

PROF DR YUSOFF ON TUTORING WITH COMPASSION

Interview by Lilian Kek Siew Yick

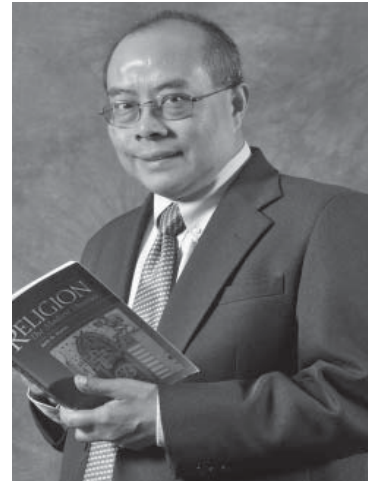
PROF DR MOHAMED YUSOFF ISMAIL is the Dean of Applied Social Sciences. In this interview, he lets us know what makes a great tutor, inserting wisdom gained from years of working in the field of comparative religion.

Lilian: Please tell us about yourself.

Prof Dr Yusoff: I am a social anthropologist by training. I studied at the Australian National University for a doctorate after pursuing my B.A. and M.A. at Monash University. My research interest has been on Theravada Buddhism for the last 20 years or so. I have always been interested in comparative religion and inter-religious dialogue. I am currently involved in interfaith activities led by the Amitabha Buddhist Society of Malaysia and Cheng Ho Multi-Cultural Trust. My philosophy in life is very simple – people should extend compassion towards others regardless of ethnicity and religion. Working relations would be more enjoyable and fruitful if one showed respect, compassion and care towards others. In fact, all religions have this basic tenet about loving kindness between human beings in society.

Lilian: In your opinion, what is the personality of an “A-star” tutor?

Prof Dr Yusoff: An “A-star” tutor should possess compassion towards students. Otherwise, the tutor’s commitment to delivering good teaching is questionable. Not much can be expected from those who become tutors simply for the sake of earning extra money during weekends. They might come to classes unprepared, be unfriendly to students and work according to the paid hours. They would not walk the extra mile. They might evade students who want to contact them during non-tutorial hours. They might even press the reject button when students call them up on their mobile phones. We cannot blame them as legally, they are not committing any crime. On the other hand, consider tutors who are dedicated and hardworking. They view their job as a calling even though it is on a part-time basis. They see it as a contribution towards manpower training and capacity building for the country. Our students are mature enough to differentiate “A-star” tutors from those who just pay lip service. We can gauge the quality of tutors not only from students’ evaluation but also from other sources. The bottom line is dedication. This is what



we need from tutors. If you have compassion for your students, dedication comes quite naturally. You will feel the joy of helping students in their learning process.

Lilian: What does religion say about teaching and education?

Prof Dr Yusoff: The basic premise of any religious teaching is to disseminate good values that will ensure an orderly way of life in the present world and the next. Prophets of any religion are great teachers. Prophet Muhammad was a great teacher. His lifestyle is to be emulated by Muslims. Buddha was a great teacher (achariya) and saviour (arahat) who taught people about the Noble Eightfold Path to salvation. His life is emulated by others. They renounce the world to find relief from suffering and to reach nirvana. Religious messengers are great teachers, whose task is to convey to others the teachings of the religion, including on moral conduct and ethical philosophy.

Lilian: What is the significance of tutoring styles towards learning?

Prof Dr Yusoff: Tutoring styles vary from person to person but the foundation of effective teaching is commitment to helping students understand their learning materials. We must bear in mind that tutorials are not lectures. Instead, tutorials are always interactive and tutors serve as

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facilitators. Secondly, some students learn very quickly with little coaching, while others take a little longer. Therefore, tutors should be able to gauge the reaction of students to the course content and look for telltale signs of whether they could comprehend and digest the ideas and concepts being taught. A tutor needs patience and a high level of tolerance. But if you are sincere and honest about teaching, tutorial classes can be enjoyable and lively. Students will interact and show a positive response. Teaching style is a personal choice but if tutors come to classes and start reading bits and pieces from modules, students might as well pack their bags and go home. Hence, preparation is important for tutors to guide students in discussions, prompt them to ask questions or argue on certain issues. Likewise, online tutorials are supposed to be interactive. It is definitely not a one-way traffic. The kind of answers given by tutors will eventually reveal their attitude, preparedness, level of knowledge and communication skills.

Lilian: Could you recall any of your teachers who have left a lasting impression on you?

Prof Dr Yusoff: Yes, a professor who first taught me anthropology. He was very humble despite being a great name in the field. I enjoyed his lectures and tutorials as he explained things in a very simple way, without using complicated terminology. He was very helpful. Once, he personally showed me where certain books were in the library although I could have used the cataloguing system to locate them. He was so approachable that we felt very much at home whenever we joined him for lunch and coffee break at the department. One advice that he gave me was that one should strive for the highest grade in one's academic subject. He said, "It is better for you to get an 'A,' even in Greek studies, than to get a 'D' in a choice discipline." With that advice, I do not regret at all doing anthropology.

Lilian: What is your opinion about the following statements?

- **Teachers are like hairdressers. They know the same style won't work for everybody.**

Prof Dr Yusoff: I agree with this statement. You need to be sensitive to the learning capability of various students. In OUM, our students are mature people who already have some preconceived ideas about certain knowledge. Not only that, they could be more experienced than the tutors, having been exposed to work and real-life situations more than half way through their life. So, the learning process could turn out to be the other way round too – we may learn something new from adult learners, something that is not written in modules or textbooks.

- **Teaching is like gardening – Though the growth is imperceptible at first, it rewards when the flowers bloom.**

Prof Dr Yusoff: Exactly. Sometimes, it takes time for knowledge and ideas to sink in. Education is a long-term nurturing process but we are now caught in the paper chase syndrome of getting degrees in the shortest possible time. Teaching and learning are part of socialisation. It is a continuous process that takes time.

- **Teaching is like marriage – It takes a few years to hit your stride.**

Prof Dr Yusoff: What I can perceive from this statement is that experience makes the teacher. The more often you meet your students, the more you can learn about them, especially their learning habits. So you can adjust yourself accordingly. Remember, good teachers also happen to be good listeners. If possible, take your students out for a teh tarik session or two. Who knows, you may end up learning something new from them.

Lilian: What is your advice to OUM tutors?

Prof Dr Yusoff: Begin with compassion as the basis for a meaningful relationship. Second, you must have passion for the responsibility you are entrusted with. Do not accept the job if you are going to do it half-heartedly. Third, when you are dealing with adult students, you need a lot of patience. Hence, good tutors possess three key qualities: compassion, passion and patience.

ONLINE POLL

I developed my tutoring style mostly through:

1. Observation of other tutors – I select tutors either from OUM or other universities and try to emulate them as much as possible.
2. Reading materials related to effective tutoring – I choose the styles recommended by experts and try them out.
3. Trial and error – I believe it is best to do it my way and continuously improve until I get it right.

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