



University of Jaffna

Professor Alagaiah Thuraurajah
Memorial Lecture - 2016

Ethics for University Teachers

by

Prof.S.B.S Abayakoon
Senior Professor in Civil Engineering
University of Peradeniuya
Peradeniya

on

Thursday 10th November 2016
at 3.00 p.m

at

Kailasapathy Auditorum
University of Jaffna





University of Jaffna

Professor Alagaiah Thurairajah
Memorial Lecture - 2016

Ethics for University Teachers

by

Prof. S.B.S Abayakoon

Senior Professor in Civil Engineering
University of Peradeniya
Peradeniya

on

Thursday 10th November 2016
at 3.00 p.m

at

Kailasapathy Auditorium
University of Jaffna



Professor Alagaiah Thurairajah

MESSAGE FROM THE VICE - CHANCELLOR



It is my distinct honour and pleasure to welcome each of you to Professor Alagaiah Thuraijarah Memorial Lecture.

Professor Thuraijarah was a well known scholar and a Civil engineer specialized in soil mechanics. He was the former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Jaffna from September 1988 to March 1994. During the period of his service, University of Jaffna has faced lots of difficulties and downs, and only a person of his caliber could manage such situation. The physical and mental stress of being the Vice-Chancellor of a University in a virtual zone of war had a devastating effect on his health, eventhough he would never admit to it.

He was the leader among researchers who pioneered the science of soil mechanics. He worked with the best researchers in his field internationally.

His life and work is an example to us. Above all, he was the humanist irrespective of class, caste, colour or creed.

To honour his memory, the University Community and wellwishers established Prof.A.Thuraijarah Memorial Fund, which supports this annual lecture.

This evening, we have invited Professor S.B.S. Abayakoon, Senior Professor in Civil Engineering attached to the Department of Civil Engineering of the Faculty of Engineering, University of Peradeniya to deliver the Lecture. Prof.Abayakoon is also well known scholar and the student of Prof.Thurairajah. He will speak on the topicof, “Ethics for University Teachers“

I would like to thank Prof.S.B.S.Abayakoon for accepting our invitation and delivering Prof.A.Thurairajah Memorial Lecture.

Prof.(Miss.) V.Arasaratnam
Vice-Chancellor
University of Jaffna, Jaffna

PROF. A. THURAIRAJAH MEMORIAL LECTURE

Ethics for University Teachers – SBS Abayakoon

NOVEMBER 10, 2016, KAILASAPATHY AUDITORIUM,
UNIVERSITY OF JAFFNA

Prof. Vasanthi Arasaratnam, Vice Chancellor, University of Jaffna, Dr. A. Atputharajah, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, Members of the academic staff, Practicing Engineers, special invitees, distinguished participants, well wishers, and my dear students.

About six years back, I visited the University of Jaffna to participate at the monthly meeting of CVCD, Committee of Vice Chancellors and Directors, of Sri Lankan Higher Education Institutions. At that time, Prof. N. Shanmugalingam, who eventually became a very good friend of mine, was the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Jaffna. After the meeting was over, the two of us went into a casual conversation and naturally, Prof. Thurairajah's name came up. I got into discussing the great human qualities I have witnessed in Prof. Thurairajah as a student in the mid 70's and as an academic staff member of the University of Peradeniya afterwards. A couple of days after this meeting, I received a telephone call from Prof. Shanmugalingam where he had expressed his willingness to have me at the University of Jaffna, to deliver a lecture on Prof. Thurairajah. This is what has materialized today, in this beautiful evening.

Six years is a long time to organize a lecture. Well, there have been many reasons. We fixed a day in early 2011 and on that same day, the UGC wanted to have an emergency meeting of all Vice Chancellors in Colombo. In March 2011, Prof. Vasanthi Arasaratnam, who also became a very good friend of mine, assumed duties as the Vice-Chancellor. She was also very much interested in this and she did organize the lecture twice, once in late 2011 and then in early 2012. The first time, there was a huge student agitation in Peradeniya and I could not leave the administration there to my deputy. The second time, once again, the culprit was the UGC - another emergency meeting. Then, in mid 2012, I relinquished my position as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Peradeniya and went abroad on sabbatical leave. Upon my return, Prof. Arasaratnam and the Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, Dr. A. Atputharajah, started discussing with me about a possible time and a date. With the consent of the University of Jaffna, we fixed this lecture for 11th June 2016, to be held in Jaffna. It was later discovered that Hartley College has organized a felicitation for Prof. Thurairajah on the same day. Hence, after a yet another postponement and a venue change, finally it has happened. After all the setbacks I am so glad to be here today and I thank the University of Jaffna for giving me this opportunity to put some of my thoughts into words.

I am sure there are many others who are better qualified to deliver this talk. My selection by your University is, I believe, primarily based on the close association I have had with the late Professor, at Peradeniya and also after he left Peradeniya.

Prof Thurairajah was born on the 10th of November 1934 in the Vadamarachchi Division and hence, had he lived, he would have been celebrating his 82nd birthday today. He was educated at the Uduppiddy American Missionary School and at the famous Hartley College, Jaffna, for his primary and secondary education. Prof. Thurairajah was one of the most respected and accomplished past pupils of Hartley which, in itself, is by no means a small achievement considering the array of distinguished personalities that have been produced by Hartley since 1838.

In 1953, young Thurairajah passed the University entrance examination obtaining highest marks in the stream and was admitted to the Faculty of Engineering of the then University of Ceylon. I am so proud to say that this is the same Faculty of Engineering that admitted me twenty two years after Prof. Thurairajah.

After graduating with a First Class Honours degree in 1957, he joined the public works department as a junior engineer. In 1958, the year I was born, he left for his higher studies at the University of Cambridge, UK, and worked with Prof Kenneth H Roscoe in his research on shear properties of soils. Prof. Thurairajah's work at Cambridge is recognized, even today, as some of the best contributions to the development of a constitutive relation for soils.

After obtaining his PhD in 1961, Dr. Thurairajah worked for about an year in UK and returned to Sri Lanka in 1962. After resuming

duties at the University of Ceylon, he went from Colombo -where the Faculty of Engineering was temporarily located- to its permanent home in Peradeniya in 1964. He continued his fundamental research in Soil Mechanics at Peradeniya and became a full professor at the relatively young age of 37, in 1971. During my undergraduate days at Peradeniya over 40 years back, Prof. Thurairajah became the Dean of the Faculty of Engineering. I can still remember his imposing, yet strikingly simple stature that we all loved at the Faculty.

Since that time, I have known him in several capacities, but in my mind his soul is mostly cemented as a great teacher and a great human being. When Dr. Atputharajah very generously allowed me to select a topic for today's presentation, I struggled a bit initially and then decided on the title "Ethics for University teachers" as that, in spirit, captures who Prof. Alagaiah Thurairajah exactly is.

"Ethics for university teachers" in a way, is a mystery to be unraveled. It is very difficult to define the term "Ethics". In essence, it captures the "moral principles that govern a person's behavior or the conducting of an activity". The central question of ethics is "What ought one to do"? The Greek philosopher Socrates asked this question from his student Plato and today, we are still trying to answer it. Rather than trying to answer it, people usually try to escape the question by justifying their action with phrases like I did it because "everyone does it" or because "it seemed like a good idea at the time" or because "that is just the way things are done around here". Once a selected group of

professionals were asked the question “what is ethics?” and they gave diverse answers: ethics has to do with feelings of the individual, ethics has to do with the religious beliefs of a person, being ethical is what the law requires and also, it consists of the behavior accepted by our society. The only answer that was correct was that “I do not know what it means”.

So, the area is a little gray. Therefore let us try, as a start, to have a look at qualities that we all should cultivate in our lives that will help us answering Socrates' question whenever we are faced with it. I would like to select a few such as: respect for the autonomy of others (value free expression, conducive environment), doing no harm (physical or emotional, neither tolerating), being beneficial to others and accepting responsibility, fairness and equity (treating others the way we like to be treated), fidelity and honesty (integrity, follow through, respecting procedures), dignity (dignity of all, respecting diversity, do not exchange for popularity), caring (compassionate to all, exercising duties with care), and doing your best at all times (valuing the pursuit of excellence and taking pride in your work). In addition to these basic qualities, we will have to be more specific in our affairs as University teachers. First and foremost, a good teacher should engage fully in his/her job. As we all know, the core of teaching, as presented in many books goes: Tell me and I will forget, show me and I will remember, let me do it and I will understand. In some scholarly articles, this is expressed differently. The mediocre teacher tells, the good teacher explains, and the superior teacher demonstrates: and go a step further by adding “the great teacher inspires”.

Let me divert a little at this time to describe why Prof. Thurairajah is, indeed, a teacher who has inspired his students.

Prof. Thurairajah was one of the teachers who would go way beyond his normal teaching duties to help his students. The time during which we served as young members of the teaching staff, our aim was to find a place abroad for higher training. Of course, all the academic staff members were very approachable when we needed help in securing a position. Prof. Thurairajah went beyond the norm. I remember him asking me to call all young staff members to a lecture room at 5 pm. He would come in and start lecturing us on areas beyond the undergraduate programme. The lecture would go for two to three hours. The subjects include not only geotechnical engineering -the field of his specialty- but also mathematics, mechanics, finite elements and latest innovations in Civil Engineering. There were tutorials as well. He encouraged us to read scientific papers. He would give me a paper and request me to explain it to him and my other colleagues the next day. This forced learning helped all of us tremendously when we went out for postgraduate education. It has helped us improve our presentation skills. Some of the advanced subjects were not new to us as they had been covered in Professor's informal lectures. Naturally all of us were at the top of the class at our respective universities.

Ladies and gentleman, Khalil Gibran, the Lebanese artist, poet and writer, once said that “the teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind”. This is something we all should keep in mind and the present day practice of student centered learning is based on this concept.

As teachers we must maintain trust in the profession. We should keep a fully professional relationship with students at all times while respecting the uniqueness and diversity of students. Our work must be done in collaboration with all stakeholders. One of the most important aspects of teaching is keeping the professional knowledge and practice up to date.

When we look at university teaching, there are a few other special areas where we need to focus ourselves on. Some of these are: Understanding the public university system (paid for by all citizens of this country, only 3-4% of the age cohort 19-23 are with us, issues - Private Universities, Foreign students, Funds), the value system (Honesty, Punctuality, Dependability, Approachability, Simplicity, Empathy)

Once again, let me divert to tell you about some of the VALUES of Prof. Thurairajah. In 1976 the University of Peradeniya was closed for quite a long period after a prolonged student unrest that ended with the death of WM Weerasooriya, a first year arts student, recording the first such incident in the history of

University education in Sri Lanka. At this period of time, the geotechnical laboratory of Faculty of Engineering was loaded with soil testing, mainly for the Samanalawewa hydropower and irrigation project. My first close association with Prof. Thurairajah began when the laboratory hired me and another student from my batch to assist in the testing programme as we were on indefinite vacation. It was not mandatory to sign in and sign out as we were given tasks to complete. However, Prof. Thurairajah informed us that there is a book by the entrance to the laboratory and if we wish we can sign in and out in that book. Reluctantly, we decided to do so. Throughout the period, we could not come to the laboratory before him and we could not leave the laboratory after him. We will see A. Thurairajah signed in at 5:30 am or 6:00 am. We will also see him leave only after about 7pm or 8 pm. Needless to say, I learned a great deal from him, not only on soil mechanics and geotechnical engineering, but also on work ethics and punctuality. I have been a university teacher for over 36 years and to this day, I am usually in my office by about 7:00 am or 7:30 am and I never leave office before 5 pm or 6 pm. I have never cancelled a lecture. I am very punctual in my work. My students know that I am never late for lectures and I expect them to follow suit. I do not allow anyone to enter the classroom after scheduled start time for the lecture. I learned most of these qualities from Prof. Thurairajah.

Continuing, I need to add Competence and further studies (Library, CPD, Interdisciplinary studies), Commitment to teaching (Preparation, Updating, Attendance, Assessment, Student Evaluations, Grading in time, PG Vs UG etc.), Student affairs (Mutual respect, Rules of the University and Faculty, Truthfulness, Honesty, Extra-curricular activities, Student development), Role model (Respectability, Behaviour, Politics, TU Actions, Attire), University and Faculty affairs (Acceptance, Active participation, Involvement, Documentation, Behaviour at meetings), and Consultancy (Competence, Should not affect the primary job, Should do the very best, Responsibility)

Immediately after graduation, I was absorbed into the teaching staff at Peradeniya. Prof. Thurairajah called all the new recruits and gave us a lecture on how we should conduct ourselves as professional engineers. In particular, he discussed consultancy work. He said that as engineers, it was not only alright but also our duty to engage in consultancy work. He said that when an outsider needed our help, as professionals, we could and should charge money for the service. The important thing to remember was that money must be secondary and the service must be the priority. He went on to emphasize that the first thing to bear in mind was that you must assure yourself that you are qualified and experienced enough to take up the job. Then you can work out the total cost for the service. If the client agrees or if you were happy to do it for free, then you should take up the job and perform it to the best of your ability. Our guru was very particular in advising

us that we should never ask for an advance. He said that we should complete the job and hand over the final report to the client, before presenting him/her with the invoice. If the client makes a payment, we should take it. If not, we should not worry about it, even if we had spent money out of our own pocket. In either case, he said, we should be happy that we had done a job of work that would benefit the Sri Lankans who have paid for our education.

Other areas of importance are Self Development (Publications, Promotions) and of course, Research (Initiatives, proposals, reporting, publication, funding, use of funding, and funding sources, conflict of interest among researchers, collaborations among researchers, human and animal research, ethnic, religious and gender studies, plagiarism)

Before concluding, I must also touch on one of the most important qualities I have witnessed in Prof. Thurairajah: Patriotism. He loved Sri Lanka.

He used to say, on many occasions, that the people of this country have paid for our education through their noses and hence we owe a lot to them. For those of us who were about to leave for higher studies he insisted that we should return and serve this country and its people.

I noted his strong patriotism once again, a few years afterwards, at the time during which I was completing my Master's Degree at the University of British Columbia,

Canada. The year was 1983 and the troubles broke out in Sri Lanka. Prof. Thurairajah was in Peradeniya and he was requested to vacate his house by the Vice Chancellor, apparently to protect him from a possible mob attack. They had to live in one of the student residencies with other members of the academic staff who were also asked to move there. My supervisor in Canada, who was the Dean of the Faculty, got to know about this and sent a fax to Prof. Thurairajah requesting him to come to Canada. In fact, I was aware that he had organized an academic position for him at UBC. One day, my supervisor called me into his room and showed me Prof. Thurairajah's reply. It contained two sentences. "Thank you very much for your kindness and help. But I will not leave MY country, whatever happens"

Finally, let me tell you a very personal experience of mine that demonstrates how caring a person, Prof. Thurairajah is. I was born and raised in Peradeniya and I was the only child in my family. Prof. Thurairajah knew this and he sensed that my parents were very worried about my trip to Canada for higher studies. He visited them one day and explained the importance of higher education for me and the benefits that the country can harvest upon my return. He also knew that my father was a heart patient and took great efforts to lessen his agony. In fact, he used to visit my parents quite frequently at my home after I left the country, until he had to leave Peradeniya to assume a position at the Open University of Sri Lanka.

Ladies and Gentleman, I believe, once we are fully aware of

who we are and what is expected of us, and once we keep learning from and respecting the great teachers and scholars of the caliber of Professor Alagaiah Thuraiajah, it will not be too difficult to answer Socrates' question, "What ought one to do?" in situations that we do encounter. By that we would have all but solved the mystery associated with the phrase, "Ethics for University teachers".

Thank you very much

Professor S.B.S. Abayakoon is a Senior Professor in Civil Engineering attached to the Department of Civil Engineering of the Faculty of Engineering, University of Peradeniya. He obtained B.Sc.Eng. with First class honours from University of Peradeniya in 1979, M.A.Sc. in Geotechnical Engineering and Ph.D. in Structural Engineering from the University of British Columbia in 1983 and 1987, respectively. He is an International Professional Engineer from 2007 as well as a Fellow of the Institution of Engineers Sri Lanka (IESL) from 2004.



He was the Vice Chancellor of the University of Peradeniya (from 2009 to 2012) and Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, University of Peradeniya (from 2005 to 2009). He was the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Sciences at the UGC (from 2008 to 2009). He is a founder member of the International Institute for Infrastructure Renewal and Reconstruction (IIIRR, in 2004) and University Network for Climate and Ecosystems Change Adaptation Research (UN-CECAR, in 2009).

He has been serving as a member in many professional bodies such as Governing Council of the IESL (2007/08 and 2014/15), Board of Governors and Building Works Committee of South Asian University, New Delhi (from 2008), National Committee on Sri Lanka Qualification Framework (from 2009), University Grant Commission (from 2008 to 2009), Expert panel on Dam Safety for Mahaweli Authority (from 2008), Board of Study in Disaster Management PGIS (from 2006), Sri Lankan Geotechnical Society (from 1988). Further, he was serving as a member of more than 40 professional service committees. Also he worked as a consultant for more than 50 projects in and out of Sri Lanka.

He received many awards including Outstanding Leadership Contribution to education at world education congress in 2012, Amity global academic excellence award at Amity University in India in 2012, Outstanding Contribution to Education by CMO Asia in 2011. He also bagged special merit awards in A/L and O/L examinations in 1974 and 1971, at his alma mater, respectively.

He has delivered over 20 keynote addresses, invited presentations and lectures etc. He served as a lecturer and a visiting professor in reputed institutions including University of Peradeniya, The University of British Columbia, Canada, University of Tokyo, Japan, and United Nations University, Tokyo, Japan. He published more than 60 Journal/Conference papers.