Address by the President

at Commencement Exercises on January 20, 2007

at Queen Sirikit National Convention Center (QSNCC)

President of the University Council,

President Emeritus,

The University Chaplain,

Members of AU Community,

Honored Guests,

Parents, Relatives and Friends, and

Dear Graduates:

It is indeed a great honor for me to address you on the occasion of this commencement. On behalf of all administrators, faculty and staff of the University, and our honored guests, permit me to congratulate each and everyone of you on your splendid achievement after years of hard work. We welcome your parents and family, and we share their pride in your achievement. Like them, we are certain that you will contribute to making the world a better place. You can be proud of this support by your family and the University and treasure it in your heart.

I know that all of you are excited and restless. You are looking forward to finishing the ceremony and meeting family and friends afterwards. Yet, please take a deep breath, savor this special moment, and listen attentively to what I will say.

As you all know, the year 2006 had been considered to be a special year for the Kingdom of Thailand. The whole nation celebrated the 60th Anniversary of the Reign of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great on June 9, 2006. Our University has also joined the nation in this celebration.

On the other hand, you could observe the unrest and the terrorism in the three southern provinces of Thailand; the frequent reports of graft and corruption in major public projects; doubts about the neutrality and honesty of various bodies, to mention just a few items that marked the year. Because of these ills in our society, moral development has been receiving more attention in Thai society recently. Especially during the political impasse that happened last year (2006), much was written about and discussed concerning the quality of our citizens. Prime Minister Surayud Chulanond touched upon the issues when he stated the government's policy platform before the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) on November 3, 2006. Then on December 8, 2006, the government made a morality, good governance and anti-corruption campaign in the state sector a part of the national agenda.

As alumni of Assumption University who are professionals of today, many of you will confront moral issues of importance directly. It is no longer a matter of merely pursuing your

careers in different fields. Rather, it is a matter of having to make the right choices in moral issues. You must be able to exhibit a certain level of moral maturity. We are living in a chaotic world, but without morality our society will experience even more chaos.

Elements of Moral Maturity

First we need to try to understand the concept of "**moral maturity.**" While it cannot and need not be defined in a single, universally accepted way, nevertheless some conceptual clarity is essential if we are to comprehend its complex and multifaceted nature.

Mathieson (2003) identifies seven elements of moral maturity. They provide an image of what a morally mature person is like.

1. Moral agency and sense of self

A person is entitled to one's own identity. She must be able to develop a sense of self and establish the authority of her own voice. Therefore, moral agency means that people see themselves as having **the right** and **the ability** to make decisions, and to act on them.

There is recognition that there is a self, the self chooses behaviors, and the behaviors affect the self and others. This recognition is fundamental to moral maturity.

2. Harnessing cognitive ability

Cognitive ability is the cornerstone of moral reasoning. It helps people identify situations that have a moral component. A well-developed mind can better imagine the impact of various courses of action. The morally mature people harness their intellectual powers to work for what is right.

3. Harnessing emotional resources

Emotions drive much of our behavior. They are important in initiating and sustaining action. Therefore, resisting impulses, the virtue of self-discipline, is critical to goal achievement. At the same time empathy, where someone feels the emotions of others, helps someone understand how events affect other people.

4. Using social skill

Morally mature people have the skills to participate in the social world. They can understand others, make themselves understood, and sometimes persuade others to adopt their own point of view. Morally mature people know that group norms affect behavior, and that social pressure is used to encourage obedience.

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5. Using principles

The ultimate sign of moral development is principle-based reasoning. A principle is an abstract moral idea applied across situations.

Morally mature people do not slavishly obey one principle however. They understand community standards and the relationships that bind communities together.

6. Respecting others

The morally mature person's respect for others shows itself in several ways. First, people are valued, recognizing the value of people simply because they are people with inherent worth. Second, morally mature people know they are part of an interdependent social system. People move from dependence, where they define themselves by others' opinions, to interdependence. In the last stage, people recognize the complex web of relationships that tie us to each other. Third, a morally mature person recognizes that knowing is dependent to some extent on the knower. However, social **facts** vary widely across cultures. Someone who recognizes that knowledge is in part socially defined can better deal with the realities of interpersonal exchange. Finally, a morally mature person can interact with others without feeling that one's own worldview is threatened.

7. Developing a sense of purpose

The final element of moral maturity is a sense of life purpose. It may be a way of living life, a dedication to certain processes rather than specifics. Service to a higher power is another recognizable life purpose, which may or may not entail service to others.

Morality and Character Development

We need not only the knowledge that we receive through our education, but also moral principles to guide us. This morality needs to be developed just like knowledge.

Just as the limbs are developed and strengthened through exercise, so morality needs to be developed through our individual and social interaction. You graduates have undoubtedly noticed this during the years of your education. You were developing knowledge in your courses, but you also were developing your sense of morality and sense of self in your interaction with your friends, teachers, and acquaintances. The development of morality is an ongoing process. You will continue to struggle to shape it as you go on with your lives.

Our moral principles give us only guidelines for our moral actions. But our moral maturity is the development of a capacity, which goes beyond principles. We are not bound by moral prescriptions because we naturally live them. In other words, we do not need to carry

around a manual to tell us how to act, because we instinctively live our morality. And this capacity is something developed over the years.

Moral maturity is interwoven with social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development, all of which are interdependent. They cannot be clearly separated. A morally mature person is a moral agent and is aware of this role. It helps people appreciate their responsibility and act according to the good.

The common view of moral development holds that children acquire moral values either by observing adults or by being instructed in moral virtue at the hands of adults. Moral development, according to this view, is a process of replicating the codes and standards of adult society in the behavior of the developing child. The more a child is instructed in moral virtue, the better his or her moral behavior will be, at least in the sense that this behavior should increasingly conform to the prevailing moral norms of adult society.

Yet the structural-developmentalists have tried to capture both the creativity of an individual's moral development and the uniqueness of the individual's moral knowledge during each of several distinct developmental periods.

- *The basic notion is that a person works out his or her own sense of morality through actively structuring and restructuring his or her social experience.*

- *The key underlying assumption is that person's own behavioral representation of moral rules and values is uniquely organized at each developmental level. Progress consists of a series of reorganizations each of which radically changes the nature of the individual's moral knowledge. These developmental organizations occur in an invariant sequence – that is, in the same order for all children – because each mode of moral organization is necessary for the emergence of its successor.*

Moral maturity clearly calls for the internalizing of values and a personal and self-conceived strategy to address problems whose concrete details cannot be foreseen. Mature young persons should possess a distinct sense of their uniqueness as a person, a realistic appraisal of their capacity to make a positive difference for others through their skills and caring, and some sense of direction about what in life offers unifying motivation for their continuing growth and education.

The mature youth can go beyond mere rule-conformity according to precise norms and can think of fitting responses to unforeseen situations on the basis of internal principles that have become their own.

Moral maturity is a combination of both mature moral judgment and mature moral conduct. Both moral judgment and moral conduct are important aspects of morality. We cannot become good or bad people without good or bad conduct. As Jean-Paul Sartre points out, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." Yet the moral conduct component is, by itself, inadequate as a measure of moral maturity because the moral conduct of some individuals is motivated simply by the desire to conform to collective norms. Mature moral judgment is necessary as a safeguard against conformity to the potentially immoral norms of the community.

Gene Bedley states that the "Morally mature person understands universal moral principles and accepts responsibility for applying them." As Aristotle pointed out, "It takes a fine and well-grounded character to react immediately with the right approvals and condemnation." Thus character is very essential in our life. Gandhi considered "Knowledge without character" as one of the seven deadly social sins to be aware of.

According to John Dewey, the cultivation of habit has moral significance, for it is the process by which the disposition of a student to respond to and act in the world is formed. Through habit formation, patterns of action and perception are developed that not only structure moral agents' tendencies to respond and act in certain ways – they also structure the way moral agents see and interpret the world by determining what kinds of stimuli they attend to and what kinds of features they recognize as relevant.

The cultivation of moral maturity thus requires not only that moral agents actively attune themselves to the morally relevant details of their environments but also that they develop a stable disposition to respond and to act appropriately (through a sustained, mindful, and directed cultivation of habitual practice).

As moral agents' actions begin to reflect the initial untrained insights of their moral sensibilities, those sensibilities are strengthened and stabilized, thereby expanding their capacities to transform their insights into a stable foundation of what Francisco Varela has called embodied "ethical know-how." Through repeated activity such know-how is employed and, by way of direct feedback, fine-tuned and increased. Through this process, moral maturity is achieved.

No two situations, and no two people, are ever exactly alike. Even a single individual is constantly changing, for, as one acquires experience, one's responses become constantly more refined. Thus there is no final answer as to what the appropriate response in a particular situation should be. Each person must simply respond as well as one can to each unique situation with nothing but experience-based intuition as guide.

Finding life's purpose is a difficult philosophical task. To choose one's own goals (and to respect others while pursuing them), to use one's cognitive, emotional, and social skills well, to keep fast to one's own principles) is not so easy. Most people probably don't reach full moral maturity during their lifetimes. However, the image offers an end point toward which students can strive. They can recognize the elements, appreciate them, and perhaps approach them in later life. Further, understanding moral maturity can help students evaluate statements by others.

During their years on campus at Assumption University, students were given opportunities to develop moral maturity in different ways – from their classes on professional ethics, to the conformity to certain rules and regulations, to their interaction with lecturers, staff, and friends on campus. But the most important strides in the development of moral character were the ones they achieved themselves. It would be wise to approach moral development programs in a spirit of meaningful educative activities. Students will be treated as travelers through life, not as objects to be transformed. AU has the responsibility of helping students set the course of their lives. Hopefully, we have given you a good start.

Dear Graduates:

We can recall the Royal Wisdom given to the Thai citizens by His Majesty the King on July 8, 1967 on knowledge and morality. He stated:

> "To achieve desired results that are also beneficial and
> morally just, you need more than just knowledge: You need
> honesty, sincerity and justice. Knowledge is like an engine
> that propels a vehicle. Moral principles are the steering wheel
> or rudder that leads the vehicle safely in the right direction."

In light of His Majesty's wisdom, I wish to encourage you to continue to develop moral maturity which AU has already initiated. Venture a bit further than you've gone before each day. Dare to dream bigger. Do not allow complacency to keep you up in mediocrity. You can restructure your past to affect the future. Try to experience the abundance of life to become cultured and learned people. Begin today looking beyond where you are to where you want to be.

Once again, I congratulate you on your success. Work hard to develop your professional skills as well as your spiritual well-being. Remember that your success is not the product of your hand only. As such, always be thankful to those who contributed to your success. In particular, remain grateful to your parents for their generosity, and the way they have supported you in various ways. Be also thankful to your faculty members who patiently educated and encouraged

you. Your friends also deserve your thanks, for they also have been an important part of your life and education. They have cheered you up when you were down. Always remember that gratitude is an important trait of an educated and morally mature person. Behave yourself accordingly as an ambassador of AU to mankind. Please come back to your *alma mater* to visit us from time to time.

May God grant you graces to face life's challenges and may you be filled with happiness and prosperity always.

Bancha Saenghiran, f.s.g., Ph.D.
President
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