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SPEECH BY MR CHAN SOO SEN, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY

(PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE & MINISTRY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT), FOR THE BUDDHIST
LIBRARY NEW PREMISES OPENING CEREMONY DINNER, ON SATURDAY, 15 MAY 99, AT 7.30 PM,
AT WORLD TRADE CENTRE HARBOUR PAVILION

Good Evening

Venerable B Dhammaratana

Religious Advisor

Venerable Yuan Qing

Honorary Religious Advisor

Mr Hah Lee Kuan

President, Management Committee

Buddhist Research Society

Venerable Sirs

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very happy to join you this evening to celebrate the official opening of the Buddhist Library New Premises. I would like to congratulate the Buddhist Research Society on this important milestone. This official opening signifies the support your members, devotees, and the community at large have for the Library, which was set up in 1983 in support of the work of the Buddhist Research Society.

2 Over the last 16 years, the Library has developed into one of the largest Buddhist libraries in the region. There are now more than 2,000 members, comprising members from all religions and ethnic communities. You have a good collection of more than 15,000 books comprising both print materials and multi-media including CD-ROMs. Very importantly, the Library also organises a good range of activities, including observances and festivals, courses, and special events. The activities are scheduled and publicised well in advance. The courses cover a good range of subjects, from Buddhism, to meditation, to arts, to managing charity projects. There are also children's classes. Reading the materials you sent me, and sensing the atmosphere of this evening's occasion, I could feel the energy, commitment, and devotion of the people of the Buddhist Library.

3 Books make up a key dimension of any major civilisation. Books also make up a vital conduit for knowledge, value, and culture. In ancient civilisations, libraries are considered key infrastructure the State should invest in. Wise kings and emperors in the ancient world took pride in building libraries and commissioning the writing of books. The imperial librarian was a key official in the imperial court, in some cases as prominent as a Cabinet member today.

4 When Tang Hsuan Tsang returned to Xian in the 7th Century after having studied Buddhist scriptures in India for 12 years, his most important possession was the scriptures and books. One of the first things the Tang Emperor did was to build a large monastery complete with a library to facilitate and house Hsuan Tsang's works. Such is the key role of the library for learning and enlightenment. This will remain so for years to come.

National Archives of Singapore

5 I am someone who loves to go to libraries. I enjoy being surrounded by bookshelves full of books, and people who love to be with books. My association with the libraries started in the early 1970s when National Library set up its first branch library in Queenstown. I was very lucky as the branch library was just 10 minutes walk from my home. Going there to browse through books became my favourite pastime. A library gives one the opportunity to read freely. So I read a bit of everything. This habit went on when I went for my undergraduate study in Oxford. I studied mathematics then. I realised very quickly that there was not much point trying too hard when I had no inspiration. So I spent a lot of those time when I had no inspiration browsing through the excellent collection of books in the university libraries. I read a little of history, a little of sociology, a little of political science, a little of third world development, a little of religions. I also browsed through plenty of magazines, and did a fair amount of thinking or even day-dreaming in the libraries. The knowledge gained through browsing books proved most useful after I started work.

6 As someone who have benefited so much from libraries, I would like to wish the Buddhist Research Society and The Buddhist Library even greater success. One area you may wish to consider is greater exploitation of IT to expand your reach. You already have a nice website which I have visited. However, the website could do more. You could consider putting on line selected work from the Library. These could be papers presented at your activities, or research work the Society or the Library wish to share with others. There could also be a special mailbox for those who have questions, with a reply service recommending readings that could provide guidance. There are even possibilities of putting recordings of some of those courses on line in the longer term. This way, the Library reaches out to more through advancement in IT. You may thus need to organise some IT courses as part of your programmes, or run a campaign to encourage and help more members to be on Internet or to acquire software. You need to put in some effort, but then the benefits will be tremendous. More will benefit from your programmes. More will know of your work, and more will come to you.

7 So the best is yet to be. Do keep up with the good work for a better tomorrow.

Thank you.

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