A few nations, quite a good number of large corporations and the best of the business schools are what they are today because of his contributions. However, the role he loves to don, rather which he lives every moment by, is that of a teacher and his students rule the roost today in every field across the globe. Bala V Balachandran, is genuinely interested in the welfare of his students. To his students he is Uncle Bala.

A S Gopal

The Teacher of teachers

People from different backgrounds have made it big in life. Some have been able to mark their name in history by demonstrating extraordinary management and leadership skills even without academic brilliance and some have done it along with academic achievements. Here is a person who is one of the best academicians in the world and has produced many more like him. He is also known for the emotional connection he has with everybody who works with him. In his words, “Education gives you academic credibility; intellect is different from knowledge and there is always something or somebody who triggers or inspires you in life, may be at an early age. For someone to create a niche in life, it’s more to do with his Emotional Quotient rather than the Intelligence Quotient. IQ is necessary, but not sufficient whereas EQ is sufficient. EQ is the engine and IQ is a by-product.” His life is an inspiration for many, for it is triggered by EQ and is filled with IQ.

His very name would kindle a feeling of respect, reverence, love and affection from those who know him personally as well as the one who may not know him personally, but would have heard about him. A few nations, quite a good number of large corporations and the best of the business schools are what they are today because of his contributions. Whether it is framing of policies, working out strategies, extending consultations, giving advices, or heading organisations he still continues to do with élan. However, the role he loves to don, rather which he lives every moment by, is that of a teacher and his students rule the roost today in every field across the globe. His ideas have turned around organisations and he always wants to give more. He says, “Happiness is only in giving, to help the needy, to give to someone who is not related to you. You feel happy not by anticipating it, but by experiencing it in the very act; the doing itself is happiness.” He is genuinely interested in the welfare of his students. Meet Bala V Balachandran, Distinguished Professor, Kellogg, and Honorary Dean, Great Lakes Institute of Management. To his students he is “Uncle Bala”.

Bala was born near Pudukottai in Tamil Nadu and right from his childhood he was influenced and inspired by his uncle, Sathyamurthy, who was a great freedom fighter. Speaking about it Bala said, “My first ten years defined the rest of my life. When I was seven, I accompanied my uncle to see Mahatma Gandhi. Since I was the youngest in the crowd, Gandhiji took me into his lap, hugged me, kissed me and asked what I could do for India. Spontaneously I replied that I would give my life for India. Gandhiji had tears in his eyes and so did I. At that age I didn’t know much about Gandhiji, but his eyes amazed me and dragged me. This scene still keeps playing itself in my mind and I feel accountable to that moment.”

Bala was the eldest son to his mother and both were very much attached to each other. One of his close relatives, who was a very
affluent person, living in a palatial bungalow, used to host the rich in the town in the main hall of his bungalow on important occasions. During one such occasion Bala was a mute spectator when his mother was served food along with the servants. Emotions that are very deep get expressed in the form of tears. Bala became very emotional and tears welled up in his eyes when he recalled, “It was a humiliating experience and I couldn’t do anything about it. My mother, understanding my plight, told me that one day I should become big and should invite the poor and serve them food with dignity. It was then I understood that economical status is as important as intellectual status.”

Life came a full circle when one day, many years later, the same relative, approached Bala for a favour. It was then Bala had his deepest desire fulfilled. Explaining about it he said, “When that relative asked me what I wanted in return I asked him to just take my mother to his house, make her sit next to him and serve the best of food to her.”

Talking about the reforms needed at our basic education system Bala said, “Ethical values are the absolute foundation. There is a lot of difference between knowing ethics and being ethical. When you stand in front of the mirror you can’t fool yourself. What’s right and what’s good should be infused very early. Value-based education should form part of curriculum. This is a journey and one should always understand that the end never justifies the means.”

As a professor and a management consultant, Bala has interacted widely with students and organisations all over the world. Mentioning about Indians he said, “We are very smart in terms of the left brain and hence good at Business Analysis and Business Intelligence (BABI). The Americans are good at judging people and in soft skills, and philanthropy is the highest in the US. They believe in being wealthy by giving, rather than feeling rich by hoarding. The human resources department in any organisation is the bridge between the employees and the top management. But here, predominantly the importance is given to technology and not to people, and HRD is given a backseat. I am glad that the situation is becoming better. All these are already present in Kautilya’s Arthasastra, which explains the best systems.”

Even though Bala dons many roles, what he loves the best is that of a teacher. He has been the best at that for a long time and he has been chosen as the best amongst 130 elite professors. Recently his students have contributed large sums of money for creating a chair in his name at the Kellogg School of Management. Talking about it he said, “I did not expect this. There is an outpouring of love from my students, for it is an emotional relationship. It is not a transaction, but an enduring relationship. I am always genuinely concerned about their welfare and go all out to contribute and I don’t seek anything in return from them.”

Explaining about what it takes to be a great teacher Bala said, “One should command and not demand...
respects. The position should not matter. If you want to distribute knowledge, you should do enough research to create it. There should be a balance between business relevance and academic elegance. What is delivered should be practicable with an action plan communicated effectively.”

Bala is 72 years young and his energy and enthusiasm are very contagious. Talking about what drives him he said, “I believe that god has created me as a human being and not as an animal for a specific reason. In fact, I did undergo a bypass surgery and by then I could have gone. But the desire to give a chance to the truly deserving students, to provide a fair opportunity to every student keeps me on. My brother was denied a seat due to quota system and only here I find that people are competing to be backward. The desire that I should do my part so that merit is recognised drives me. Mine is an emotional passion. My obsession for ethical results and compassion for helping others are the values that drive my life. I always look for an end with good means; I call it the Ratan Tata way.”

Bala took just two years for completing his doctorate and was a gold medallist. It usually takes six full years for one to become a full professor at the North Western University, but Bala earned it in just three years. Talking about it he said, “I don’t like procrastination. I just cannot wait. Whenever anybody asks me why I am running, I tell them that in today’s world even to stay where you are you should be sprinting. That’s why at Great Lakes Institute of Management the course is only for one year, unlike the regular two-year programs where so much time is wasted.”

Explaining decision-making and striking a balance between mind and heart he said, “In god we trust, but data is required for analysis. I call it the 40-70 rule. To analyse and arrive at a decision, a minimum of 40% or a maximum of 70% of facts is required. One shouldn’t wait beyond that, else you lose the game. Waiting to have the entire facts will lead to paralysis by analysis.”

Bala started his career as a lecturer at the Annamalai University and then served the army, but later went to the USA to pursue his Ph.D. Talking about it he said, “I was the first Indian to be part of the North Western University and I did a good job which actually paved the way for many more Indians to shine as management professors in the US. I first went to US with just $8 in my pocket. Today I have much more than $8 and I know very well that I cannot carry that when I die. When I die my first name would be Dead and my last name would be Body. If we can understand this - even in relationships as I always say, in the long run you go, I go, why ego in between - then we can focus on giving and helping others.”

Bala came back to India when the economic liberalisation was set in and ever since he has been contributing in producing world-class management professionals from our land, by setting up business schools and also working closely with the government. Bala is the founder and Honorary Dean of Great Lakes Institute of Management and explaining about it he said, “The culture in Great Lakes is customer centric. I believe every student is my customer and I have to provide more value than what they can get anywhere. I do that by providing stellar facility. We are creating a campus on international standards and more importantly we are producing professionals with compassion and values.”

Mentioning about his future plans Bala said, “I will keep doing my best by contributing till I die. I will have one leg at US and the other at India for that will help me bring the best from there to India and showcase the best from here to the world. I am working towards global positioning of India and directly influence the mindset of global CEOs to look at India. Of course, I believe in god and he gives me indications about my future.”

‘Uncle Bala’, a personification of human spirit, is showing to the world the power of one and helping his students to believe in that. It is in dedicating this issue of Frozen Thoughts to this great teacher we celebrate the Teacher’s Day.