

INTRODUCTION
SPECIAL ISSUE: DEDICATED TO EMERITUS PROFESSOR P.D.
PREMASIRI'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD OF
BUDDHIST STUDIES

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Mahinda Deegalle¹ and Upali M. Sedere²

A precious time has dawn for rich reminiscences. Life at large remains full of reminiscences and cherished memories. This Special Issue of—*Sri Lanka International Journal of Buddhist Studies*—celebrates the over four decades long academic career of Professor Pahalawattagē Don Premasiri. It captures glimpses of ever-lasting memories of a leading Buddhist scholar in Sri Lanka, whose formidable influence has spread worldwide in the field of Buddhist Studies and who has shaped the academic culture and integrity of several institutions of higher learning. Former students, colleagues and friends who appreciate the formidable contribution of Professor Premasiri towards success and flourishing of their lives as well as that of others pay tribute here by gathering a collection of insightful essays on Buddhist perspectives on life, birth, death and matters in-between.

Academic Life of Professor Premasiri

Professor Premasiri was born in Śrī Jayawardhanapura, Kotte, a suburb of Colombo on 25 July 1941. His primary and high school education was at Christian College, Kotte. This was the first English school (f. 1822, which became popular later as 'Cotta Institute') established by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) under British rule. In 1964, this church school was rebranded as Śrī Jayawardhanapura Mahāvīdyālaya after the Sri Lankan government took over some Christian denominational schools.

In 1959, Premasiri entered the University of Ceylon and obtained a Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree with a First Class specializing in Pali. In 1963, as an assistant lecturer in Pali and Buddhist Civilization, he began teaching at the University of Peradeniya, where he taught more than four decades. For his excellent performance in Bachelor of Arts Degree, he was awarded the Government University Scholarship for Oriental Studies. Premasiri entered St. John's College, University of Cambridge to study Western Philosophy from 1965 to 1968. Returning to Sri Lanka in 1968, he resumed teaching at Peradeniya in the Department of Buddhist Philosophy. In 1971, Cambridge University conferred on him a Master of Arts degree. In 1975, he held a visiting lectureship

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in Buddhist Philosophy at the Vidyalandara Campus of the University of Sri Lanka.

In 1976 he joined the Department of Philosophy at Peradeniya. In August 1977, receiving a post-graduate scholarship from the East West Center under the "Open Grants" scheme, Premasiri went to study in Honolulu, Hawaii. Premasiri carried out his doctoral research in Comparative Philosophy at the University of Hawaii from 1977 to 1980 and completed a doctoral thesis: *Moral Evaluation in Early Buddhism: From the Perspective of Western Philosophical Analysis* (1980). Upon returning to Sri Lanka, Premasiri rejoined the Department of Philosophy, University of Peradeniya. In 1996, he was appointed as Professor of Pali and Buddhist Studies. Upon retirement from University of Peradeniya in 2007, he became an Emeritus Professor of Pali and Buddhist Studies. Since 2007, Premasiri has continued to teach at Peradeniya as well as other higher educational institutions in both Sri Lanka and abroad.

Life at the University of Peradeniya

As a comparative philosopher, beyond theorizing and analyzing Buddhist ethics, Professor Premasiri was also concerned with religious matters related to Buddhist practice. Over the years he had built a good reputation within the university community as a supportive teacher and colleague. He participated in many extra-curricular activities of students of the university.

Over four decades, Premasiri has nourished many young minds locally at the University of Peradeniya. He has also inspired overseas students from the USA through participation in the Inter-Collegiate Sri Lankan Education (ISLE) programme and by taking up visiting teaching assignments in the US and elsewhere.

Professor Premasiri's Contribution to Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy

Professor P. D. Premasiri has played a key role in the establishment of Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy (SIBA) as well as its growth and success. Indeed, Premasiri was a member of the board of academics who made the original proposal for the establishment of SIBA. When SIBA was established, Premasiri was one of the pioneers of the SIBA campus, joined SIBA in July 2009, and served as the first Academic Director. He greatly contributed as the first, and most senior Professor in Pali and Buddhist Studies for the Masters and PhD degree programs, from 2009 up to the present. Since 2009 he has served as a member of the Board of Studies and Higher Degree Committee of SIBA. He contributed as Professor of Pali and Buddhist Studies for the very first B.A. Degree in Buddhist Leadership batch from 2009 to the present. In addition, Premasiri is on the advisory board of the *Sri Lanka International Journal of Buddhist Studies* (SIJBS), which is the journal published by SIBA.

The Buddhist Studies program at SIBA truly achieve its success because of Professor P.D. Premasiri's dedicated service. Prof. Premasiri always represented

SIBA and his presence was a prime factor of the success SIBA has achieved in the field of Buddhist Studies. As its name indicates, a vital part of SIBA's role is to provide a sound education based on the Pali sources of Buddhism to students from around the world, so as to bring the balm of the teachings of the Buddha to many people in our troubled world. Premasiri's role has been critical in making this endeavor, once only a dream, into a reality. In addition to students from Sri Lanka, many students from Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, China, Vietnam, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal, including many ordained monks and nuns, have been able to study at SIBA. There have also been students from Europe, Africa, and North America who have studied Buddhism at SIBA, taken degrees, and returned to help spread the Buddhist teachings in their home countries. Particularly the post-graduate students much valued Professor P. D. Premasiri.

Of a truth, Premasiri has been a blessing to SIBA in every possible way. With deepest respect and heartfelt gratitude, this edition of the SIJBS is dedicated to Professor P.D. Premasiri.

Professor Premasiri's Distinguished Contributions

One of the distinguished contributions to Buddhist Philosophy and Ethics is Professor Premasiri's pioneering discovery and presentation that there are clear distinctions between the notion of *puñña-pāpa* (merit and demerit) and *kusala-akusala* (skillful and unskillful). This research was first published as "Interpretation of Two Principal Ethical Terms in Early Buddhism" in the *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* (1976).¹ This discovery has attracted a significant attention as well as debate in Sri Lanka as well as in overseas in later decades as seen from the work of late Lance S. Cousins (1942–2015),² Damien Keown and his philosopher colleague, the late Professor Gunapala Dharmasiri (-2015). One instance of his international influence in the understanding of Buddhism is as follows. Citing Premasiri's contribution, Lance S. Cousins made a profound observation on the role of *puñña-pāpa* and its differentiation from *kusala-akusala* in Theravāda Buddhism. Cousins writes,

P.D. Premasiri has sought to differentiate the usage of *puñña* and *kusala*. Essentially, I agree with him that, although there is some overlapping, *puñña* is most often used in regard to actions intended to bring about results of a pleasant kind in the future. It is almost exclusively *kusala* which is used in relation to the Buddha's path. Indeed one may go further and suggest that *puñña* was almost certainly not a technical term in the thought of the Buddha and his early disciples. It was no doubt a part of the background of beliefs current at the time, although there is certainly no reason to suppose that they objected to the notion as such. Of course their understanding as to what constitutes *puñña* would not necessarily be the same as that of all their contemporaries.

What I am less happy with is the use by many scholars of the translation "merit" or "meritorious", at least for the earlier

literature. The notion of merit seems to imply the notions of “deserving” or “being entitled”. To the extent that this is so, it seems inappropriate for *puñña*, which simply means fortunate or happy.³

This is only one example of the importance of Premasiri’s work in the proper understanding of Buddhism that can be evolved by the thoughtful and careful examination of the Pāli sources. We are including a list of Premasiri’s publications for the benefit of our readers.

Endnotes

¹ Premasiri, 1976: pp. 63-74

² Cousins, 1996: pp. 136-164

³ Ibid.: pp. 154-155

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