Thilan Wijesinghe: Walking Tall



His career spans 25 years and he has held diverse portfolios. His experience transcends the private sector and the public sector and his knowledge ranges from finance, investment banking to leisure and property. He was the youngest and longest serving Chairman of the Board of Investment. During his tenure he introduced many firsts to the country. Thilan Wijesinghe is humble when he acknowledges those who have been instrumental to all his successes. He is a businessman with sharp acumen but he also has an aesthetic and spiritual side to him. Thilan Wijesinghe shared with Business Today, his experiences and knowledge that are truly inspirational.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe | Photography by Menaka Aravinda

Who is Thilan Wijesinghe?

First and foremost, I am a scrupulously straightforward and honest family man. Secondly, I am driven by a sense of entrepreneurship, accomplishment and ambition to tread the paths where few people would dare tread. Finally I have an aesthetic side to my life where I enjoy music, architecture and pursue my spiritual goals as a Buddhist.

During your career that spans about 25 years, you have held diverse portfolios. Can you tell us about your achievements at Sampath Bank?

I started working at Sampath Bank in my late twenties. N U Jayawardena picked me from obscurity and brought me on board and within one year I was promoted to the position of Manager to head Strategic Planning. At that time I was the youngest by about five years within that grade.

The year I took over as head of Strategic Planning was immediately consequent to an erosion of 20% of the bank's deposits within a matter of three weeks, which gave rise to serious questions about the stability of the bank. Thus when the former Chairman, Mr Jayawardena, made certain management changes, I was entrusted with the task of drawing up a short term recovery plan and a five year plan for the bank with a view of creating a platform for growth. By the time I resigned from the bank I had presented the five-year plan, achieved the required level of growth and stability, and as such I was quite happy to move on and pursue my entrepreneurial interests. Since then the bank has grown from strength to strength.

Therefore the singular achievement that I could cite as far as Sampath bank is concerned is that I played a role in stabilising the business and setting a platform for growth of the bank and bringing forth a new management team headed by Edgar Gunatunga.

What was your thinking behind forming Asia Capital?

The main reason was timing and my desire to be a shareholder in a business. I did not want to be an employee who was paid a monthly salary. The other was that my favourite subject in University was Finance. It was the year when the then UNP government had opened the stock market for foreign investment and the stock market was migrating to a paperless system. As such, during my early 30's I made a decision that I wanted to pursue a path of entrepreneurship where I would own a part of the business.

One Of The First Tasks I Felt I Had To Do Was To Introduce A Set Of Targeted Incentives Under The BOI Law… I Obtained Treasury Funding And Built Nine New Zones In The Five Years While I Was Head Of The Board Of Investment.

During your tenure Asia Capital grew substantially from initial investment of 25,000 dollars into a company with a market capitalisation of 55 million dollars in 1994, what was the strategy adopted to achieve such massive growth?

The key strategy was to position the company as a truly independent investment bank without affiliations to any other corporates or agendas of other corporates. This strategy worked because at that time, the two main stockbrokers with whom we were competing were affiliated with major corporates. Thus within one and a half years of being setup, we became the number one stockbroker and were successful in concluding some landmark corporate finance transactions at the time. These included the privatisation of Trans Asia Hotel, valued at 40 million dollars, which was then the largest ever transaction executed through the Colombo Stock Exchange. Asia Capital also co-promoted the Regent Sri Lanka Fund, the first ever country fund, listed in Dublin, dedicated to Sri Lankan equities.

The second key strategy was focus on research. Once I took over, I set up the research department of Asia securities from scratch. There were only two or three research products in the market and I initiated the creation of nine research products of which five or six were firsts. In fact, in 1993 Asia Securities received the highest ranking among Sri Lankan brokers for research and overall performance covering the Colombo Stock Exchange in a poll of over 600 fund managers worldwide conducted by Asiamoney Magazine.

Why did you decide to sell your equity holding of Asia Capital, considering that you were a co-founder?

During the first part of 1994, the platform was laid for Asia Capital to go public with an IPO, which we did during the latter part of the year. Stock broking volumes grew to the extent where we were earning a bottom line of about ten million rupees a month purely from stock broking and thus we felt we could tap the stock market to raise money to undertake corporate finance and other investment banking transactions.

However, in 1994, stock broking volumes and foreign interest in the capital markets dwindled to such an extent that we went from earning about ten million rupees profits a month from the stock broking business to barely breaking even without losing market share. It is during this time that I contemplated on what to do; one thought was to take some of the capital that was raised through the stock market and replicating the success story of Asia Capital in India. It was during this time – around July 1995 – that I was invited by the former President to become the Chairman of the Board of Investment. Since I was not feeling optimistic about the investment banking business, I decided to accept the appointment.

I would rank helping in the founding of SLIIT as one of my proudest personal achievements and I continue to devote time as a Board member looking at how we can expand, including to the North and East.

Within a few months of taking up this position, I sold my shares in Asia Capital to avoid both conflicts of interest and to cut my losses as I anticipated a downward trend in the stock market. I was proven right!

When you were appointed as the youngest BOI Chairman, what were your first thoughts?

The first thing that I did was I sought advice from my father who had been a public servant his entire life and asked him the do’s and don’ts of public service. I valued his advice very much.

One of the first tasks I felt I had to do was to introduce a set of targeted incentives under the BOI law. When I took over as Chairman, I believe under the advice of the World Bank and IMF, the Government had removed all tax holidays. Therefore, I had discussions with the investment community, my Board, the Secretary to the Treasury as well as the senior management of the BOI and made a case to the President, who was also the Minister of Finance and to whom I reported, that we needed a new set of targeted incentives to be legislated under the Board of Investment law. These incentives were brought forward within record time – actually within three months of my taking over.

The third aspect that was evident to me was the delays encountered by investors in implementing their projects. To address this issue I requested the Government to invest in Free Trades Zones again. I argued on the point that if a manufacturer has to go outside a zone he has to get an entire list of licenses and this was delaying implementation of manufacturing projects. Accordingly, I obtained Treasury funding and built nine new zones in the five years while I was heading the Board of Investment.

You introduced many firsts during your time as Chairman of the BOI. Can you tell us the key aspects you focused on as the Chairman?

There were three main focus areas. Focus number one was private investment into infrastructure. After my appointment I realised that USAID had funded the Treasury to build capacity to undertake what was then called BOO/BOT (Build-Own-Operate, Build-Own-Transfer type projects) which now fall under the realm of Public-Private Partnership (PPP) projects. In the two and a half years of technical assistance from USAID, not a single project had been successfully concluded.

Therefore I made a proposal to the Secretary to the Treasury and setup a new unit within the BOI called the Bureau of Infrastructure Investment (BII) and again with USAID funding, built the technical capability to structure private investment infrastructure. During my five years we financially closed and implemented 800 million dollars of infrastructure projects, the largest being SAGT (South Asia Gateway Terminal), independent power plants, mini hydro projects, and telecom sector projects such as Lanka Bell and Suntel and building IT infrastructure.

The second area of focus was IT. One of the first aspects I realised from the investment community in late 1995 was that there were vacancies for over 600 software programmers, but the universities were graduating only 150, per annum. I then invited all the Vice Chancellors of all the universities for a discussion and asked them what was constraining them from expanding their curriculum in terms of producing the numbers to fill the vacancies. The answers they gave me were: paucity of state funding and the outflow of graduates for foreign employment.

In The Private Sector You Are Virtually Always In Control Of What I Call The Tools Of Motivation: Increments, Promotions, Bonuses And Training Opportunities. However In The Public Service, Almost None Of The Tools Of Motivation Are Within The Control Of The Head Of The Organisation Whether It Is The Chairman Or The Director General.

Thereafter, along with Dr Lalith Gamage and Professor Sam Karunaratne, I helped in setting up of the Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT), which started with 30 million rupees of “seed capital” provided by the BOI. It became the first fee levying UGC (University Grants Commission) approved, Government owned IT university which has grown over the last ten years. I continue to function as one of the founder-Board members of SLIIT. It has now grown, with an enrolment of 4,500 students, conferring over 800 IT degrees and diplomas per annum.

As part of its drive to stimulate investment in IT, the BOI funded the laying of fibre optics on the entirety of the World Trade Centre, which resulted in IT companies moving into WTC, and then as they expanded they moved elsewhere. Virtusa, which has now become one of the world’s most prominent NASDAQ listed Sri Lankan founded IT companies, started at WTC because the required infrastructure was provided.

In addition, I initiated the master planning of Malabe as an IT hub and played a role in the location of Millennium IT’s campus within the Malabe area, which I believe now employ more than a 1,000 people.
I would rank helping in the founding of SLIIT as one of my proudest personal achievements and I continue to devote time as a Board member looking at how we can expand, including to the North and East. I am at the moment helping create an endowment fund for SLIIT for deserving students to obtain scholarships.

I Gained Much Self-Satisfaction In Creating The Investment Plan That Eventually Resulted In Developments Such As The Millennium City Housing In Athuruguriya And Nivasipura Housing In Ekala.

Another aspect that received my attention during my tenure as Chairman was having a targeted number of incentive schemes to increase the number of private hospital beds available in Colombo, which again was a consequence of Government policy. Apollo Hospital, Durdans, Nine Wells, Oasis, Nawaloka expansion and Asiri Surgical were setup as a consequence of the Government proactively providing them with land on concessional payment terms and certain fiscal incentives.

During your tenure as the Chairman of BOI, you were successful in bringing in the largest sum of FDI in 1999; what can you tell us about this?

In fact right at the outset, I asked my staff what are the goals that we should achieve. One goal was to achieve the highest-ever levels of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) within a period of three years. Our target was to do so in 1998, but we achieved that in 1999, when according to Central Bank statistics, we achieved 206 million dollars of FDI. This is the first time that FDI exceeded 200 million dollars in a year. I must qualify my statement and say that at that time FDI was computed on the basis of pure foreign equity and advances pending allocation of shares. I am proud of the fact that we achieved a milestone for the country.

The year 1999 was also significant since Sri Lanka’s GDP grew at 7.8 percent. I believe that if we achieve over seven percent this year it would be the first time since 1999. It was that year’s performance that also resulted in the BOI winning its first-ever international award where Corporate Location Magazine selected us as the second best investment promotion agency in Asia.

The BOI was also the first ever Government agency to launch its own interactive website in February 1996. The website was later ranked as among the best in the world by an investment promotion agency by Corporate Location magazine.

Considering your experience and when we look at the direction of the BOI today, what do you think could be done to increase its efficiency?

I have a great sentimental attachment for the institution that we call the Board of Investment. It is the window through which investors first get a perception of the country and it is the window through which a local investor understands the fiscal benefits available for investment. In my view, the success of the BOI needs to be measured by the speed at which the institution is able to convert an investment application or agreement signed into the first dollar or rupee being actually invested. Therefore, minimising the time frame between commitment and implementation is crucial. Follow through during the investment process and cycle is the key.

The BOI has to play a very important role in the area of public policy. I firmly believe that the BOI, UDA and Tourist Board are three key economic development agencies of the Government, structured to promote private sector investment. They must necessarily work in close interface with the Secretary and the Minister concerned and the other line ministries to ensure that private capital formation occurs with a high degree of efficiency.

The final aspect would be to strengthen the ability of the BOI to successfully implement PPP and other priority projects, which make a material difference in the economic landscape of the country. In 1999, five to six large projects (eg Lanka Bell and Suntel rolling out their network and Sri Lanka Telecom privatisation) contributed to a surge in GDP growth. Therefore, a few key private development projects are sufficient to generate a momentum in this country.

Having worked in the private sector and then the public sector, what would you say are the main differences and challenges that you had to face?

Let me point out two major differences in the public sector; one is that you find an untapped brain trust. Most professional staff, I would say more than 90 percent, has at least a Bachelor’s Degree or a professional qualification. I found it extremely stimulating to interact at both intellectual and professional levels with such knowledgeable staff, on aspects of public policy varying from land alienation, agriculture, ports and aviation to the film industry.

The second difference was the inability of the leader of the public institution

concerned, mostly due to appointments being made on political considerations and lack of exposure, to harness that knowledge and the capacity of the public servants to guide the institution in the right direction to achieve strategic economic objectives. I was able to give the necessary leadership primarily on account of a very supportive Board of Directors, which included the likes of Dr P B Jayasundera and Michael Mack, and senior staff members.

In the private sector you are virtually always in control of what I call the tools of motivation: increments, promotions, bonuses and training opportunities. However in the public service, almost none of the tools of motivation are within the control of the head of the organisation whether it is the Chairman or the Director General. All increments and bonuses are subject to public circulars. Therefore the challenge in public service is how to motivate public servants to achieve bigger and greater things when some of the tools of motivation are not within your control. It is primarily a sense of accomplishment and the recognition by his peers and superiors that motivates the genuine public servant to come to work every day. At the BOI, for example, the sense of accomplishment that a typical staff member would feel is that he or she played a role in making a difference in the country's economy and generating much needed jobs.

First I Must Be Humble Enough To Say That Everything I Have Touched Has Not Been A Success…The Successes I Have Achieved Are Due To The Help And Support I Have Received From Many. I Will Never Ever Take Singular Credit For Anything That I Have Achieved.

You touched on the telecommunication industry – the entrance of Lanka Bell and Suntel into the market and the privatisation of SLT. Currently when you look at the telecommunication industry there are many players and competition is very high. However now one can see a dip in the industry. How can we overcome this?

The stronger players in the telecommunication industry should be profitable for the industry to thrive. At the moment the levels of profitability and return on capital employed of the key telecom players from domestic business is cause for concern. This I believe is primarily due to regulatory aspects and of course the advent of new players to the market. But overall what is now required is some degree of regulation so that the key players are able to generate sufficient surpluses so that they can

reinvest. Adequate surpluses to reinvest in new technologies are crucial so that the growth in the software industry or any other industries that depend on efficient telecommunications services is not hampered.

In every country where telecoms have thrived, there has been a good regulator.

You served as Chairman of the Sub-Committee of PERC that selected the financial adviser to privatise SLT. Why was the telecommunication sector privatised?

In 1996, for a population at that time of 18 million people we had only 80,000 fixed telephone lines. Average waiting period for a phone was two and half years. The thinking was that it was essential to privatise Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT). A decision was made that prior to privatisation, competition would be introduced. Therefore, the issuing of licenses to Lanka Bell and Suntel occurred before the privatisation of SLT. Again, there was an extensive education programme of the stakeholders. For example, trade union members were sent on overseas visits to study telecom companies that were successfully privatised. I would say that the reason for the success of the initial drive to liberalise the telecom sector was the effective communication strategy and introduction of competition in a limited way. The results post liberalisation has been quite remarkable: the number of telephone lines started growing exponentially and service standards improved dramatically.

Again in your career you made a shift from the public sector to the private sector into property and leisure. Can you tell us why you made that shift?

From my post-university career to the BOI most of my achievements were connected to transactions; these included project finance, investment banking and structuring. I felt that there was something missing in my professional life. Certainly the left side of my brain – that is the mathematical side – was getting stimulated, but my creative side including passion for design and architecture – the right brain – was dormant.

Therefore, at the time of leaving the BOI, when I looked at the opportunities available, I was drawn to property development. One of the first persons who

stimulated my interest in property was Adrian Zecha, the founder of Aman resorts and GHM hotel chain. I had the pleasure of spending many hours with him when he was searching for properties in Sri Lanka to create a chain of Aman resorts.

I gained much self-satisfaction in creating the investment plan that eventually resulted in developments such as the Millennium City housing in Athuruguriya and Nivasipura housing in Ekala. At that time I realised that the private sector housing was typically limited to clusters of five to twenty houses. However in my travels to Malaysia, I had seen large townships where there were thousands of houses, playgrounds and hospitals, schools with everyone’s needs met within the township.

I realised that my calling would be to get involved in property development because it would strike an ideal balance between my forte for capital raising and the quantitative aspects of running business combined with my appreciation of design, architecture and aesthetics. Therefore, it was actually a fairly easy decision when I received a call from a shareholder of Asian Hotels who asked me to run the company as Co-CEO.

You were briefly Co-CEO of Asian Hotels Corporation. Can you tell us the strategy behind the merger of AHC with the subsidiary of Crescat?

I discovered that Asian Hotels was trading at a discounted market because it was perceived as a hotel company. Obviously at that time, with the prevailing conflict, the hotel business was not entirely profitable. However, I felt that Asian Hotels was a property company where profits from the sale of apartments were part and parcel of the recurrent income stream of the company. I clearly wanted a perception change as far as the way in which the capital markets valued the company.

With respect to the merger, there were regulations in the BOI that if an underperforming company merges with a performing company or is taken over by a performing company, there would be additional fiscal incentives available. Thus at the time the underperforming company was the hotel side of the business. So this company merged with the more profitable business Crescat which was built with the

apartments and the retail mall. As a result the operations of the company was brought under one BOI agreement. Another reason for the merger was to consolidate procurement and other management functions into a more cohesive unit, thereby generating greater management synergies.

What would you say were your major achievements at AHC?

I would say tripling the profitability of the company. Of course we had a wind behind our sail because that was a brief period where there was peace in the country due to the signing of the CFA. I then overlooked the completion of the master plan for the entire 11 acre and short listing architects to build the next tower, which was later named Monarch.

My main achievement was being able to achieve an almost four times higher share price within a period of 20 months and facilitating the sale of the company to John Keells Holdings at a reasonable valuation. John Keells have subsequently grown the business of Asian Hotels. I believe that this transaction was a win-win proposition for the sellers and the buyers; that is when you get the most amount of satisfaction.

Can you tell us about your work with the MJF Group and also the thinking behind Ceylon Tea Trails?

The opportunity with MJF came about because I opted to resign from Asian Hotels after John Keells bought it. Malik Fernando who had read in the newspaper that I had opted to resign called me and asked me what my future plans were. As I had none I met with Malik who wanted me help create a hotel/resort company.

One of the first things I did was present a vision and a strategy for creating a hotel company. We made several decisions at the outset that we would be in the boutique hotel segment, keeping in line with the fact that Dilmah, the majority shareholder in the venture, was also a premium tea.

The success of Ceylon Tea Trails (CTT) was that it was a genuine partnership among Nick Clayton, a personal friend and initial investor in Asia Capital, the MJF Group,

Bogawantalawa Tea Estates and myself. Everyone contributed towards the concept creation – four renovated plantation bungalows connected by walking trails. Then our CEO, Dominique Nordmann joined the company and advised the shareholders on the best way to operate the boutique hotel to world class standards.

Another reason for the success of Tea Trails is the location, which was identified after four months of research.

A crowning achievement for CTT was receipt of the TripAdvisor Travelers' Choice Award (2009 and 2010) in the categories of Best All Inclusive Hotel (World). Unlike any other worldwide hotel awards programmes, the "Choice Awards" are based on an analysis of real and unbiased reviews and opinions about the hotel by actual travellers and guests. This is a first-time achievement for any Sri Lankan hotel. CTT has also been featured in "best hotels lists" of many international publications: eg Top 10 hotels in the world for tea lovers, Luxury Traveller Magazine (UK); Top Five Colonial Holidays in the World, The Independent (UK); Hot List of best new hotels in the world (2006): Conde Nast Traveller; "World's Greatest Trips" in National Geographic's publication on "Journeys of a Lifetime"; "Best destination in the world (out of ten) to pop the question to your partner": Wow Traveller Magazine; Top 10 Tours to Whet your Whistle: Belfast Telegraph; Winter Getaways – 20 Great Destinations: Travel + Leisure, Australia. CTT was recently featured by National Geographic as one of the "World's Greatest Trips" in their 2008 publication on "Journeys of a Lifetime". Also, CTT was one of six resorts featured in the article "Luxury on the Edge" in the annual travel issue (May 2009) of Newsweek.
Tea Trails is also a financial success and thus I would like to think that this is the best boutique resort in Sri Lanka.

Along the way, I have had very good business partners with whom I continue my entrepreneurial journey. Being exposed to international business partners at a young age was a huge advantage.

With your experience what can be done to promote the leisure industry in Sri Lanka?

Much can be done. Just to give a macro-perspective, I believe tourism is still hovering at less than two percent of GDP; in countries such as France, Thailand it is

over seven percent of GDP. So we are starting from an absolute low base.

Planning infrastructure is crucial. For example we need to gear our airport infrastructure to handle larger influxes of tourists. The first impression is always important. We need to develop our regional airports because I do not believe within my working lifetime we will have a network of highways or expressways that will link up all the key parts of the country. Therefore, being able to travel quickly, like in the case of the Maldives, from one tourist destination to another and to be able to access them either through water or even by air, I feel, is going to be crucial. The reason why I am pointing this out is according to our customer research on Ceylon Tea Trails, the biggest negative that guests point out is the process of getting from one place to another – typically the road infrastructure and the delays encountered especially from the airport.

The next one is land allocation. We must ensure that the land is allocated to small and medium entrepreneurs as well as larger entrepreneurs. We must also work towards attracting international brands because with the international brands we can “piggy back” on their marketing and PR for the benefit of the tourism industry.

My contention is that our upside in tourism is going to come from primarily Western Europe and UK followed by India and that is because we have certain unique attributes favoured by travellers from these destinations. The fact that we are a developing country itself is an advantage because certain other countries have lost their charm through over development. As a consequence I would say that expanding tourist arrivals in a planned and measured approach is far better. The sector holds much promise for this country in terms of economic development and job creation because for every tourist there are about five direct and indirect jobs that are created.

If you take a look at your career, everything you have touched has been a success. What are your thoughts on this?

First I must be humble enough to say that everything I have touched has not been a success. There have been two instances where I have started certain businesses that have failed. Looking back, these failures have

been a result of placing too much trust in individuals and not understanding certain cultural aspects impacting the business.

The successes I have achieved are due to the help and support I have received from many. I will never ever take singular credit for anything that I have achieved. If I were to go back to my days at Asia Capital, it was really a team effort involving the key shareholders that contributed towards the success of the company. If I look at my achievements at the Board of Investment, first, credit must go to the Board, and the support we had from the Government, and the senior management team. It was a collective effort. Even when it came to the success of Tea Trails, it was a concept created by the Directors including myself and I gave that project the implementation support, working with a handpicked CEO.

If you were to ask what has contributed to my success, the key aspect has been my ability to work with the right partners and associate with those from whom I have learnt much. This has been a common thread in my career. If I go back to the late 80s and early 90s, my guru and mentor with whom I worked directly was N U Jayawardena. Prior to that, soon after University, when I was working at Price Waterhouse Coopers, I had the pleasure of working with D C Wijesekera who was one of the most brilliant accountants and business strategists. Then, subsequently, I had the privilege of working directly with people such as Dr P B Jayasundera from whom I learnt much about public policy and how to manage an economy, and him being on my Board, helped me drive the Board of Investments agenda forward. Subsequently, I had the privilege of partnering with Merrill Fernando when I was Managing Director of Forbes & Walker. I was able to then understand what made him one of Sri Lanka’s most successful entrepreneurs ever.

Along the way, I have had very good business partners with whom I continue my entrepreneurial journey. Being exposed to international business partners at a young age was a huge advantage.

You are a person with a multitude of talents and expertise, your portfolio ranges from investment banking, public sector service, real estate and leisure to music and sports. Can you tell us a little bit about that side of you?

I was born into a musical family. My grand uncles on my mother's side were very musical. Whenever they met up at our house they would congregate around the piano and there would be three hour long sing-song sessions; one of my granduncles would be on the piano, another on the piano accordion, another on a guitar and another on a harmonica. I must have been about six or seven years old at that time. They all played by ear, never having had a music lesson in their lives. So from that stage onwards, having watched them perform, I picked up piano and later guitar and harmonica by simply watching them. My mother thought I had some ability in music and sent me for piano lessons. After three years, since I did not like my music teacher I quit my lessons.

You can excel only in one profession at a time. I firmly believe in that. If you are a corporate leader, stick to it, and do other things that help you maintain your balance, but do not try and pursue another field as a career.

As far as music is concerned, it has been an important part of my life, because it has enabled me to relax and interface with creative people in Sri Lanka. In fact I first started dabbling in composing music at Cornell University in USA. During vacation time I was not always able travel to Sri Lanka to spend time with my family. There were these long summer holidays of two and a half months, and I was either doing a part time job or certain summer holidays I would be all alone in my dorm room. There was a piano in the lounge and that was my company and I then realised that composing was an interesting outlet.

When I came back to Sri Lanka after graduating from university I saw an advertisement in a newspaper where Nimal Mendis who is one of the pioneering western composers, who wrote Master Sir and Ganga Addara, had placed an advertisement for a concert titled 'The Thinking Show' and that he would be auditioning unknown musicians who if selected will be given the chance to perform two original songs in the second half of the concert. I sent in an application. I was selected and at the rehearsals at Navarangahala, I met Husni Suresh and DK who eventually became Alien Accent. I also met Anthony Surendra who subsequently went on to form Shakthi and I met a brilliant classical guitarist by the name of Jude Peiris, and we all performed in this concert. Strangely more than 20 years later, I am firm friends with those musicians and we have done many things over the years. Music has been something that has helped me maintain my balance.

As far as sports is concerned, again, I possibly inherited this from my father's side, I started playing cricket when I was nine for the under 12 team. I was then trained under Anuruddha Polonnowita who coached Ananda for almost two decades. When I was 12 years old my cricketing life took a strange twist. My father, Thilak Wijesinghe a Civil Engineer was very good friends with Ramsey Wettimuny who was also a Civil Engineer and father to Sunil, Mithra and Sidath – the cricketing family. I was sent to Ramsey Wettimuny for training when I realised that he was the man who was largely behind the success of his sons at cricket. Ramsey had in fact studied cricket to such an extent that he knew every fine point on cricketing technique. To him the foundation of a batsman is his stance, grip and back lift. With that technical change there was a sudden improvement in the way that I was batting and I started scoring runs.

I had the privilege of playing for the senior first eleven cricket team when I was thirteen. I still do not know whether this was a record of being the youngest, but I have been informed so. At fifteen I had the privilege of playing for Sara trophy cricket for Tamil Union. I have always played club cricket for the Tamil Union throughout my life and I will always be grateful to the club for giving me that break. I believe I became one of the youngest ever to score a Sara trophy century at 15 years. Then at 16 I was in the Sri Lanka under-19 team and during the same year won the all Island best batsman award. I also scored a century in the Ananda-Nalanda big match. At 18 or 19 I was the vice captain of the Under -19, Sri Lanka team and also captained the Ananda College team. During my years in university I stopped playing cricket.

In 1985 when I came back to Sri Lanka, I realised that I had lost my balance. More than anything else, cricket is all about the steadiness of your head and body in order to time the ball. I can clearly remember Sunil Wettimuny telling me that I would not be able to make it back since I had stayed away from the game for five and half years. I wanted to prove him wrong so I enrolled in a gym. I started reading books on training and began training on my own. I went to a former coach of Ananda College Lionel Mendis and joined my old club Tamil Union and I started by playing at the Division two level. I regained most of what I had lost in three years and was selected back into the Sri Lanka national pool, which is the final 25 from which the team for the test and one day international matches would be chosen. At this time Arjuna Ranatunga who had played under me at Ananda College was the

Captain of the Sri Lanka cricket team.

I actually peaked when I was 30 years old and that year I actually won the best Division one batsman’s award as well. I was vying for the opening slot, but that went to Chandika Hathurasinghe who was about eight years younger than I was. The selectors gave me the second best prize by making me the captain of the Sri Lanka A team. I captained Sri Lanka A against England A and Pakistan A, and I was 31 when I played my last club match for Tamil Union. It was the 50-over Premadasa Trophy Day-Night final; I had scored 49 runs and was run out at the 50th run because I was too unfit! I then realised that I could not hold a full time job and play cricket.

Thus I made a clean break from cricket. You can excel only in one profession at a time. I firmly believe in that. If you are a corporate leader, stick to it, and do other things that help you maintain your balance, but do not try and pursue another field as a career.

Cricket, just in the same way as music has allowed me to interact with people from diverse backgrounds. It has helped me remain grounded to the roots of this country, and to various aspects of society, which I think is very important when you live in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society such as Sri Lanka.

What keeps you going?

A rule by which I live is, at the end of every day, I try and ask myself, did I achieve my work-life balance that particular day? Did I achieve what I set out to achieve in my profession? Did I do my exercises? Did I spend enough quality time with my family? Did I connect with my spiritual side? And finally, am I giving something back to my community at large? At times, I get despondent when I cannot achieve this balance. It is not that I have to devote equal time to a given area. I set myself goals in each area and strive to pursue such goals systematically. However, in the final analysis, what keeps me going is my wife, two kids, and living according to basic tenets that keep me content.





