

Onwards Alone like a Unicorn

Dr. E. W. Adikaram

Translated by Ravi Palihawadana

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Adikaram, A Man Like No Other	1
Dr. E. W. Adikaram – A Unique Educator	7
I Am Not A Hero.....	17
Crime and Punishment	25
Learning and Understanding.....	28
The Affectionate Shall Bring Peace on Earth	31
A Mother's Love.....	33
Living Buddha or a Departed Buddha.....	36
‘Avurudu’ Rituals and Aged Children	40
The Web of Life	43
The Medium is Not the Message	47
Religious Fervour and Violence	50
Does the End Justify the Means?	53
Is it Possible to Commemorate the Buddha?.....	57
Those Who Lead Us on the Path to Destruction.....	62
The Computer and the Mirror.....	64
You Are Our Protectors	68
An Appeal to the Buddhist Clergy	71
Living and Dying From Moment to Moment.....	75
Psychological Pollution.....	80
Let He Who Hath Not Sinned Cast the First Stone	82
Isn't It Necessary to Have a Revolution?.....	86
Is There a Need for Religious Universities?.....	88
Creativity and the Vacant Mind	91
Duplicitous Lives and the Teaching Profession.....	94
A Most Suitable Country to Live in?.....	98
From Light to Darkness.....	102
Who am I?	105
The Fear of Being Free	108
Religious Rituals and Self-deception	111
The ‘Innate’ Consciousness	114

Total Attention.....	117
Onwards Alone, like a Unicorn	124
Parents, Do You Love Your Children?	126
Truth Alone Liberates Us	137
Can't We Lead Happier Lives?	139
Do Gods Exist?	142
Effortless Discipline	146
World Peace and Inner Peace	149
Was, Am and Will Be	152
Blossoming of a Flower.....	154
Rights and Responsibilities	156
What is the Purpose of Education?	159
Hollow Aspirations.....	162
Freedom from the Known.....	165
Importance of Open Discussions.....	169
A Teacher's Rights and Responsibilities	173
Aren't We Heading for Doom?	175
My Utopian Fantasy	177
As Ephemeral as a Bubble... ..	181
Who is a True Artist?	183
I Do as I Please.....	186
Is There Any Purpose in Living?	187
What is True freedom?	191
The Other Learning.....	194
Religious Education	204
What Came First, 'Karma' or the Individual?.....	207
Learning and Discipline	209
Isn't the Nationalist a Mental Patient?	214
The Flute	219
Our Society.....	221
More the Decline of Buddhist Order, Taller the Statues	225
Publishing History	229

ADIKARAM, A MAN LIKE NO OTHER

Professor J.B. Disanayaka

It happened about sixty years ago. I was just a lad of seventeen, studying in grade eleven at Ananda College. As I walked past the small play-ground in the centre of the primary school premises, I caught the sight of a small-made man in our national dress, walking towards the Principal's office. A senior whispered "That's Dr. Adikaram". I had a good look at him, the new president of the BTS, which looked after Ananda as the Island's main Buddhist educational institution.

I saw him again about ten years later, at the office of the Indian High Commission where I had gone to get a visa to go to India to attend a religious conference in Darjeeling organised by the Quakers, a society known for their opposition to violence and war. Dr. Adikaram was also there to get his visa to attend this very same Meeting. It was my rare privilege to have a word with him. We left to India by air, from Ratmalana, on the full-moon day of Wesak, 1959.

That was rather a coincidence, I thought, to go to India, the land of the Buddha's birth, on the full-moon day of Wesak, which celebrates three events of His life — the Birth, the Enlightenment and the Passing Away. At Madras, we boarded the Howrah Express to Calcutta. There were four of us, all on our way to the Conference: Dr. Adikaram, Chris Pullenayagam, Chitra Wijesinha and me. I had the rare chance to sit next to Dr. Adikaram and chat with him for two long days!

Some of what he said took me by surprise. I just could not understand him when he said that he had seen my 'astral body' on three or four occasions when he was reading in his study at his house in Pagoda. Being a Theosophist, he was able to explain to me about 'astral bodies' but I simply could not take his word. It was so strange. So, I requested him to write all that on paper and he promised to do

so on his return to Sri Lanka. And he did. It ran to about four or five foolscap pages!

As he sat in his study at Pagoda, he saw the glimpse of someone walking into his house. He came out of the room but there was none. This happened on a few more occasions and as days went by he got a faint glimpse of the face of this strange man. He told all his friends, including Dr. Mahinda Palihawadana, the Principal of Ananda Sastralaya, whom he met in the morning at Pagoda, to keep track of this strange character. However, they saw no one that fits his frame. On his return from the Indian High Commission, he told his friends, “Well, I saw that man today!”

Quakers had chosen one of the most beautiful sites for their Conference, in a bungalow overlooking Mount Kanchenjunga, one of the world’s highest mountains in the Himalayan range, bordering India and Nepal. We spent about a week listening to lectures and discussing matters of ethical interest — on how to build a world without barriers. On my return to the Island, I contributed an article to the University journal and it was titled ‘A World Without Barriers’.

Later, he took me to Adayar in Madras to listen to J. Krishnamurti at Vasanta Vihar. Krishnamurti was a man of stature, both physically and spiritually. I listened to him in earnest and found that his words made a lot of sense. ‘Conditioning’ is the word that made all the difference. We are all ‘conditioned’ by the world around us so much so that we fail to see reality. Our beliefs and dogmas, rites and rituals prevent us from seeing reality and all that prevents us from living in peace.

I had the chance to discuss some of these matters in detail with him intimately when I came to Pagoda to translate into Sinhala his PhD thesis, ‘Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon’. It was a wonderful model of research based on the study of Pali texts. He also

made me study Pali, so that I could do a better Sinhala translation. He assured to me that studying Pali was fun because he himself learnt it only after his first year at the University College, giving up science and mathematics.

I spent my vacations at Pagoda in the early sixties translating his book, but unfortunately I could not finish the work because I had to leave on a Fulbright scholarship to California in 1963. I think he himself completed the translation but never forgot to acknowledge my contribution in his Sinhala Preface. Only a few knew it because in the Preface my name appears as ‘Jayaratna Banda Disanayaka’ of the Department of Sinhala of the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya!

‘Conditioning’, as Krishnamurti says, prevents our mind from seeing reality. So we wanted to look at the nature of the mind itself, and we did a couple of experiments. I was at the Peradeniya campus and he was at Pagoda. We decided to set off a time on a particular day of the week to think about something, like rivers, mountains, animals and plants and so on. At the agreed upon time, I spent about five minutes, thinking about something in particular and jotted it down on a piece of paper. He did the same thing in his study at Pagoda. I posted my note to him and he sent his note to me. On many an occasion we have thought about the very same thing! Now, isn’t that strange!

Minds can communicate. Some call it telepathy. It still happens to me almost every day. I am writing this note on the fifteenth of March 2021. Let me tell you about a few strange coincidences that took place last month. On the ninth day of February I wanted to find out a little more about the Sinhala word ‘*san nam*’ (brand name) and I thought of calling Achintya Bandara, a young lecturer in the Sinhala Department, because he said the other day that I am the ‘*san nam*’ of Sinhala linguistics. In fifteen minutes, my mobile rings. It was Acintya Bandara!

On the 10th, Dr. Malini Endagama of the *Mahavamsa* Editorial Board wanted me to translate its fifth chapter to English. I was not interested and she wanted me to suggest another name. I thought of my friend, Austin Fernando, who was the Secretary to the President under the last government, and who has written a book in English, titled ‘My Belly is White’. However, I was unable to contact him because I do not have his telephone number. A couple of hours later, Austin rang me to find out the meaning of a Sinhala word. What a bit of luck!

On the 13th of February, I wanted to write a short note on the Sinhala word ‘*kana kaesbaeva*’ (blind sea-turtle). Then rings my mobile. “Sir, my name is Unantenne. What does ‘*kana kaesbeva viya siduren balanava*’ mean? “ Why on earth were we both thinking of the same blind mythical animal at the same time? What does all this mean? That the mind is strange. It was Dr. Adikaram who made me think about the unimaginable ways of the human mind.

His booklets in the ‘*Sitivili*’ (Thoughts) series were all about the ways of the world and the ways of the mind. He always posed questions and wanted you to answer them along with him. Do you think or does thinking occur to you? Why do we get angry when others scold you? What do dreams tell you? Are there layers in the mind — deep and surface? Can the end justify the means? and so on and so forth.

I liked his style of writing in Sinhala — simple and straightforward. When I compiled a handbook on the correct usage in Sinhala, in 2018, I chose him as one of the seven modern writers who have a style of their own and who deserve to be imitated. He was also one of the first to write on Modern Science in Sinhala. He edited the first science magazine in Sinhala, titled ‘*Navina Vidya*’. He compiled a small English-Sinhala glossary for school children to help them learn science in Sinhala.

He was a man, a bachelor, who loved not women but nature — birds and flowers. At Pagoda I observed, every morning, how he kept food for the birds and watered his flower plants. Occasionally, he calls me and says “Look how this flower smiles at me”. He allowed mice to hang around the garage as they pleased. Once he did not drive his car for a week because there were new-born little mice in the dicky!

He was a vegetarian not because it is considered a sin (*pav*) to kill animals. “Even if someone were to tell me that it is a merit (*pin*) to kill animals, I shall not kill simply because it hurts animals”. He never visited the zoo because they had to kill many animals to keep other animals alive. Prof. Mahinda Palihawadana is still a vegetarian who is doing his best to make this a world where not only human beings but all beings can live in peace.

My interest, however, was not in birds and plants but in language and culture. However, he was able to shift my attention to plants when he took me, along with Siri Palihawadana, who had an expensive camera, to the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens, to take pictures of certain trees for his text books in science. We sat under the shade of many trees and enjoyed our meals at leisure.

The 28th of December 1985 was a strange day. I was at the University of Edinburgh on a Commonwealth scholarship to study Applied Linguistics. On many a day I stop by the University Bookshop on Buccleuch Place to buy a book usually on Linguistics. However, when I browsed the books on the 28th, my attention was drawn to a book on Krishnamurti and I was delighted to set hands on it.

I went back to my room and was reading Krishnamurti, always thinking of Dr. Adikaram who introduced me to him at Vasantha Vihar in Adayar. My telephone rings and it was Siri Palihawadana. “JB, I have some bad news to tell you. Doctor passed away a few hours ago.” Now isn’t that strange? To buy a book on Krishnamurti

and read it, as Dr. Adikaram laid in his death bed?

Siri and his wife Lakshmi looked after Dr. Adikaram with utmost care and affection. I remember that he had a nursery of sandal-wood plants at the back-yard and they were distributed to those who loved plants. As I write this note in the library of my daughter's house, near the Sri Jayawardhanapura campus, I see the young sandal-wood tree in her garden, gifted to her by Ravi Palihawadana. It brings back memories of an unforgettable past, where Dr. Adikaram moulded my way of thought and my way of life.

Dr. Adikaram was like no other because different people saw him in different ways. He was an orientalist, with his knowledge of Pali and Sanskrit, a historian, who recorded the history of Early Buddhism in Ceylon, an educator who was the Principal of a leading Buddhist school, Ananda Sastralaya in Kotte, the founder of the leading Buddhist girls' school in Nugegoda, Anula Vidyalaya, a science writer, and a philosopher who did his best to mould the minds of the young to create a world without barriers.



*Left to right: Dr. Adikaram,
Siri Palihawadana, H.P. Siriwardane, and J.B. Disanayaka*

DR. E. W. ADIKARAM - A UNIQUE EDUCATOR

Professor Mahinda Palihawadana

Born at Wellampitiya on March 29, 1905, the early life of Edward Winifred Adikaram was marked by devotion to the practices of Theravada Buddhism and willingness to live strictly by its principles. At age 14, a talk at the Dhamma School aroused his naturally compassionate disposition and caused him to give up meat-eating. He became a vegetarian not in order to acquire religious merit, he later explained. It had one and only one meaning: it is because flesh invariably came from the killing of animals. Kindness to animals assumed legendary proportions in his life. Anecdotes about this, as about other traits of his character, are abundant. Some of these stories border on the incredible and some are actually fictitious; but they all show how non-conformist he could be in acting according to his convictions.

As a young man, he entered Colombo University College and offered science and mathematics at the first examination, but later switched to the study of Pali and Sanskrit. After graduation, he went to England on a government scholarship and entered the London School of Oriental Studies and obtained an M.A. degree in 1931 and in 1933 a Ph.D., based on the thesis "Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon", hailed by the likes of I.B. Horner and A.K. Warder as "a model of careful research".

Returning to Lanka, he reverted to his position as assistant teacher at Ananda Sastralaya, Kotte. Though armed with a PhD from London University, he preferred this modest job in a grant-aided school to service under the British government in a more remunerative capacity. Documents at the British Museum Library had convinced him of the grave injustices perpetrated by the colonial administration of Ceylon. He was therefore keen to join forces with others who worked for the overthrow of the imperial yoke. A personal friend of leading