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Levels of Knowledge and Knowledge Without Wisdom

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Introduction

Professor J.B. Disanayaka sheds light on the 'crossing in life' (i.e., the change of status) graduates go through at a convocation, and the responsibility that accompanies their achievement to change the society they live in for the better. Professor Disanayaka details the history that underlies the crossing in life witnessed at a convocation and states that it goes back to the mediaeval Europe. He juxtaposes the university system of ancient Sri Lanka with the higher education system we inherited from the British. In particular, Professor Disanayaka discusses how a graduand's change of status is legitimized with the conferring of a bachelor's degree such as the Bachelor of Arts (BA) or the Bachelor Science (BSc). Historically, in Mediaeval Europe, a crown or wreath of laurel was placed on one's head to indicate high merit or honour. At today's convocations, this wreath is replaced by a garland of a certain colour. It is delightful, according to Professor Disanayaka, that some of these 'bachelors' change their status to that of 'Master' or 'Doctor'. Nowadays, the English word 'doctor' is used to refer to a physician but it is derived from the Latin verb 'docere' which means 'to teach'. Similar etymological implications are seen in the degrees of 'PhD' or 'DPhil'. The ancient universities, which were most of the time attached to religious educational institutions (such as the Maha Vihara and the Abhayagiri in ancient Sri lanka), had unique perspectives on knowledge production, wisdom, and knowledge practices. Traditional education, despite its many faults, placed more emphasis on wisdom than on knowledge. In the modern world, information has replaced wisdom and education without wisdom has resulted in the increase of violence as visible in the educational institutions themselves. In such a background, Professor Disanayaka invites educated members of society to denounce immoral practices seen in the modern education system of Sri Lanka, so that, every individual can live in peace, harmony, and dignity.

Today the Chancellor of the University of Colombo has convoked an assembly consisting of a segment of the public to witness an event that will mark a turning point in the life of the graduates who attend this Convocation. The public consists mainly of academics of the University of Colombo and the parents, relatives, and well-wishers of these graduates.

In the presence of this august public, an event will take place that will change the status of the graduates who are assembled here. As the Chancellor declared in a language of decorum, "By authority vested in me as Chancellor, I confer upon those whose names have been read, the Postgraduate Degrees", this change of status will mark a change in their levels of knowledge. This change of status is yet another 'crossing in life' for these graduates.

Anthropologists – those who study human cultures – say that a man's life (by the way, when anthropologists say 'man', it embraces 'woman' too!) is marked by certain 'crossings in life' that take him from one 'status' to another. 'Status', in this sense, covers not only social positions but also levels of knowledge or existence.

A crossing in life is marked by certain rites performed in a ritualistic way and hence they are called 'rites of passage'. These rites involve a certain amount of ceremony in the presence of the public. Ceremony is needed to highlight the ritualistic significance of the occasion and, the presence of the public is necessary to make it a socially legitimate event.

A girl who attains puberty, for instance, goes through such a 'crossing in life' changing her status from that of a 'girl' to that of a 'woman'. A man who enters wedlock goes through another crossing, from the status of a 'bachelor' to a 'married man'. In Sinhala and Tamil cultures, a child is initiated into the alphabet at a ceremony because it also marks a change of status, a transition from illiteracy to literacy.

A layman who enters the Buddhist order of monks goes through a similar crossing; from the status of a 'layman' to that of a 'novice', called 'samanera' in Buddhist parlance. When he reaches the age of twenty, he is eligible to go through yet another crossing in life, from the status of a samanera to that of a 'bhikkhu', a monk in the full sense of the

word. The ceremony that accompanies this change of status is called ‘upasampada’- higher ordination.

A Kandyan dancer also goes through a crossing in his life on the day the ves tattuva -as the head gear is called in Sinhala- is placed on his head for the first time. This head gear is symbolic of a royal crown and thus it is placed on the dancer’s head at a ceremony that resembles the coronation of a king. At this ceremony, known as the kala eli maduva, the dancer changes his status from that of a ‘novice’ to that of a ‘fully-fledged dancer’.

Today we are gathered here to witness another crossing in life which involves the changes of status either from that of ‘bachelor’ to that of ‘master, or from that that of ‘master’ to that of ‘doctor’. What do these changes involve and signify? Why is this crossing in life called a ‘Convocation’? Today’s convocation has another significance in that it concerns only graduates.

To understand the thinking that underlies the crossing in life at a convocation, it is necessary to understand the historical background against which University education came into being in mediaeval Europe. As you know, the first Universities in Europe came into being in Italy, the homeland of the great Roman Empire. The University of Bologna in north-central Italy is considered the first University in Europe.

The language that was in use at that time in educational institutions was Latin, the mother of modern Italian and other Romance languages such as French, Spanish, and Portuguese. Remnants of this linguistic usage are still found in the terminology of academic distinctions of Western Universities, both in Europe and the United States. Sri Lankans inherited them from the British.

The very first change of status in the Western University tradition is from that of an ‘under-graduate’ to that of a ‘graduate’. At the Convocation, the undergraduate reaches the status of a ‘bachelor’ and degrees such as Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor Science (BSc) legitimise this change of status. Why is this status called ‘bachelor’?

The word ‘bachelor’ goes back to the mediaeval Latin word ‘bacca-laureate’. The word ‘laureate’ means ‘crowned or decked with laurel, as a mark of distinction or honour’. For it was the tradition in mediaeval Europe to place a crown or wreath of laurel on one’s

head to indicate high merit or honour. Today this wreath is replaced by a garland of a certain colour.

Laurel, by the way, is an evergreen shrub found in the Mediterranean region and botanists have named it, 'Laurus nobilis'. Its leaves are aromatic, flowers are yellowish, and fruits are like cherries. In England of yesteryear, the royal household had a poet whose function was to write for public occasions and he was called 'Poet Laureate'.

Today, any poet acclaimed as the most eminent in a country may be called a 'poet laureate' as was Rabindranath Tagore, who was the first Indian poet to receive the Nobel prize for Literature. In the olden days, the 'Poet Laureate' was so called because he was publicly crowed with laurel in recognition of his merits, usually by the king.

In mediaeval universities, the first degree in the field of arts or humanities was titled 'Artium Baccalareus' and American Universities still retain this title when they refer to their Bachelor's degree as 'AB' and not as 'BA' as we call it. Today, some of these 'bachelors' will change their status to 'master' or 'doctor'.

The first post-graduate degree is titled 'Master': Master of Arts (MA), Master of Science (MSc), Master of Laws (LLM) and so on, as the case may be. The English word 'master' goes back to the Latin word 'magister' which had several meanings such as the one who directs, manages, heads, teaches, instructs, or commands.

It is thus connected to words such as 'magistrate' in the courts of law and 'maestro' in the field of music. In Sinhala personal names in the South, such as 'vadu-mestri' which we have inherited from the Portuguese, we can see remnants of a lineage of a 'master-carpenter', for the Sinhala word 'vadu' signifies 'carpentry', and the Portuguese word 'mestri' means master. Those who hold a master's degree will be elevated today to the status of a 'doctor'. They will receive a 'doctorate' to mark this change of status. Today, the English word 'doctor' brings into mind a physician but originally it meant a 'teacher' because it is derived from the Latin verb 'docere' meaning 'to teach'.

In Sanskrit, the teacher is called 'acarya' and this explains why the holder of a doctorate has been given the title 'acarya' in Sinhala, in contract to dostara or vaidya, the title

given to a medical practitioner. Thus, 'Dr. N.M. Perera' was called 'acarya' because he had earned a doctorate in economics from the London School of Economics.

It is rather unfortunate that the Municipal Council of the city of Colombo is unaware of this distinction between the titles dostara and acarya because the road in Colombo 8 (Borella) named in honour of Dr. N.M. Perera carries the title 'Dostara' in place of 'Acarya' before his name! What is more shocking is that Dr. Perera himself was a Mayor of the city of Colombo.

The degree that is conferred on the basis of a doctoral thesis is known as 'Doctor of Philosophy', abbreviated as 'PhD' or 'DPhil'. In this case, the word 'philosophy' is used not in the narrow sense of a science that studies the relations of causes, reasons, and effects of phenomena but in the broader sense of a discipline that deals with the general principals belonging to any branch of knowledge, be it the humanities, science, medicine, or law.

This takes us back to the origins of the word 'philosophy'. It comes from the two Greek words 'phileo' and 'sophia'. The word 'phileo' means 'loving' and 'sophia' means 'wisdom'. It thus refers to a love of wisdom as leading to the search for it. He who gets a doctorate is thus one who has a love for knowledge and wisdom – 'a seeker of truth.'

The highest degree a modern university can offer today is titled 'Doctor of Science' abbreviated 'DLitt'. These are senior doctorates awarded to scholars of eminence on the basis of published works and professional position. Since these degrees are awarded as a mark of honour, they are called 'honorary degrees' and carry the Latin title 'honoris causa'.

Today, Prof. Hemapala Wijayawardhana, Professor Emeritus in Sinhala and I have been honoured by the University of Colombo by being awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters, sometimes called Doctor of Literature. We are indeed grateful to the Faculty of Arts and the Senate for conferring on us these honorary degrees in recognition of the many years we have spent both at Peradeniya and Colombo in pursuit of knowledge and wisdom.

Although my analysis presents a very simple structure of first and higher degrees as falling into three main levels as bachelor's, master's and doctorates, their nomenclature is rather confusing owing to their great diversity. As we have already noted, the degree of Bachelor of Arts is named BA in British Universities and AB in American Universities. The PhD is also called DPhil in some universities. DLit may be Doctor of Letters or Doctor of Literature.

In the British Commonwealth, I am told, there are more than 250 different bachelor's degrees, 170 master's and 70 doctorates. More recently, there has been an unprecedented growth in degree titles representing a wide range of professional training in the fine arts, architecture, business, finance, management, technology, and so on.

Since we inherited the present system of university education from the British, one may be tempted to believe that university education had its origins in the West. The truth of the matter is very different. India and Sri Lanka had their own systems of university education, their origins going back to the pre-Christian era.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, describing the structure of the village republics of ancient India in his 'Glimpses of World History', describes the origin of universities in very simple terms:

"Many learned men used to retire into the forests, near the towns and villages, in order to lead simple lives, or to study and work in quiet. Pupils gathered round them, and gradually fresh settlements grew up of these teachers and their students. We can consider these settlements as universities. There were not many fine buildings there, but those who sought knowledge came from long distances to these places of leaning" (p.25).

When large towns and cities grew, the universities also grew into large complexes. "And in these centres of leaning" continues Nehru, "every kind of subject that was then known was taught. The Brahmans even taught the science of war" (p.26).

Prof. A.L. Basham, the author of the famous book, 'The Wonder That Was India' tells us more about these Indian Universities.

"Certain cities became renowned for their learned teachers, and achieved a reputation comparable to that of the university cities of mediaeval Europe. Chief among these were Varanasi and Taksasila, which were already famous in the time of the Buddha: later, around the beginning of the Christian era; Kanci acquired a similar reputation in the South. Varanasi, then usually called Kasi, was particularly renowned for its religious teachers, but Taksasila, in the far North-west, laid more emphasis on secular studies."

Taksasila, which is now in Pakistan, had become so famous as a university that even the Buddhist Jataka tales make reference to it. Says Prof. Basham:

"The Buddhist Jataka tales show that young men from all over the civilized part of India sought education in this city, through which a trickle of Iranian and Mesopotamian influence found its way to India. Among the famous learned men connected with Taksasila were Panini, the grammarian of the 4th century BC, Kautilya, the brahman minister of Chandragupta Maurya, and traditionally the chief master of the science of statecraft, and Carake, one of the two great masters of Indian medical science" (p.165)

Indian Buddhists get the credit of establishing monasteries that developed into universities. The Buddhist monastery of Nalanda, in Bihar, founded during the Gupta Age was one such university. According to Hsuan Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim who visited Nalanda in the 7th century, Nalanda was a hive of intellectual activity.

As Prof. Basham notes: "Under its aged and saintly abbot Silabhadra, Nalanda did not confine itself to training Buddhist novices, but also taught the Vedas, Hindu philosophy, logic, grammar and medicine. It would seem that the student population was not confined to the Buddhist order, but that candidates of other faiths who succeeded in passing a strict oral examination were admitted" (p.166)

Sri Lankan Buddhists can also take pride in establishing universities attached to their monasteries. Two of the most famous monastic universities of ancient Sri Lanka were the Maha Vihara and the Abhayagiri. By the fourth century AD, these monasteries had earned such a reputation as centres of learning and scholarship that monks from distant China came to Sri Lanka in search of rare Buddhist manuscripts.

One such monk who visited Sri Lanka in the 4th century was Fa Hsien whose 'Record of the Buddhist Countries' refers to these two monasteries as centres of learning. He records that while Abhayagiri had five thousand monks, Maha Vihara had three thousand monks. Fa Hsien spent two years at Abhayagiri studying Buddhist texts.

He was happy that he was able to obtain copies of the Dhirgagama, the Samyuktagama, and the Sannipata, manuscripts that were unknown in China. He also found a copy of the Rules of the Mahisasakas. These were Sanskrit texts, a fact that helps us to conclude that Sri Lankan centres of learning were not confined to Theravada studies but included Mahayana studies as well.

We are thus inheritors of a long tradition of university education. We do not have, however, nomenclature that refers to the different levels of academic status that are found in the western tradition, such as bachelor, master and doctor. As such, we do not have information about the crossings in life that ancient and mediaeval Sri Lankan scholars had to undergo in their university life.

However, there is something that brings the university traditions of mediaeval Europe, ancient India, and Sri Lanka together. They were all agreed on the primary aim of education: the systematic development and cultivation of the mind and other natural powers. It begins in the nursery, continues through school and also through life, whether we will or not.

The modern Italian word for education –educazione– sheds much light on this aspect of education. 'Educazione' means 'upbringing', that is 'the development of character by teaching, discipline and other social processes'. The modern Italian phrase 'un uomo senza educazione' means, literally, a man without upbringing, that is, without a cultivated mind.

He who has a cultivated mind has also cultivated the art of speech and the art of behavior. This meaning of 'education' presents a sharp contract to the normal meaning attached to 'education' today, where it refers to the impartation of knowledge relating to various fields such as economics, geography, mathematics, physics, medicine or law.

I had the very good fortune of spending my first sabbatical year in Italy, at a university near Rome, -Universita Per Stranieri– studying the Italian language and culture, and one of the first things I had to learn was that in modern Rome, there is no ministry named, in Italian, 'Ministero dell' educazione'! Isn't it surprising that Rome, "la citta eterna" ("the eternal city" as the Italians call it), -the capital of the great Roman Empire that shaped western civilization and the capital of the country that produced the oldest university in Europe- has no 'Ministry of Education'?

This means that the Italians, even today, do not associate 'educazione' with what takes place in schools and universities. In their view, what goes on in schools and universities is not 'education' but 'public instruction', as they say in Italian, 'pubblica istruzione', in various fields of study. Thus, they have named their Ministry that manages schools and universities 'Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione' and not 'Ministero dell' educazione'.

We are told that even in colonial Sri Lanka, the Department of Education was named the 'Department of public Instruction', for the British too did not want to confuse 'public instruction' in various fields such as medicine, sciences, and the arts with 'education'. Public instruction is but a part of education. What is most unfortunate is that we have today equated 'public instruction' with 'education'.

This shift of focus from 'education' to 'instruction' has brought about adverse results. The origin of the crises that society is facing today in almost every field of activity - politics, economics, commerce, and so on- is the inevitable result of placing more emphasis on 'knowledge that is relevant to public instruction' than on 'wisdom that is relevant to education'; on 'vishaya gnana' than on 'pragna'.

Today, in whatever field of study, we are collecting more and more facts and figures, and our corpora of data are thus becoming larger and larger. We are entering into the so-called 'world of information', and 'information technology' that brings in vast amounts of knowledge, almost to the extent of an 'information explosion'.

Knowledge and Information, we certainly need, and this increase is undoubtedly a favourable phenomenon. However, when knowledge increases at the expense of wisdom, then, there is something to worry about, because in the final analysis, wisdom

cannot be replaced by knowledge. For wisdom alone will guide humanity to use knowledge for the better.

Traditional education, in spite of its many faults, placed more emphasis on wisdom than on knowledge. It was a kind of education where the relation between the teacher and the pupil was one of affectionate respect, almost of reverence. This reverence was called 'guru bhakti' and that was the basis on which all the other elements of traditional education rested.

I am reminded of what Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, one of the most outstanding Sri Lankans of the twentieth century, said in his masterpiece 'Mediaeval Sinhalese Art' on this aspect of education. Having described the traditional system of education of this country, he compared it with the kind of 'English education' that public schools of the day provided, in the following way:

"The old system of education above described could not have been preserved in its entirety; it is in many respects unsuited to modern requirements besides having intrinsic faults; but it is very unfortunate that so many of its real advantages are lacking in the modern system and especially unfortunate that an 'English education'… leaves the 'educated' ignorant of everything that would appear to be of special interest and value to him, and unable to hand on to others even that knowledge which he possesses of the great world beyond, and the lesson he has learnt from a study of the history and manners of other peoples"(p.51).

Dr. Coomaraswamy concludes his observation with a special reference to the Sinhalese, particularly because he was writing on mediaeval Sinhalese art, but what he said of the Sinhalese could be equally applicable to the Tamils.

"Most stupid of all is the affectation of despising everything Sinhalese and thoughtlessly admiring everything English; reminding one of that time in England when 'Falsehood in a Ciceronian dialect had no opposers; truth in patois no listeners' (p.51)

Rabindranath Tagore, in his essay on 'My School' in his collection of 'Lectures and Addresses' laments the unholy division of education into distinct segments to suit modern trends:

"The object of education" insists Tagore, "is to give man the unity of truth. Formerly, when life was simple, all the different elements of man were in complete harmony. But when there came the separation of the intellect from the spiritual and the physical, the school education put entire emphasis on the intellect and the physical side of man. We devote our sole attention to giving children information, not knowing that by this emphasis we are accentuating a break between the intellectual, physical and the spiritual life" (p.27)

I can cite some examples from my own field of language and grammar to show the truth of what Tagore said: the unholy separation of knowledge from wisdom. The English grammarian who wants to show the difference between the two kinds of sentences – the active and the passive – cites as examples, sentences such as the following:

> "The farmer killed the rabbit" is an active sentence.
> Its passive sentence is "The rabbit was killed by the farmer"

The student understands the grammar that underlies this pair of sentences but that was all the information that the modern grammarian cared for. The idea of "killing" did not bother him at all. Now let's turn to the traditional Sinhala grammarian. What did he achieve when he taught another grammatical usage: 'the instrumental case' (karana vibhakti)? The Sidat Sangarava, the traditional grammar of the thirteenth century gives the following sentences to illustrate the instrumental case:

> metnen vera parayanu
> (Conquer hatred by loving kindness)
> gunen dana: saganne
> (Treat people by virtue)
> sitini ve: dusiri susiri
> (By mind is immorality changed into morality)

In the sentence cited above, the Sinhala words metnen, gunen, sitini are in the instrumental case denoting the meanings 'by loving kindness', 'by virtue', and 'by mind' respectively. Even if the pupils were to forget the grammar of these sentences, they would still retain these values in their minds. Do you see a difference between "the farmer killing the rabbit" of the modern grammarian and "conquering hatred by loving kindness" of the traditional grammarian?

Education minus wisdom has also resulted in the increase of violence in modern society and particularly in educational institutions themselves. There are more than a dozen universities in this country today, but the inhuman phenomenon called the 'rag' keeps on spreading like a wildfire, making it more and more violent. Of what worth is university education if a colleague who enters the groves of Academe is subjected to inhuman torture in the name of a 'welcome'?

It was only a few months ago that we heard the shocking news that an undergraduate was killed by his own colleagues! Does a university degree of whatever colour, mean anything if differences of opinion are settled on the campus –the highest educational institution of a country– in ways that lack wisdom? It is time we realise that knowledge, however modern or precise, cannot replace wisdom.

Violence is fast spreading into other educational institutions as well. A tuition institute in the suburbs of Colombo, that has earned a name as one of the finest, keeps on churning out thousands and thousands of young men and women, equipped with knowledge but lacking in wisdom. Had they acquired, at least an iota of wisdom, they would have thought twice before killing one of their fellow pupils for the want of some space on a bench!

Last week, the newspapers reported that two schoolgirls and their grandmother were kidnapped and taken to a desolate place to be killed. They were somehow saved, but it is the cause for the attempted murder that shocks every member of civilized society. It was reported that a father who wanted his daughter to become the class captain or the head girl had masterminded this crime to get rid of the other girl who could compete with his daughter for this position. If this father succeeded in killing a family to get a petty position in the school for his daughter, what is education in the school worth?

I can go on and on citing examples from our own contemporary society to show that there is something absolutely wrong in the way we think and act. Action follows thinking, and thinking is a matter of the mind. Education, in the final analysis, is the development and cultivation of the mind but who taught us to develop and cultivate our minds?

In my view, it is time for our senior educators and those who today receive diplomas in education, to redefine 'education' so that we bring wisdom back into it. Knowledge, we need, but we can afford to have less knowledge and more wisdom. Let us go back to 'educazione' where it meant 'upbringing' rather than 'amassing knowledge' in various fields. This implies a change: a change for the better.

In this endeavour, all of us, whether we are bachelors, masters or doctors, whether we are physicians, engineers or educators, have a role to play. 'What role can I play? I am just another individual' you might say. Well, the society is made of individuals and if each individual makes his or her contribution to change our society for the better by bringing wisdom back, then, it will bring about a new society where we can live without fear.Let me conclude this oration by quoting Tagore whom I greatly admire not only as a poet but as a man of wisdom. In his collection of poems titled 'Stray Birds', he makes the sun ask a question:

'Who will take up my duties?' asked the setting sun
'I shall do what I can, my master' said the earthen lamp"

Do you really think that a little earthen lamp can perform the duties of the sun? Absolutely not. But the little earthen lamp can also bring some light to eliminate darkness. We are, in a sense, like earthen lamps. Each of us can shed some light to eliminate the darkness of ignorance that surrounds us and when we all get together, it will certainly bring some enlightenment that will show us the right path to real education.

On this memorable day when you are honoured for your achievements in moving up the scale of knowledge, let me congratulate you for the hours you have spent in pursuit of such knowledge. However, that is not the end of the scale. You have now a special role to play as an educated member of our society to bring knowledge into harmony with wisdom. It is then, and only then, that we can mould a society where we can live in peace, harmony, and dignity.

** The Editorial Board of the ColomboArts Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities believes that the concerns raised by Emeritus Professor J.B. Disanayaka in his Convocation Address delivered at the General Convocation 2002 of the University of Colombo, held on the 4th of March 2003, have contemporary relevance. Therefore, it is worthy of being read by all the present stakeholders of Sri Lankan higher education.