

Ambition, Purpose and the Cosmology of Education: Lessons from Ancient Indian and Malay Civilisations

Dr. Yunus Yasin



Early Educational Influences

The formative years of schooling are often shaped not by the entirety of one's teachers, but by a select few who leave lasting impressions. For many students, one or two inspiring educators each year are sufficient to guide them along a meaningful educational journey.

Among my own teachers, Mr. Ali stands out. He taught Malay language with a presence that was both inspiring and thought-provoking. While the factual details of his lessons have faded, the emotional resonance remains deeply engraved in me to this day. On one occasion, he asked the class to reflect on our Cita-Cita—the Malay word for ambition. Predictably, the responses were limited to conventional professions such as doctor, engineer, or lawyer. This narrow scope reflected the pre-information age, when access to knowledge about diverse careers was restricted.

Mr. Ali's concluding remark challenged our assumptions: "Why has none of you chosen the Cita-Cita of being a good

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person?” His words reframed ambition, suggesting that moral character may be the highest aspiration of all.

The Question of Purpose

The significance of ambition extends beyond childhood. Recently, I encountered a third-generation farmer who described the relentless demands of his profession—early mornings, continuous labor, and the absence of holidays. His father, also a farmer, now retired, had fulfilled his role as a good provider, raising and educating his family. Yet, despite his accomplishments, retirement brought in himself a sense of diminished relevance and existential questioning.

This narrative illustrates a broader paradox: while many anticipate retirement as a reward, it often ushers in feelings of meaninglessness. The transition from achieved ambition to inactivity exposes a deeper need of the human mind. Ambition alone, whether professional or personal, may not suffice. What sustains individuals beyond their occupational roles is purpose—a sense of meaning that transcends career and continues to anchor and guide a person’s life value.

Educating the Mind

The mind is complex and difficult to comprehend. It is the active system that thinks, feels, and perceives knowledge. Knowledge in turn, is the stored collection of facts and skills that the mind employs. Thus, education can ultimately be understood as the training of the mind. Many philosophers have emphasized the importance of training the mind. Here, I wish to explore philosophies from the Indian subcontinent, where systematic study of knowledge has been practiced since ancient times.

The Sanskrit word for the mind is Antahkarana, meaning “inner instrument” or “inner bridge.” It is described as the inner faculty through which a person understands the world, and as a bridge connecting the individual to her higher soul or God. The word itself is composed of Antah (“inner”) and Karana (“doing”), implying that the mind is an active entity within.

The Composition of Antahkarana

According to ancient Indian thought, the Antahkarana consists of four distinct functions:

1. **Manas** – The faculty that processes sensory data, doubts, and desires. It interprets information received from the five senses. It is important for ‘doing’ stuff.
2. **Buddhi** – The intellect, responsible for logic, reasoning, and decision-making. It connects information to form coherent understanding. It is important for thinking about stuff.
3. **Chitta** – The subconscious storehouse of memory and past impressions. It encompasses values and ideals such as love, patience, resilience, meaning, and purpose. It links or adds values to our doing and thinking.

4. **Ahamkara** – The ego or constructed self-identity. It grounds all information around the “I” as its center. It is described by mystics as the “false self.” Its grounds all the above to its environment or surroundings.

It can be argued that most decisions pass through these four functions before reaching a conclusion. For example, a person may first receive information from her surroundings (Manas), then integrate it with existing knowledge (Buddhi). The subconscious mind (Chitta) adds values and emotions, shaping what she feels strongly about or disregards. Finally, the ego (Ahamkara) asks, “What is in it for me?”

Thus, the mind’s final decision emerges from a complex interplay of these four faculties, which may operate in sequence or simultaneously. These four functions do not imply any hierarchy with all being equally important.

A Sample Cosmology of Holistic Education

From this perspective, a truly holistic educational system must train all four functions of the Antahkarana. Ancient Indian thought holds that each faculty can indeed be cultivated, for example:

1. Manas through exercises and mindfulness
2. Buddhi through learning and problem-solving
3. Chitta through positive environments, experiences, and friendships
4. Ahamkara through selfless actions and good deed.

Modern schooling, however, tends to emphasize Manas and Buddhi and not Chitta and Ahamkara, largely because the outcomes of the first two are easier to measure and thus is perceived to be more important in a materialistic world view.

Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology, similarly divided human consciousness into three levels: the conscious, preconscious (subconscious), and unconscious. His famous iceberg analogy illustrates that active awareness is only a small fraction of mental activity, while the majority remains hidden beneath the surface. The analogy illustrates the importance of the subconscious mind.

Comparable ideas exist in Islamic and Malay thought, which distinguishes between Zahir (outer) and Batin (inner) aspects of the mind. Both traditions highlight the importance of nurturing the inner faculties alongside the outer ones.

The Wisdom of the Ancient Malays

The Malay word *cita* originates from the Sanskrit *chitta*. In Malay usage, *cita* rarely stands alone. For instance, *citarasa*—meaning taste or preference—combines *cita* (intent, aspiration, or feeling) with *rasa* (taste or sense). This compound conveys how individuals perceive food, art, and style, while also reflecting their predisposition to favour certain matters over others. These preferences are not derived merely from thinking processes.

Of particular interest is the Malay term *cita-cita*, commonly translated as “ambition,” such as the aspiration to become an engineer or doctor. Yet its etymological roots suggest a meaning far deeper than mere vocational pursuit. *Cita-cita* implies a broader sense of purpose and meaning, transcending the narrower definition of ambition.

True purpose emerges when the conscious mind (*buddhi*) and the subconscious mind (*chitta*) are harmonized. Decisions that place these faculties in conflict inevitably generate dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

I now appreciate the wisdom imparted by Cikgu Ali many years ago: one must first discover purpose before selecting ambition.

Ambition Versus Purpose (Cita-Cita)

Ambition, by its nature, is limited in scope, while purpose encompasses a wider horizon of meaning. A single purpose may manifest through diverse ambitions. For example, if one’s purpose is to serve children, this may be realized through multiple paths: as a paediatrician, a journalist reporting on child welfare, a lawyer defending children’s rights, or a politician advocating for stronger protective legislation. Purpose arises internally; ambition is the external pursuit that channel’s purpose into action.

The contemporary world is characterized by rapid technological advancement, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence, which renders the future of work increasingly uncertain. Professions are not merely subject to incremental change; rather, they are likely to undergo transformations so profound that they become unrecognizable in comparison to their present forms. For instance, the role of the physician of tomorrow will differ substantially from that of today, especially with respect to core functions and responsibilities.

In this context, it is prudent to reorient education toward purpose-driven learning rather than ambition-centred objectives. Ambition, while valuable, is inherently fragile in the face of technological disruption, as it often ties individuals to specific career trajectories that may no longer exist or may become misaligned with societal needs of its time. Purpose, by contrast, offers resilience and adaptability, enabling individuals to navigate and adapt to shifting professional landscapes while maintaining a sense of fulfilment and continuity.

The Way Forward

Considering the complex and significant challenges ahead, the transition toward holistic education should be a multi-stakeholder initiative; it cannot be achieved by the formal education system alone. Furthermore, formal education today stands at a crossroad, caught between the demands of industry and the need of the learner —the former emphasizing creation of workers, the latter seeking deeper meaning. I do not claim to offer a definitive solution. Rather, I contend that society must first determine the kind of future it envisions for its children. Only then can the educational process be tailored to align with that collective vision. One source of inspiration can be in Japan where young students are training to be responsibly citizen in schools through activities such as shared cleaning (*Osoji*) and serving lunches (*Kyushoku*). Japanese society are

clear how their society should be, and have actively tailored their education system accordingly. Their pedagogical approaches do not conflict with subjects such as science and mathematics, as evidenced by Japan's consistently high performance in the PISA assessments, often ranking among the top five countries worldwide.

An Epilogue

Recently, I was having dinner with a friend when a cat wandered by. We debated whether to share a piece of chicken from our plate with it. Just then, two young women appeared, gently caught the cat, and placed it in a container. They then fed another cat nearby before sitting at a table close to ours and ordering food and drinks.

Curious, we asked about the cat they had "bagged." They explained that they rescue and care for cats in the area and the bagged cat would be taken to the vet the next day. Both of them held full-time jobs, yet devoted their evenings to this work. Their eyes shone with sincerity, and their faces radiated a rare glow—something I seldom see these days.

When I went to the cashier to settle my bill, I quietly paid for theirs as well. As I walked away, I couldn't help but wonder: did they know something I don't?

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