

Always full of vigour despite hectic pace

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■ S- AND STAMINA

Q: A member of your family said that one of your ways of staying fresh and alert is by taking catnaps?

Yes, that is one of the things. I can sleep anywhere, anytime. For example, people wonder why I can start work upon reaching home after a journey from London to Kuala Lumpur. But I do sleep. I sleep more on the plane than on the ground. I can sleep more than 10 hours on the plane, on the ground normally sleep six hours. And that is sufficient rest for some adjustment to the time and to the jet lag.

Q: Surely you would need some exercise apart from enough rest?

This is the thing I would advise people to do but I myself have not had time for any exercise, really. I do some horse riding, which is at the most once a week, but sometimes for weeks on end, I don't have an opportunity.

I begin my work very, early in the morning. I get up at 6am and after prayers followed by breakfast, I start work. And then I work until 6.30pm or 7pm, followed by some official dinners where I have to give speeches. Other people may be enjoying the dinner but I have to provide the entertainment.

■ +MI HIS WIFE, FAMILY AND RELATIVES

Q: Those who really know you and your family say that your children have been unfairly punished because their only "crime" is that they have you as their father.

That is true because my son, for example, eventually had to do business outside the country, not inside the country. They do business not with the Government; they do it on their own. I

In the first of a two-part interview published yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad talked about his post-retirement plans, his concerns and expectations after he leaves and where he gets all the energy to go about his punishing routine. Today, he reflects on his most difficult moments, his health "secrets", his love for his wife and family and that matter about a certain song.

Q: What keeps you awake?

I think it is the will. Sometimes, I do feel extremely sleepy but I try my level best to keep awake. After a short while, you overcome the desire to sleep, especially when something interesting is happening.

When I'm doing things, I never sleep. When I'm talking or doing something with my hands or visiting, I don't feel sleepy.

Q: What keeps you from having a good night's rest?

Occasionally some problems which keep on turning in my mind, may keep me awake, but normally I will have a good sleep.

Q: Is My Way truly your favourite song or is it some other song?

(Laughs.) It was somebody else who thought of it because he said people say I like to do things my own way, which is quite true. But when they first started

singing that song for me, I pointed out that it begins with 'And now the end is near.'

That was Frank Sinatra in his old age, he was singing about his end being near. So I wondered whether people were suggesting or hinting to me that I should step down. But now it is all right. Now they can sing that song because the end is really near.

■ This interview is also available in Asia News Network (ANN) member newspapers and their respective websites whose URL addresses can be found at www.asianewsnetwork.net

ANN members are: The Daily Star (Bangladesh), China Daily, The Statesman (India), The Jakarta Post, The Daily Yomiuri (Japan), Philippine Daily Inquirer, The Star (Malaysia), Sin Chew Daily (Malaysia), The Straits Times (Singapore), The Nation (Thailand), Viet Nam News, The Korea Herald, and The Island (Sri Lanka).

Family ties kept out of the way

give them no support at all. They never apply to me because they know I will not approve.

But some distant relatives, of course, think that there is an opportunity for them. They think "now that he is going to retire in October, we had better get these things quickly".

Sometimes I have a full day, working from morning till night before going for dinner. And when I come back home at 1 pm or midnight, some people are waiting with requests.

It is very taxing because I know the people, and some of them hang around

the gates of my residence. I have to refuse to see them although it is not in my nature to be unfriendly. But I just cannot.

Q: According to your second son, Datuk Mokhzani, he sold his shares in Tongkah Holdings Bhd and Pantai Holdings Bhd because he was badly hit by the financial crisis. And because he was from the Mahathir family, the banks were very hard on him because they knew he would not run away from his responsibility. He said that

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A supportive father and a loving husband

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was why he had to sell out. But where your eldest son, Mirzan (who had to sell his shipping business), is concerned, rumours are still persistent that he was bailed out.

No, he wasn't bailed out. The fact is that he couldn't pay his debts (like Mokhzani). He had to sell the company to somebody. The best option would have been to sell to foreigners but the Government would not have been happy. He is a bumiputra and to sell it to a non-bumiputra would also not make the Government happy.

MISC (Malaysian International Shipping Corporation) saw the opportunity to get his shipping company at a very low price, you know. And he had to sell - he had no choice. It's not that he wanted to. He built his own LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) tankers and he got contracts that were still there but he could not pay his debts, so he sold.

And then after that he went to do business outside the country.

Q: In moments such as these, it must have been difficult to distance yourself as they affected your family directly.

Yes, but fortunately, my children understand. They don't trouble me. You know, they don't come whining to me. My children don't give any trouble. They go off on their own and do their own things. Like Marina (his eldest daughter), she is more interested in charity work. Sometimes she disagrees with me of course, as she has a mind of her own. But that's all right with me.

Q: Can we then assume that you read her column in *The Star*?

I read her column in *The Star* sometimes but she can do things on her own. My father gave me an opportunity for an education. After that there was nothing left for me. The rest went to my other family members. Education gave me the upward mobility. I became a doctor so I didn't need any more help from him. In the case of my children, I also gave them the same thing. Then it is up to them.

Q: According to your son Mukhriz and son-in-law (Che Wan Mohd Adli), they were like guinea pigs when you sent them to Japan for further education. Is that true?

Yes, because I say "Look East" so how can I not send them to the east?

Q: Isn't it terrible to take a risk with your own children?

Well, I took a risk having my heart operation in KL at a time (1989) when people were not confident with the ability of local doctors. I didn't know who was going to operate on me. I didn't know (cardiologist Datuk) Dr Robaayah (Zambahari), I didn't know (cardio-thoracic surgeon Datuk) Dr Yahya (Tun Awang). I met them when I was hospitalised. They asked me whether I wanted to go to America for treatment. I asked them whether they could do it here, they said they could.

I told them then, "Okay, do it here". I mean if you go to America and if you are going to die, you are going to die. So I resigned myself to the fact that if God wills I should die, I will die no matter where.

Q: There is one thing that many ladies want to know about: your love for Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah. What is the one thing that you love about her and have you ever given her flowers?

(Laughs) Well, very, very occasionally I give her flowers but usually I give some little presents for maybe her birthday or something like that.

She has been very supportive all the while. We have been together for a long time; we studied and grew up together. When you are together for a very long time, you will feel it if there's any separation. She has not only been a wife but a friend (and) a supporter, and has shown a lot of understand-

ing and patience all along.

She doesn't complain (like "Why you come home late: you attend to only your work and you don't look after our children." No complaints at all. If she has to look after the children, she will do that. If she has to pack for me she will pack. She personally packs for me when I travel.

Like our recent trip abroad, we stayed one night in London, two nights in Stockholm, one night in New York and one night in Monaco. She had to pack and unpack every night before going to sleep as the bags would be going early morning the next day. But she did not complain.

Q: During your recent overseas trip, Dr Siti Hasmah thought you kept looking out for her very often but she did not know why. Is that true?

Well, it is true. I like to have her around. Sometimes she has other engagements. For example, in Stockholm, there were about 700 Malaysians living in Sweden who gathered at the embassy. I should have been there but since I had other engagements, she was at the function.

In the past, she used to attend every function I went to but after a few years, other people started inviting her for their functions. So now, we each do our own thing.

Sometimes she is not able to follow me when I go abroad but that is very seldom. I miss her a lot when