness of the Canadian seasons. The sun in the Sri Lankan skies, he discloses to us with a sense of self-assurance, shall always offer a warm welcome. So once again, he did not mind resigning from the delightful position he enjoyed in Toronto and coming back home to Sri Lanka.

The year was 1972, almost at its very end and Sri Lanka was what it had to be. Many expressed their concern at his decision to return. He was nevertheless convinced that he had made the right decision. Within weeks, Sri Lankan friendships of old saw him invited to teach Pali at the University of Colombo which had by then resumed teaching these once-abandoned subjects. Professor Dhirasekera was back in the saddle once again, in the same old Colombo Campus. It is with a deep and equally genuine sense of gratitude that he speaks of these events and persons connected therewith.

It was only after a brief spell of few months when one afternoon, while he was resting after lunch in the Arts Building of the Colombo Campus, he had a message from his dear old Guru, Professor Malalasekera, that he was ill at the Wycherly Nursing Home (now converted to an International School). By 2.30 p.m. he rushed there and found his revered teacher happily snoring away in a chair with a *TIME* magazine on his lap. He stayed out and did not wish to disturb him. But within minutes, Mrs. Malalasekera, an equally gentle lady whom he remembers with a deep sense of respect, came out and invited him in. Both

teacher and pupil were equally delighted on seeing each other after years and commenced a strangely fascinating dialogue. The Guru was exceedingly happy that his carefully groomed pupil was back in the island for good. He pleaded that his pupil stays in this country and serve the cause of Buddhist learning and research which both had shared during an earlier phase of their lives.

The Guru, who at the time was the Editor in Chief of the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, called upon his pupil with confidence to assist him in the task. Professor Malalasekera had always visualized the vastness of the project. The printed version of the Encyclopaedia by then had gone beyond the letter B, the last article being on CAURA-VIDHVAMSANA-NĀMA-DHĀRAṆĪ. The Guru was sharp enough to ask his pupil, so reports my teacher, as to who should be invited to write the article on Zen. The pupil was completely taken by surprise and he politely replied that Z was the last letter in the English alphabet. The teacher's equally polite, but forceful advice was for us to take a more telescopic view of life. The Guru did not look ill at all that evening. Humbly pledging to do whatever was humanly possible for this jointly conceived cause, the pupil left his Guru at 4.30 p.m. with the joy of reunion in his heart, with the parting words See you soon again, Sir. But it was never to be. By 8.00 in the night this great stalwart of Buddhist learning in Sri Lanka and this giant of a national leader breathed his last. *Kaṃso upahato yathā*, like unto the end of a cracked bronze gong. These were the sad words with which my teacher summed up this unforgettable situation.

The inevitable choice to succeed Professor Malalasekera as the Editor in Chief of the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism was Professor O.H.de A. Wijesekera whom we already know as Professor Dhirasekera's teacher under whom he did his Sanskrit studies. He accepted the post to which he was invited on the condition that he had Dhirasekera as his Deputy Editor in Chief. This worked smoothly but before long Professor Wijesekera resigned, recommending that his Deputy be made the Editor in Chief. In a spirit of serving his professional Guru

who, in the most mysterious manner had made, more or less, a death-bed request, Professor Dhirasekera humbly accepted the challenge. Professor Dhirasekera's vision of the whole Encyclopaedic project and what he hoped to do in the normal run of events, can be gauged from his Preface to the very first fascicle he produced, namely Vol. IV. Fasc. I.

He gave his best to the project, writing numerous new articles, revising with meticulous care articles hitherto written. He departed, leaving behind to the Buddhist Encyclopaedia the legacy of the new logo which he created, with the ***dharma-cakra*** and its accompanying laudatory remarks of the divinities of the ten thousand world system [***dhammacakkam pavattitam appati-vattiyam***] written around it. This new logo of Dhirasekera's creation now retrospectively adorns the cover pages of the entire Encyclopaedia from its very beginning, even of the reprinted earlier volumes. He was wanted elsewhere.

The Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies of the Kelaniya University was in need of a Director. The Chairman of the U.G.C. invited Professor Dhirasekera to accept this position. Considering from all angles the needs of the day, he accepted it. Considerably enriched with his recent experience at the University of Toronto, he completely re-visualized what a Postgraduate Institute of Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka should be. He restructured it and threw open its doors to students from all departments of study like Medicine, Science, Engineering etc. to pursue Buddhist studies and do research there in fields connected with Buddhism.

In planning the courses of study for the Institute, he never lost sight of historical priorities: original Indian Buddhism of Sakyamuni Buddha first, with whatever associated research needed and only thereafter its development in Sri Lanka or China or anywhere else as one chooses. With a carefully planned Diploma course first for all, and insisting on very high standards of performance, students were enabled to acquire with minimum delay all pre-requisites needed for the diverse research programs. Very soon, the new Director courageously

moved the Institute to the city of Colombo for greater accessibility. Among its first students in the new setup were eminent Buddhist monks, theologians, doctors of medicine and a few foreigners. Possibly, many more great things were yet to be done. But at the age of sixty-seven, Professor Dhirasekera was glad to hand over the reins and disburden himself.

In the quietude of his retirement, as he looked at the country and its people at large, he saw turmoil all around. While living in solitude in Galle, the silence of one misty morning was disturbed by the arrival of an official who brought him an urgent message from the Chief Minister of the area, requesting him to take charge of the Ruhuna University as its competent authority, on the resignation of the Vice Chancellor during the youth unrest. "Enough is enough," he said to himself, and further: "Heavenly messengers have appeared on the scene. It is now time for me to renounce." ***Pātubhūtā devadūtā. Pabbajjā samayo mama.***

This was the moment of decision and this the moment of action: the culmination of an idea which had been fermenting within him, perhaps through Sansaric experience. Within days he was in the depths of the Bowalawatta forest hermitage in the Hantana hills, well above the Peradeniya Campus where he and his family had lived for eighteen years. But now he had turned a forest dweller - a ***vānaprastha***. The *modus operandi* of his departure, to few he would tell. Now clad in a long-sleeved chocolate brown [*kāsāya vattha*] banian and a sarong of the same colour, he was befriended in his jungle abode by the beasts of the wild, *olu muvās*, *vali kukulās* and not-so-harmless *polongās*. He had known already about the worth of their friendship through his intense study of the Theragāthā.

He had to wait patiently there for six months as a *pabbajjā* aspirant, looking forward to the return from America of the most venerable Madihe Paññāsīha Mahā Nāyaka thera to seek his ordination under him. On May 18th 1990, the day dawned for this silver-haired *upāsaka* Dhirasekera with an extra glow in the sky. On this great day in his life, a little after breakfast, he sat on a low seat in a quiet

room in the Bowalawatta *Aranya Senāsanaya*, and a senior monk cut the first lock of his silver hair and delivered into his hands. The moment he set his eyes upon this lock of silver grey hair, he tells us, he firmly resolved, **May I never see the likeness of this again till I reach my goal in Nirvana.**

He was the only novitiate to be ordained this day, and within an hour he came back to his well wishers who had filled the Dharma Sālā at Bowalawatta to its capacity. In their midst was also the then Vice Chancellor of the Peradeniya University where the new monk Dhammavihari once belonged. The concluding remark in his inaugural sermon that day was, **I am so glad that whenever and wherever I left, the choice has always been mine.**

That vibrant lecturer who once strode on to King George's Hall now in saffron robes walks with quiet dignity and speaks from a different platform. Then he addressed a small gathering of students assembled in a University hall. Now he addresses the world. His voice is as full of vitality at age 83 as it was then. He is ready to address any assembly on Buddhism irrespective of nationality, caste or creed. He is forthright, speaks with firm conviction, and with a veracity of judgment. He is invited to speak at numerous fora, nationally and internationally. No one, whatever may be their social, religious, national or international status, is exempt from his sharp and critical observation. In his own words, "Wherever I go as a student of Buddhism I am ever watchful to safeguard the authenticity of my Master's words".

In a world where many and conflicting interpretations of the Truth confuse and confound, this approach of my remarkable teacher takes on a crucial significance.

Eileen Siriwardhana

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