

Valedictorian for Ceremony C14 - 13 July 2026 Monday (7:00pm)

Dr. Tan Seng Leong Adrian

Doctor of Philosophy (Mechanical Engineering)

Good evening,

Professor S Jayakumar, NUS Pro-Chancellor,
Mr James Ng Choon Chua, Managing Director, BYD Singapore and Philippines,
Distinguished Guests, Fellow Graduates, Parents and Friends.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for joining us at this session of the 2026 Commencement Ceremony. I am Adrian Tan, from the Department of Mechanical Engineering, of the College of Design and Engineering. It is indeed my honour to be delivering this address as the valedictorian.

When I was named a valedictorian candidate, I asked: "Why me?"

After all, I don't fit the usual image of a valedictorian, who is young and just starting out. Instead, I'm a seasoned mid-careerist, although one who is still learning.

The panel's answer was simple: my journey beyond the classroom holds lessons worth sharing as we step forward into the future.

So today, I would like to share a reflection that has grown increasingly important to me throughout my postgraduate journey and beyond- the importance of people and relationships.

But before I continue, I want to congratulate our graduands on their outstanding achievements—earned through determination, countless sleepless nights, many cups of coffee, triumphs over seemingly impossible deadlines, and for the recent batches of graduates like us, spirited zoom discussions. Please join me in celebrating the graduating Class of 2026 with a well-deserved round of applause.

Indeed, our Class of 2026 belongs to a unique generation of learners. Artificial intelligence and technology have transformed the way we learn, research, and solve problems. Increasingly, we are not only using AI as a tool but integrating it into the solutions we design and the knowledge we create.

Sam Altman, the co-founder of ChatGPT, once said:

"AI won't replace humans. But humans who use AI will replace those who don't."

Many people tend to focus on the latter part of that statement, but I find the first part equally important.

"AI won't replace humans."

AI may power the future, but the human touch- the emotions, physical interactions, and even the human flaws- are aspects machines cannot replace. AI, ultimately, is only a tool of mankind.

The same is true of our own successes: they do not carry as much meaning in silo. Behind our pursuit of academic excellence are people- mentors who guided us, colleagues and classmates who worked with us, and friends who listened, as well as family members who stood beside us. Their contributions may not appear on our transcripts, theses, or certificates, but they are certainly woven into every achievement we are celebrating today.

In our personal lives, many of us likely missed important family gatherings, celebrations, and moments with loved ones while balancing work and study.

Yet the people around us remained patient. They accepted our absence and understood our stress even when we had little time left to give.

For some among us, the opportunity to express our gratitude may no longer exist. Time moves only in one direction, and some people may no longer be here to witness this milestone with us.

That reality reminds us of something important: while knowledge can be acquired, titles can be earned, and careers can be built, the time with people we love is far less replaceable.

As we celebrate this milestone, it is only fitting that we acknowledge those who made it possible. To our professors and mentors, please accept our heartfelt thanks for challenging us, guiding us, and sharing your knowledge with such generosity. Our heartfelt thanks also go to the administrative team, which has worked tirelessly to support us.

Once again, to our families, partners, and loved ones—thank you for being our anchor.

On a personal note, I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Zhai Wei, Dr Zhao Miao, as well as Dr Li Xinwei for their guidance throughout my PhD journey.

To my parents, family and friends seated here today, as well as many others beyond this hall — thank you. This achievement belongs to you, as much as it does to me.

Today is not the conclusion of our story, but the beginning of a new chapter. But as we continue to pursue our ambitions, let us be just as intentional in nurturing our relationships and never lose sight of those that give our accomplishments meaning.

Knowledge may advance society, but it is the human connection that gives purpose to what we do.

Congratulations, Class of 2026.

Thank you.