

## Presidential Townhall, 31 Jan 2026

### Theme: We cannot shortchange respect

Let me begin with a personal experience which happened long ago, but I never forgot about it.

It was the early 1979 when I was heading back to Kanglung College after the winter vacation. When we reached Samdrupjongkhar we checked into a hotel. There were four of us but we took only one room with two beds because we planned to share the beds. Just as we settling down for the evening, there a soft knock on the door. The helper boy said, that the owner wanted to see us. I asked why? He replied that we had booked only two beds but we are now four persons.

After the boy left, we had a brief discussion among ourselves. One of my friends said, “we will go and argue with him, it’s our right to decide how we want to sleep.” Another chipped in, “We agreed to pay for two beds, we didn’t ask to add any more beds.” Another friend said, “let’s change the hotel and go to another one.”

I tried to be the peacemaker. I knew that it was late and probably we won’t get another hotel. I also knew that the hotel owner had the right to be upset because we lied about number of people when we checked in. I told my friends, “Let me go and talk to him.”

When I entered the restaurant area of the hotel, I noticed that the lights were already tuned low as there were no customers. At the far end, I saw a man, hunched over a bowl of noodles. I stepped in and approached the table slowly. Before he could say anything, I spoke up. “Sir, I am sorry and I came to apologise because we lied about the number of persons the room. But we are students and we don’t have much money. So, we thought we could save some money by sharing beds.

He was quiet, his chop sticks in his hand as he stared at me without expression. Then he gestured me to sit down on the chair opposite him. He put his chop sticks down and sat back on his chair. “You know I was also a student like you,” he said softly. I was relieved there was no anger in his voice. “You should have told me honestly; I would have understood.” I knew he was right and that we had no reasonable defence.

“I know Sir, and again we are sorry,” I said. “But I would be grateful if you could kindly consider some concessions.” He bent down over his noodle bowl and took a few mouthfuls before he spoke again.

“No, I don’t need you to pay more. It’s okay. And I am happy that you came to talk to me.”

I thanked him profusely, and walked out quietly, but happy and relieved.

The lesson for me was to have the humility to accept our mistake and to be respectful to other person's feelings too. He was the owner. He felt that he was lied to and therefore not respected. But when I accepted our mistake and apologised, he felt his respect regained! And that made him generous.

The word 'respect' could have many meanings depending on how you use it. But simply put, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as *"a strong feeling of approval of somebody/something because of their good qualities or achievements."*

We show respect to our parents because they brought us into the world and sacrificed much to make us what we are today. As youngsters we often think that we know more than our parents. I'm sure many of you have the same experience; when my daughter was a teenager, often she would say, "Apa, you don't know anything." But that's ok because every generation goes through different worlds and perceives the world differently. That does not mean your children don't respect you; they do and you have to make room for their exploration of the boundaries of their knowledge.

I'm sure many of you have ageing parents. You respect them because now you see, especially when yourself have become a parent, what you would do to ensure a better world for your children. In that same light you see in the innocent eyes of your children, the world that you dream for them, sometimes even reflecting what you yourself could not be.

We respect our teachers because they gave us knowledge and taught us what is right and wrong. We respect authority, not necessarily because the person who wields the power deserves it, but the chair or the position the person occupies keeps order and stability in a chaotic world. We respect our friends and colleagues because each one of them has something unique about them and that these friends often become the locus of our own world. Yes, people are different; yes, we don't always agree with our friends, but respect is letting them be different from us. Respect is accepting that they don't always agree with us and to accept that we are not always right.

More than all of the above I want to talk of the value of respect in our day-to-day work. It's a hard life for the health worker, like you and me. Ours is a service industry. But unlike other service industry, ours deal with life and death, pain and grief, and what is more, often it is the last stage before the final hurrah of peoples' lives!

Be it a nurse, a doctor or a technician, we are often shouted at; sometimes even physically abused. We are criticised unjustly. When a patient gets well, no one thanks you for the care you gave day and night. When a patient is brought back to life from the brink of death, no one thanks the doctor for it. Most often, people think that that is your duty. And worse, people think that it is their right to get what you gave beyond the call of duty.

And I know that most times, you would simply shrug yours shoulders and never give it a second thought. That is the nobility of our profession. We

became what we are because we felt a calling for it; we committed ourselves to a lifetime of service and sacrifice when we chose our profession.

You might ask, why should I respect anybody? Worse so, why should I give respect to someone who abuses me instead of appreciating what I'm doing for them.

It is an understandable feeling and I respect that. When patients come to the hospital, they are in pain. They are suffering and often in fear of death. Sometimes they are not even looking for medicines, but a kind word, a reassurance that they will be ok. Sometimes, their anger maybe just a projection of their failure to take care of their health. It is only human to selfish; to be self-centred and often blame the world for all their sufferings!

But we have to show restraint. We have to respect people for the life choices they have made even if it means putting themselves in harm's way. We have to understand if they are angry, if they are unreasonable because our profession demands that.

Similarly, it is important that we respect our colleagues. Juniors should respect seniors because they have gone through so much more than you. They have so much more knowledge and experiences than you. But seniors too must respect the juniors because they are the future. You'll retire and it will be the juniors who will be in your place someday. It is life's unyielding law that no one lasts forever. So, teach them, mentor them, and lead them to be future great doctors, nurses and technicians.

My friends, you may ask, what do I get in return for respecting others?

To answer this, let me tell you again a personal experience. In 1988 I was a GDMO here in this very hospital. I was young and I was good at what I was doing, and I was perhaps proud because of that. Our Medical Superintendent then, Dr Pemba, one day walked me up from the OPD to the ward, his hand resting on my shoulders. He said, "Pem, you know- you can see 99 patients with all the respect and care, and with the 100<sup>th</sup> patient, you lose your cool and you shout or scold. Those 99 patients will not remember you, but the 100<sup>th</sup> one will never forget you." Alas, it was a great lesson, but I'm afraid I never succeeded in living up to that high standard.

So don't expect anything in return because you showed respect to others. I'm sure you all have experiences of being treated unfairly and poorly despite treating someone with respect. Treating someone with respect does not guarantee you anything in return. However, the key thing to keep in mind is that even if treating others with respect does not generate that response we expect, it is still worthwhile and something to strive for.

The other question that sometimes crosses our minds is, will I be respected? Aha, that is where it gets tricky. Respect cannot be a matter of right. It must be earned.

## What do I mean by that?

To be respected you must have qualities that naturally make people to look up to you. Such qualities may be tangible ones such as the breath of your knowledge, or the intangible human nature that draws people's respect and esteem for you.

No matter what it is, it has to be something about you, or in you, that makes people look up to you. It has to be something that people would like to emulate or accept that they can never have what you have. Respect must be earned; not to be expected as a matter of right.

Finally, I emphasize that you must never short change respect. Because your respect and your word of kindness might change a person, if not the world. Let me leave you with a story from Leo Tolstoy, the greatest writer of all times.

*“One morning, Tolstoy was walking through a village street when a beggar reached out his hand. Tolstoy searched his pockets but found them empty, he had gone out for a walk and hadn't brought any money.*

*He gently said to the beggar, “My friend, forgive me. I have no money with me right now. I'm sure you will be disappointed, but I am helpless – I truly have nothing on me.”*

*He placed his hand on the beggar's shoulder and repeated, “Friend, forgive me, I have no money.”*

*Beggar smiled and said, “No problem. You called me friend that means more to me than money. Many have given me coins, but no one has ever given me what you just did. I'm deeply grateful.”*

*Just one word transformed something in that beggar's heart.*

*Tolstoy noticed how the beggar's face changed, how he suddenly seemed like a different man. It was the first time someone had called him friend. Who calls a beggar a friend?*

*That single word of love sparked a revolution within him. His self-worth changed. His dignity was restored. His entire personality seemed renewed. He was no longer just a wandering beggar – he was a human being. A new creation had begun inside him.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://moralstories26.com/tolstoy-and-beggar-story-how-a-single-word-transformed-a-life/#google\\_vignette](https://moralstories26.com/tolstoy-and-beggar-story-how-a-single-word-transformed-a-life/#google_vignette)