

# Sudharshan Seneviratne: A Personal Appreciation

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I first met Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne in July of 1993. As a recently tenured professor of religion at Carleton College in Minnesota, I participated in a Fulbright-Hays faculty development program in Sri Lanka that introduced faculty members from colleges and universities in the United States to the island's history, culture, politics, and society. In my case, it also served as preparation for directing ISLE – Intercollegiate Sri Lanka Education – a study abroad program for American undergraduates, centered in Kandy, that would commence shortly after the Fulbright program ended. As it was for much of the time between 1983 and 2009, Sri Lanka was on edge that summer, as President Premadasa had been assassinated by a suicide bomber in Colombo just two months earlier, and the war between the government and the LTTE showed no signs of abating. I was, frankly, quite nervous about having twenty American students under my wing in a country I did not know well.

It was, then, a particular pleasure to meet Sudharshan, an expert on ancient history and archaeology, who not only was deeply knowledgeable about Sri Lanka's distant past but also tremendously perceptive about its current situation and future prospects. During that Fulbright seminar and the ISLE program that followed, he did much to allay my anxieties, as much by who he was as by what he said. He had already taught several times at American colleges and universities, and seemed to



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understand the American mindset and Western culture more generally, to an unusual degree. We quickly established a personal rapport born of our shared interest in Buddhism, our mutual love of Pink Floyd, and the fact that we both were parents of young children. As scholars, we were quite different – he being an archaeologist focused on Sri Lanka and I a student of Indic and Tibetan Buddhist philosophical texts – but we found common ground in our fascination with history, politics, and the back-and-forth of debate on pretty much any topic under the sun. By the end of that fall's ISLE program, we – and our families, including Sudharshan's wife, Harsha and daughter, Shavera, and my wife Pam Percy, and our son, Ian – had forged deep bonds of affection. We were far from unique in this regard: Sudharshan was a deeply curious, highly gregarious, and intellectually engaging person who made countless friends wherever he went.

In the years after 1993, we all managed to see each other regularly, and the bonds we had created only strengthened. I directed the ISLE Program again in 2000, and Pam and I led a Carleton alumni trip to Sri Lanka in 2015. For his part, Sudharshan taught at Carleton in 1998 and 2000 (in the process, helping the college devise its Cross-Cultural Studies program), and visited any time he was teaching elsewhere in the U.S. We owed this happy circumstance to the fact that Shavera (who had been in the same elementary school as our son, Ian, in 1998) eventually attended Carleton and then went into a Ph.D. program in English literature at the nearby University of Minnesota. Because of our proximity to Shavera, Pam and I were honored to serve as her Minnesota-based "thatththa" and "amma" for well over a decade, as Sudharshan and Harsha pulled up stakes frequently, whether for Sudharshan's academic appointments in Sri Lanka and the U.S. or his diplomatic posts in New Delhi and Dhaka. Wherever they were, however, Sudharshan and Harsha placed Shavera at the center of their world and remained proud and attentive parents.

The more I got to know Sudharshan, the more I came to admire his remarkable accomplishments. In the most immediate sense, I witnessed him as an engaging and approachable, yet deeply knowledgeable teacher of American undergraduates in both Sri Lanka and the U.S., sharing his expertise in everything from the nuances of ancient Indian Ocean trade, evident from excavations of burial sites, to the politics of stupa restoration on the island, to the pernicious effects of colonialism and Orientalism in the development of Euro-American and South Asian museums. But, of course, I was aware of his larger role, as a student of the great Indian historian, Romila Thapar; as a University of Peradeniya professor who trained several generations of young Sri Lankan archaeologists; as overseer of projects at, among others, the Ibbankatuwa megalithic

site and the great Jetavana stupa; and as Director General of the Central Cultural Fund, a position he used to manage the engaging renovation of old museums (as at Polonnaruwa) and the creation of stunning new ones (as in Galle and Sigiriya), always with a deep commitment to curating Sri Lanka's historical artifacts in a manner that undermined ethno-nationalism. After his retirement from Peradeniya, he served as Sri Lankan High Commissioner in India and then Bangladesh, positions for which, with his combination of learning, intelligence, and social skills, he was perfectly suited. It was soon after his return from Dhaka in the summer of 2023 that we Zoomed with him for what turned out to be the last time. He was looking forward to settling back into Colombo but, alas, was given little time to do so.

I celebrate the many contributions Sudharshan made to his country as a scholar, teacher, and diplomat, and think with gratitude on all I learned from him over the decades, about Sri Lanka and much else besides – but I will always especially cherish the more personal memories, among them a simple gesture of human kindness that he extended to our family in the fall of 2000, at the Gal Vihara in Polonnaruwa. During our 1993 sojourn in Sri Lanka, Pam, Ian, and I were visited by Pam's mother, Marion Percy, a poet, spiritual adventurer, and intrepid world traveler. She accompanied us on the ISLE Program "Northern Tour" of Rajarata sites, and was present for Sudharshan's traditional sunset meditation, which he led every year for ISLE students on the rocks facing the colossal Buddha statues at Gal Vihara. She was deeply moved by the experience, and Sudharshan was delighted to have an endlessly curious older person come along on the tour and join the contemplative mood he sought to evoke in the presence of those extraordinary works of art and devotion. By the time we returned to Sri Lanka for the 2000 ISLE Program, Marion had died, and when Sudharshan led the sunset meditation at Gal Vihara that time, he paid special tribute to her, recalling her visit seven years earlier and her participation in the meditation at the same spot. It was a beautiful expression of compassion – precisely what one would expect of Sudharshan, who, through all his worldly successes and accomplishments, continued to love and care for people of all kinds, whether family, friends, fellow Sri Lankans, or sentient beings at large. In this, I like to think, he displayed something of the spirit of a bodhisattva. May he swiftly attain nirvana!