

Honorable members of the Maha Sangha,
Madam Chancellor,
Vice-Chancellor,
Members of the Academic Staff and
Distinguished Guests.

Convocation Address

by

Rev. (Dr.) Kamburupitiye

Vanarathana Maha Nayake Thero

First of all, it is my pleasant duty to express my gratitude for the invitation extended to me to deliver the Convocation Address of this year, which has been conferred on me by the Council of the Sri Jayawardenera University. I was one among those who joined the academic staff of this institution in 1959 when it was inaugurated under the name of "Virajodaya University". Even now I continue to work in the same institution. I have gained a great amount of knowledge and commitment to the service of the university. The university has illumined my life for twenty-eight years.

"*Vijaya Pajaya*" is the Sinhala term for "University" - a word of recent origin. When the Colombo University College was established in 1921 as an affiliated institution of the University of London, it was called *Sarasvati Nivra Sivaya*. When that institution was granted autonomy, it came to be called *vishva vidyalaya*. Another common Sinhala term for university is *saravaliya*. This is a beautiful word taken from the *Kirita Seta* (the famous poem on Tottarambe Sri Kambula Thero, who collect the chief of the renowned educational institution at Taxila in India - the Teacher of the *saravali mahara*). It is the most ancient university of the world, whose origin goes beyond even the period of the Buddha.

Venerable members of the Maha Sangha,

Madam Chancellor,

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First of all, it is my pleasant duty to express my gratitude for the invitation extended to me to deliver the Convocation Address of this year, which happens to be the twenty eighth from the inception of the Sri Jayewardenepura University. I was one among those who joined the teaching staff of this institution in 1959 when it was inaugurated under the name of "Vidyodaya University". Even now I continue to serve as a teacher of the University. I have gathered a great deal of experience by this long commitment to the service of this university. It is also true to say that the university has illumined my life in a remarkable way during these twenty eight years.

Viśva Vidyālaya, the Sinhala term for "university" is a word of recent origin. When the Colombo University College was established in 1921 as an affiliated institution of the University of London, it was called *Samasta Sāstra Sālāva*. When that institution was granted autonomy, it came to be called *visva vidyalaya*. Another common Sinhala term for university is *sarasaviya*. This is a beautiful word taken from the *Kāvya Śekaraya*, the famous poem of Totagamuve Sri Rahula Thero, who called the chief of the renowned educational institution at Taxila in India "the Teacher of the *sarasavi madura*". It is the most ancient university of the world, whose origin goes beyond even the period of the Buddha.

The ancients believed that *sarasavi* or Sarasvati is the goddess of learning and that her seat is the lotus flower. The implication of this is that in order to do well in learning one must have purity of character. That is why they used to say that learning begets discipline. Discipline surely is the hallmark of learning. It is worth pondering how for this is the case in the world of today.

The great men of learning who are the sources of the various academic disciplines of the world were known as *ṛṣis*. The word *ṛṣi* means a seer, or a researcher. These *ṛṣis* dedicated their entire life to produce the sixty four great arts of the ancient world such as literature, music, *ayurveda* and so on. The Buddha too was called a *ṛṣi*. It is said that he is the seventh among the wise seers of the world. He used the term *vidyā* to describe the Dhamma which he realized, and he said that it has five aspects: perception, knowledge, detailed understanding, penetrative realization and happiness or illumination of the mind.

These five aspects must necessarily be found in every true researcher. On these, the first, perception, is what appears to the mind as it first gets into the task. This may not necessarily show the truth. Therefore it is essential that one should review what one perceived. This is the manner to obtain knowledge. However, one must not take this knowledge too as the end of the procedure. One should consider it in every detail. This is understanding. But even beyond that there is *vidya*, the realization which comes with final insight. What *vidya* means here is the penetrative understanding which puts an end to ignorance. When one has passed beyond these four stages, one experiences a great contentment and happiness as one knows that one has realized the truth. That happiness is called "Illumination".

The Buddha's wisdom of Awakening consists of these five aspects. What we call *vidyā* today (i.e., science) does not include such a final insight, for it is liable to be altered by knowledge that may be subsequently obtained.

The ancient seat of learning of Sri Lanka which was founded on these principles was the Mahāvihāra at Anuradhapura. The Abhayagiri also, of Anuradhapura, was another such institution of university status. Branches of these institutions came to be founded in various parts of Sri Lanka as well as outside. The Mahāvihāra branch in Andhra was well known in Kashmir as well as in the surrounding areas. A branch of Abhayagiri was established in Indonesia which was exclusively for the benefit of Sinhala Buddhist monks. It is interesting to recall that the ancient universities of India, such as Nalanda and Vikramasilā, were also known as Mahāvihāras.

The standard of learning of the Mahāvihāra of Anuradhapura can be gauged by the treatment which it accorded to Ven. Buddhagohosa who came to Sri Lanka in the fifth century A. C. Although Buddhagohosa was undoubtedly a person of great learning, his scholarship was recognized by the Mahāvihāra monks only after he wrote a "thesis" on a given topic and submitted three copies of it to a "board of examiners" who on being satisfied with it, conferred on him the title of *anubuddha*.

The Mahāvihāra had several branch institutions. It had also a great library which contained books on a variety of subjects written by adherents of various traditions. It was known as Granthakara ("Mine of Books") Pirivena. This was the place which the Ven. Buddhagohosa chose for his residence.

This state of affairs with regard to learning continued as for down in history as the Kotte period. Vijayabahu Pirivena of that period was an institution similar to the Mahāvihāra. Its Principal, Totagamuve Sri Rahula Thero is famous as a “Master of Six Languages”. However, the list of these six languages does not include Sinhala, Tamil, Pali and Sanskrit, although his work, the Pancikā Pradipaya says that he was a great scholar of these languages as well. This very fact reflects the high standard upheld in this famous seat of learning.

After the Kotte Period, the religious and academic life of Sri Lanka was disrupted by foreign invasions. Its revival was ushered in by the founding of the Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara Pirivenas in the 19th century. These were the institutions which the Sri Lanka government in 1959 elevated to university status, giving them a contemporary character and turning them into instruments for providing in Sinhala the higher education which upto then was available only through the English medium. In spite of great odds, the two institutions succeeded in producing excellent results within a very short period of time.

In the year 1966, I went with a group of special degree students of Vidyodaya University to India on a research project. We were received at the University of Madras and were introduced by its staff to the then Professor of History of that university, Sri Nivasa Shastri who was then in his 80th year. When he heard from us about the status of education through the mother tongue in our university, he commented that Sri Lanka was far ahead of India in the matter of imparting education in the languages of the land.

It is by translating works written in international languages that the languages of a country can be enriched. At the time that the Vidyodaya University was started many such works were translated into Sinhala. That movement has lost its impetus today. This puts the student who studies through his mother tongue at a disadvantage. Students of the university must certainly obtain a good knowledge of an international language like English, which does not mean that they may neglect the study of their own languages.

To enrich a language means to provide through it the facilities that enable one to learn the subjects of one's choice. This is a matter which must receive the attention of educational authorities.

Education has their goals: to enhance personality, social consciousness and creativity. This is crucial at university level. The undergraduate is not a schoolboy. The university student whose aim is to reach the apex of the educational ladder must not only think of himself but also of his society, where he must get ready to play his part. This preparation will stand him in good stead when he enters the field of management or administration. Let him bear the essential mark of university education: let him be a creative individual as well as an intelligent revolutionary and not simply a blind follower of traditions. It should of course not be forgotten that to be revolutionary does not mean that one must be a maker of strife and conflicts.

I would also like to say a few words specially to the graduates who pass out today. All of you are having your various dreams about the future. But all your dreams may be negated by the terrorism that is rampant today. I urge you to strengthen your resolve to

eliminate all such barriers and to dedicate your energy and your intelligence to the progress not only of your own selves but also of your country, nation and religion.

I wish to conclude this address with a quotation from the late Professor G. P. Malalasekara, Chairman of the National Council of Higher Education:

New inventions appear almost every day, thanks to the progress of the physical sciences. This development at the physical level is accompanied by swift changes in the social life. The world we will face in twenty five years from now will be a completely different world. The aim of modern education should be to give the student the flexibility necessary for life in a fast changing society as well as the competence to offer to that society the service that it really needs.'

Thank you.