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123rd GRADUATION (MORNING SESSION)

GRADUATION SPEECH by Mr. Pote Narittakurn (Lee Pit Teong)

Good Morning Mr. President, Your Excellencies, AIT Trustees, Faculty Members, Graduands Alumni, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a great honor to be here today at the AIT campus on this special day, the 123rd AIT Graduation Ceremony. I would like to congratulate all the graduands on this special occasion on your achievement.

Please let me tell you about some brief about my life. I was born in Myanmar in 1950. At that time, we were known as Burma. My parents are from China. I was born as a Myanmar nationality but my mom was not a Myanmar nationality. So when I grew up, I was not allowed to study any professional subject areas in the college. In the 60s the country was becoming a socialist country and the government at that time nationalized everything from my parents.

In 1970, I graduated from Yangon University. At that time, it was called Yangon Art and Science University, majoring in Physics. After I graduated, I was jobless. Very hard to find job. And my name was the Chinese name, Lee Pit Teong in Myanmar. So you can think of how difficulty the life was going to be. But I was lucky because of my good achievement in the school. I tried to earn my living as a tuition teacher. So I was teaching to all the high school students entering the college. Fortunately, in 1971, a friend of my father who is a Singaporean was in Bangkok. And he asked me to join him to work for him in Bangkok. I was so happy, so excited. A jobless boy at that time, 21 years old got an offer to get a job. It's a dream. When I came here, I still remember. When I came here, I had nothing in my pocket, not a single cent because at that time, we were not allowed to exchange any foreign currency. It was very strict. So I came here without anything. And that was the beginning of my life. I came here and I worked for my father's friend. He gave me a position called assistant manager in a mining company. And in actual fact, my work was like a clerk. Nothing serious to do, nothing serious to learn. That was in 1971 December. I still remember the day I arrived here-December 18, 1971. It is always in my head. After three months or so, my father's friend whom I called "uncle" told me "Don't work for me because there is no future working for me. You should go and apply. Try your luck to apply at AIT." At that time, nobody in Myanmar knew AIT. So I said yes. I was very happy



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because as an elderly person, he allowed opened the door for me to go out and try my new life to study.

So I found out that AIT was at that time inside Chulalongkorn University campus. In the faculty of Engineering. I applied and was very fortunate, I was awarded the scholarship. At that time, I was the first student from Myanmar to AIT. At that time, the first term, that was inside Chulalongkorn campus in 1972. I still remember September. Then the second term, January 1973, we moved to this campus and Dr. Subin here, Prof. Subin, was my professor at that time. So this morning when we met each other, I was so grateful. Thank you very much. I graduated in 1974, getting my Master's degree. And I was working as a Research Associate for seven years at the Water Resources Engineering Division. My graduation at that time was not here because this building did not exist at that time. I remember that the graduation was at Narai Hotel at that time in 1974.

During the seven years at AIT, I really gained a lot of experiences. The most important thing at that time that I gained was how to liaise, how to work with outsiders. My job at that time was to liaise between government officials and the Institute because most of the research projects that we working for were granted by the government. So I gained a lot experiences, then there is how I studied to learn how to be very patient because of language difficulty and difference in culture and also patience and finally I gained a lot of patience, passion, and perseverance.

In 1981, a group of friends, including myself, went to Patpong at that time very often to drink. I didn't drink alcohol, I drank only Coca Cola. So, we decided that there was a place empty. It used to be an ice cream parlor. It was ice cream parlor own by, if I was not mistaken, Food Land and another company. So we negotiated, and then we decided to open a bookstore. And Patpong was at that time the only nightlife area. You can imagine opening a bookstore inside Patpong. We calculated that the breakeven point at that time was to sell 7000 Baht a day of books to break even. A friend of mine said even selling noodle can reach 7000 Baht, why not sell books to reach that. Then, we all decided to go ahead. But after deciding to go ahead, nobody really wanted to run the business. So everyone looked at me. So I had to resign the job here and I started running the book business. We opened until midnight. I was probably the only bookstore that opens until midnight, in Asia, and also in the world. We opened the whole day. Day time, all the office staff around there would come and buy books. In the night time, those people, those stories in the ground floor, nightlife, at the end of the evening nothing to do, they buy books and go back home. So this is how we started.



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And after a few years, by selling books, the retail shop was not really that excited. So we started to go into library services, selling books to the academic libraries in Thailand. It was a very tough job. No much money in the pocket. Selling books, you need a lot of stock. There are two problems in the book business. The first problem is—you buy a lot of books and you can't sell, it's called overstock and you have to pay for it. If the book that you buy sells too well, you are understock. Always the stock problems.

In 1986, CD Rom technology came out. In the early days in the 80s, if you talked about 100 megabyte, it's not unbelievable. CD Rom can store up to 600 megabyte. And what the publishers started doing was they put all the indexes, abstracts, on the huge volumes into one CD Rom using the retriever software. So I looked at it. I told myself this is the best. I should move into it. I should not sell books anymore. I should go into this. I take the risk. I went into the CD Rom business. There are two big advantages selling CD Rom. The first advantage is you don't carry any stock. When you get an order, you order to the publishers, you send this, you get money, you get your cut, beautiful. The second advantage is still today—every database that you sell to libraries is subscription-based meaning like newspapers every January 1, the money comes in because every library has to subscribe continuously. So, those are the two real advantages. Then, in 1989, I told myself that the library business in Thailand was pretty small, limited. And I told myself that if I only stayed in Thailand, maybe one fine day someone in other countries like Singapore and so on will get the biggest distribution and I will become a smaller and a part of it. So they will control me. Why don't I go outside and start something. I took the risk very boldly, opened a small little office in Singapore. I still remember. It was not a real office. I go and talk to a friend of mine and said: "Please, let me use your house as a registered address for my company." This is how we started. Then we grew from Singapore and we started into Malaysia, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

And from 1990s up to now, we grew from industry. CD Rom technology also moved from CD Rom to CD Rom network into dialing access, into internet. Everything on internet. We grew and today we have about more than 1200 staff around Asia-Pacific from Australia to India as well as we have office in the United States. We also have offices in Latin America. So today we are one of the biggest companies in the world that provides information services. These, without patience, without passion, without perseverance, and especially without accepting changes in life, I would not be having these. In 2008, I was asked by Chulalongkorn University. They were building this huge edutainment building called Chamchuri Square. They asked me to open a bookstore. But at that time, all my books are already online. Already becoming e-books. So we



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tried very hard to convince them that I am not doing a bookstore. But how about if I would have a library there so that customers come, they can read books? And also let me open like a coffee shop for students and for faculty members. And that was how we started going into restaurant business. And I called it “Water Library”. The reason why I called it “Water Library” at that time was I still remember. If I announced that this restaurant sells best food, every restaurant can say the same thing. But if I say that this restaurant has all the water from all over the world, no restaurant in Thailand has it. So that’s the marketing strategy. So I called it Water Library and we will try very hard to have all kinds of water. You are all welcomed to visit my restaurant. Be my guests. It’s a very fine dining place with all the water. The first three years was very, very challenging. You are dealing with the patient staff. You are dealing with the chef. The chefs are very emotional. They are artists. In my life, there are two professions that I found out that are very difficult to handle—chefs and programmers. That was the biggest challenge. Another challenge was the customers. Every time, your restaurant is full, you will get nervous because you will be doing something wrong, something missing. At the same time, if the restaurant is empty, you are also get nervous because you are going to lose money. So, this is how we balance. And with the success story of the restaurants. Today, we have about 15 restaurants throughout Thailand, Myanmar, and Singapore. In Singapore, in fact, the first restaurant is going to open next week. I am very excited. All these happened because, I want to say humble and patience. Without humble and patience very hard to achieve this. Now, of all these things, I was saying to myself last night how can I present this. So I would like to ask you one question. In fact, I am asking myself “Is it destiny?” or “Is it my obligation?” or by choice that I become up to today. Now, all of you have to start your life, the journey from now on. Your graduation today doesn’t mean ‘That’s it’.

Now, you have to start your life. You have to work hard. I will give you a few pointers so that at least these pointers one day you may think of it. You may appreciate it. Definitely, one thing that will happen is after a few years you will forget about this presentation of the speech because I forgot already that during my graduation who was giving the speech and what was it. I was so excited as usual and you are also going to be very excited now. So, I will give you a few pointers.

The first pointer is going to be about changes. Don’t be afraid of changes. Engineers tend to be a bit worry about changes. Don’t worry. So long as you think with the good intention, with the good spirit, you just do it. Changes can be opportunity. Second point is very, very important in life is integrity. When you say integrity, you always work with integrity regardless of whether



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you are working on academy, environment, on professional environment, even for your personal life. Integrity is very important. You have to be honest. The third point is I always call it PPP. That is be passionate, be patient, and have perseverance. The last point is always don't forget your roots, your country, your parents, your family members, those who have helped you in your life. And most importantly institutes that you have studied such as AIT. Don't forget. Always try to do something back.

The challenges you face today are very different from my time. The world we live in today is a lot more complicated and competitive. It's truly an honor to have been invited to this 123rd AIT Graduation Ceremony. I hope that the experiences I've shared will help inspire you to become successful. Live well and prosper. Thank you.