

By SANDRA LOW
starmag@thestar.com.my

TALKING with ex-ambassador, author and dhamma speaker, Datuk Dr G.K. Ananda Kumaraseri, you get the notion that he is in a great hurry. Not that he is rushing off anywhere.

He is just a man with no time to lose. He wants to publish as many books and give as many dhamma talks as he can – to spread the message that people can live a life that is meaningful.

While he is a devout Buddhist, he strongly believes that anyone – irrespective of one's ethnic, cultural or social background, gender or creed – who is able to develop and discipline the mind would be well on their way to finding meaning in their lives.

Talking about the dhamma (teachings of Buddha that lead to enlightenment), Kumaraseri says that the Buddha talked about the reality of life and nature, that "nothing is permanent and we don't own anything in this world."

Kumaraseri points out that the only thing we own are our good deeds and unwhole-some deeds.

"If you don't live in denial and see things truthfully, it will lead you to live skillfully and live for the present moment. There is no need to be so attached to things. By all means, have goals, but don't make them the be-all and end-all of life," he says in an interview at his home in Petaling Jaya.

Born in Sentul in 1942 and the fifth child of 12 siblings, Kumaraseri is married to Datin Asoka Seneviratne and they have two sons, a daughter and three grandchildren.

Kumaraseri's diplomatic career spanned over 30 years with postings in Chennai, New Delhi, Tokyo, Washington DC and Nigeria (with concurrent accreditation to Ghana).

His first posting was in Chennai (then Madras) as a novice diplomat in the position as High Commissioner, and he remembers it as very challenging being in a completely different environment and dealing with people twice his age.

"In hindsight, it was a plus for me as I matured much faster dealing with older people because I had to think the way they did. If I had been in New York or London I would have been like any other youngster - wining and dining, interested in fast cars and women!" he says, with a twinkle in his eye.

For Malaysians keen on a career in the diplomatic service, Kumaraseri says one must be people-oriented and have an intellectual curiosity.

"The diplomatic service is the only profession which is so alive with events and developments. While you are asleep, the other half of the world is awake making mischief. You wake up each morning with new challenges from famine, war and peace negotiations, it is a 24-hour job," he says.

After taking a brief academic stint to pursue his doctoral degree (1986-1989), he returned to the Foreign Ministry to assume a number of senior positions, namely, the head of Inspectorate and Under Secretary of the Americas Division. In 1995, he retired as Director-General of Asean.

The role that Kumaraseri found most fulfilling was his secondment to the National Institute of Public Administration (Intan) to set up and head the Centre of International Relations and Strategic Studies.

Kumaraseri says that experience – during which he was tasked to train diplomats for the government – is useful to him today because he has to look at problems and issues in society, and approach these issues in terms of how to change mindsets and attitudes.

His diplomatic career was capped with the publication of a landmark book titled *Professional Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs Management: The Malaysian Experience*.

Asia Week magazine acknowledged the book by saying, "Kumaraseri takes the art of foreign relations and dissects it with the unerring eye of a scientist. His book is a comprehensive case-study of diplomacy as it is practised in Malaysia. The book should become the standard reference on Malaysian diplomacy."

Along with his two books on Malaysian

Mind matters

A former diplomat who doesn't believe in retirement is on a mission to spread the good word.



Datuk Dr G.K. Ananda Kumaraseri, an ex-ambassador who is now an author and dhamma speaker.

diplomacy (*Professional Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs Management: The Malaysian Experience and Professional Diplomacy, and Foreign Affairs Management: An Ambassador's Insight*)

Kumaraseri has self-published 11 other books including *Mothercare and Parenting: Key to Social Structuring, Living Buddhism: The Way Forward, Living Buddhism: Advancing from Knowing to Being, Matu-Posaka: A Paragon of Filial Piety, Welcoming the Birth of a Child, Angulimala, A Compendium of Buddhist Personal Names: Heritage and Significance of Adoption, My Alphabet Book: Buddhist Pedagogical Approach, My First Word Book: Buddhist Pedagogical Approach, The Terrifying Drug Menace: Relevance and Role of Buddhism, and his latest, Siddhartha: Prince of Peace.*

With our current society inundated by teenage pregnancies, abuse and drug-related problems, Kumaraseri's books and talks could provide a much-needed balm to heal these social ills through a change in mindset.

"We are not looking at why people are getting into these problems. These are all problems of the mind. Developing the mind while the baby is still in the mother's womb is ancient wisdom," he says.

"If we all start from there it will insulate the mind from negative influences. Then we

need to put in a wholly holistic programme so that when negative influences come by, the mind will reject it," he explains.

Giving an example of how 99% of drug addicts revert to addiction, he says that is because we only remove the drugs from the body through detoxification, but nothing is done to "re-program" the mind.

He says it is important that we develop a mental culture and explains: "If someone is taught to self-regulate from a young age, there is no way he will knowingly choose to do wrong."

Kumaraseri also organises activities in the temple in which children are taught to show respect to women and taught not to look at women as inferior.

Children are taught once a month to give thanks to their mothers at home and he points out that this practise guarantees kids grow up with a different mental culture.

"With such teachings, there is no way these children will grow up to exploit or abuse women. It would be as though they are exploiting their own mother or sister," he says.

For now, Kumaraseri is about to complete a book on King Bimbisara, king of the Magadha empire from 543 BC to 491 BC. Called *King*

Bimbisara: A Father's Unremitting Love, the book, he says, is a poignant story of a father's unconditional love for his son.

In the story, the children cannot feel their father's love until they become fathers themselves and know what it is like to be a father.

Kumaraseri has been passionate about this book because he wants to impress upon youngsters the importance of honouring fathers.

"The hidden agenda of my book is to encourage children to read as they would read classic literature, that they would be able to learn while they enjoy the book," he says.

Recently he started the Human Development and Peace Foundation – with a small group of people – a vehicle to try and spread positive messages across to society.

"I hope to encourage people to develop human values and a mental culture that will fit in with the issues that we are facing," he says.

Kumaraseri believes that our society needs a holistic approach when looking at family, child care and community development.

He gave an example of the "Tak Nak" anti-smoking ad campaigns (by the Health Ministry) that he strongly feels are not working.

"Decades ago the United States, Australia and Japan had done awareness programmes and they realised that awareness was not the problem. Attaching a phobia to smoking saying that it kills doesn't do anything for the mind, and we continue spending money on such programmes," he pointed out.

Before embarking on such a programme there has to be more thought put into it and he adds, "Kids are curious and if you stop them from doing something all the more they want to try it. There must be some alternative direction such as promoting interest in sports or fine arts."

He added that the government has to get their priorities in order.

"We need to get to the root of the problem and that is the mind has to be trained and developed from a young age. No one is looking at developing the mind which is the key to driving someone in the right direction," he stressed.

"I will continue to write and give talks, but I hope that I can get others to take this task on too – it has been a one-man army!" he says with a laugh.

Before retiring, Kumaraseri already knew he would continue working on his books.

"When I am writing I am totally absorbed in it so it is actually my own meditation and I find it therapeutic," says Kumaraseri, who keeps physically fit by doing some brisk walking and simple exercises every day.

"I also include some spiritual activities by going to the temple and meeting spiritual friends," he adds.

The serenity and humility that Kumaraseri exudes is surely derived from the satisfaction he gets through his contribution towards the well-being of others.

He finds it a blessing that he is able to say: "My life has been worthwhile, with purpose and meaning."

■ **Datuk Dr G.K. Ananda Kumaraseri's books are available at Sukhi Hotu bookstore outlets in Petaling Jaya, Selangor (shotu@streamyx.com / 03-7842 6828 or 03-7728 6682) and Penang (sukhiho2@streamyx.com / 04-229 4811); and The Times bookstore in Sri Hartamas, KL (03-6201 6871). He is also available for public talks and can be contacted at akumaraseri@yahoo.com, 03-7958 4182 or through his blog: www.livingbybuddhism.com.**