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Holistic Personality Development through Education: Ancient Indian Cultural Experiences

C. PANDURANGA BHATTA

Ancient India recognized the supreme value of education in human life. The ancient thinkers felt that a healthy society was not possible without educated individuals. They framed an educational scheme carefully and wisely aiming at the harmonious development of the mind and body of students. What they framed was a very liberal, all-round education of a very high standard, calculated to prepare the students for a useful life in enjoying all aspects of life. This is essentially a universally applicable educational framework highlighting the purpose of human life and interconnectedness at all levels of existence as a basis of human values. Insights from ancient Indian educational system are of great help in facilitating the production of a creative, ethical and a learning mind, which will concern itself not only with greater 'progress', but primarily or more importantly with the inner transformation of the human consciousness.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to capture the wisdom of the ages and to make it relevant for these times and to help the educators come up with innovative methodologies to help students to harness their latent potential and channel their energies towards cultivation and sharpening of multiple dimensions of human competencies.

This article addresses the topic of education from ancient Indian cultural perspective and attempts to provide an effective approach to make students more socially concerned, compassionate, liberal, inclusive, ethical, and humane through the development of holistic personality.

All over the world educationists are grappling with one central and all-encompassing question; what kind of education is needed for what kind of

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society of tomorrow? They are conscious of the new role of education and the new demands made on educational systems in a world of accelerating economic, environmental and social change and tension (Kapur 2007: 1; Mukhopadhyay 2008: 20; Pankajam 2001: 86). They have come up with some of the underlying principles which are universal and common to the aims of educators, citizens, policy-makers, and other partners and participants in the process of education at all levels. According to them education, formal and non-formal, must serve society as an instrument for fostering the creation of good citizens.

All approaches to redesign the educational processes must take into account the basic and agreed-upon values and concerns of the international community and of the United Nations system such as human rights, tolerance, understanding, democracy, responsibility, universality, cultural identity, the search for peace, preservation of the environment, and sharing of knowledge.

There is no denial that the purpose, the aim, and drive of the educational institutes, must be to equip the students with the most excellent technological proficiency so that students may function with clarity and efficiency in the modern world. But a far more important purpose than this is to create the right climate and environment so that students may develop fully as total human beings (Krishnamurti 1981: 18). 'Total human being' means not only a human being with inward understanding, with a capacity to explore, to examine his or her inward state and the capacity of going beyond it, but also someone who is good in what he or she does outwardly. The two must go together. That is the real issue in education: to see that when the students leave the school, they are well established in goodness, both outwardly and inwardly (Krishnamurti 2000: 26).

In order to achieve this, the educational process must awaken the intelligence of the student so

that he or she may 'flower in goodness' (Holistic Education, Inc. Home Page). The cultivation of a global outlook, a love of nature and a concern for fellow human beings and environment should be part of the scheme of education. In order to achieve this, education has to cover the four distinct dimensions of the human personality beginning with the physical body, the development of intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities, the development of socially desirable moral values and finally, the inner dimension of spiritual growth. This article makes an attempt to throw more light in this regard from ancient Indian cultural perspective.

Meaning of Holistic Education

Throughout history a widely scattered group of experts all over the world have pointed out that the education of young human beings should involve much more than simply moulding them into future workers or citizens. The Swiss humanitarian Johann Pestalozzi, the American transcendentalists, Upanishadic thinkers of India and many stalwarts of the 'progressive' education movement insisted that education should be understood as the art of cultivating the moral, emotional, physical, psychological, artistic, and spiritual—as well as intellectual—dimensions of the developing child (Scott and Martin 2004). An emerging body of literature in science, philosophy, and cultural history provides an overarching concept to describe holistic education (www.Holisticeducationnet/article). As expressed in these works holistic education facilitates students to identify the meaning and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to spiritual values such as compassion and peace. Besides, holistic education also aims to call forth from students an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of learning. This

is done not through an academic ‘curriculum’ that condenses the world into instructional packages, but through direct engagement with the environment (Miller 1999).

Martin (2002) describes holistic education further by stating, ‘At its most general level, what distinguishes holistic education from other forms of education are its goals, its attention to experiential learning, and the significance that it places on relationships and primary human values within the learning environment.’ (www.hent.org/HolisticEducationNetwork)

In describing the general philosophy of holistic education, Martin and Scott (1996) and Scott (2004) divide their discussion into two categories: the idea of *Ultimacy* and Basil Berstein’s notion of *Sagacious Competence*:

Ultimacy

1. Religious; as in becoming ‘enlightened’. Spirituality is an important component in holistic education as it emphasizes the connectedness of all living things and stresses the ‘harmony between the inner life and outer life’.
2. Psychological; as in Maslow’s ‘self-actualization’. Holistic education believes that each person should strive to be all that they can be in life. There are no deficits in learners, just differences.
3. Undefined; as in a person developing to the ultimate extent a human could reach and, thus, moving towards the highest aspirations of the human spirit.

Sagacious Competence

1. Freedom (in a psychological sense).
2. Good-judgment (self-governance).
3. Meta learning (students learn in their ‘own way’).

4. Social ability (more than just learning social skills).
5. Refining Values (development of character).
6. Self Knowledge (emotional development). (www.putnampit.com)

In holistic education, the teacher is seen less as a person of authority who leads and controls but rather as ‘a friend, a mentor, a facilitator, or an experienced traveling companion’. Open and honest communication is expected and differences between people are respected and appreciated. Cooperation is the norm here, rather than competition (Namra 2001: 75). The reward of helping one another and growing together is emphasized rather than being placed above one another. Teachers help young people feel connected by fostering collaboration rather than competition in classrooms (Joshi 1992: 35). They encourage reflection and questioning rather than passive memorization of ‘facts’. We will now examine the purpose and concept of ancient Indian education from the point of view of developing holistic personality which is the main thrust of this article.

Purpose of Ancient Indian Education

The direct aim of ancient Indian education was to make the student fit to become a useful and pious member of society (Rangachar 1964: 36). Inculcating the civic and social duties among the students was also a part of ancient Indian educational system. The students were not to lead a self-centred life. They were constantly reminded of their obligations to society.

Convocation address to the students as found in Upanishads show how they were inspired to be useful members of society (Mookerjee 1989).

The most important idea governing the ancient system of education was that of perfection, for developing the mind and soul of man. Ancient Indian education aimed at helping the individual to grow in the power and force of certain large universal qualities which in their harmony build a higher type of manhood. The ancient Indian educational system focussed on building a disciplined and values-based culture. Human values such as trust, respect, honesty, dignity, and courtesy are the building blocks of any free, advanced society (Markandan 2005: 92). The convocation address found in *Taittiriya Upanishad* throws significant light on the qualities required to be developed in the students, which are not very different from the qualities that modern educational systems are trying to impart and hence we quote a few lines from it here:

Speak the truth. Practise righteousness. Make no mistake about study. There should be no inadvertence about truth. There should be no deviation from righteous activity. There should be no error about protection of yourself. Do not neglect propitious activities. Do not be careless about learning and teaching. There should be no error in the duties towards the gods and manes. Let your mother be a goddess unto you. Respect your father. Respect your teacher. Respect your guest. The works that are not blameworthy are to be resorted to, but not the others. The offering should be with honour; the offering should be in plenty. The offering should be with modesty. The offering should be with sympathy. Then, should you have any doubt with regard to duties or customs, you should behave in those matters just as the wise men do, who may happen to be there and who are able deliberators, who are adepts in those duties and customs, who are not directed by others, who

are not cruel, and who are desirous of merit. This is the injunction. This is the instruction. This is the secret of the scriptures. (*Taittiriya Upanishad*, I. xi.1–4)

This convocation address outlines some of the domestic and social duties of students in very clear terms. Accordingly, students are: to honour father, mother, teacher, and guest as Gods; to honour superiors; to give in proper manner and spirit, in joy and humility, in fear and compassion. Lastly, the pupil is also asked not to neglect his health and possessions. This convocation address is very important in understanding the role of ancient Indian education in building a values-based culture. It tried to inculcate in the students the following qualities (Ramajois 1987: 38):

- Social consciousness based on love for humanity
- Character, honesty based on moral law
- Discipline based on the sense of duties and responsibilities of an individual

Discipline like character is an essential quality for personal as well as social life. It consists in obedience to laws, rules and decisions. In this regard we must admit that the ancient Indian system of education played a major role in making students realize their duties and responsibilities and emphasized on the necessity of discipline for an orderly social life. Character and discipline cannot be imparted to an individual by preaching or through speeches.

While students can be imparted the knowledge of what is moral and what is immoral, what is discipline and what is indiscipline what is character and what is characterless, they can be made to act in conformity with the required standard of behaviour only through personal example.

These qualities are acquired by emulation in addition to education.

It is only by generating these qualities in individuals that the ancient Indian educational system prompted the students to utilize their educational attainments and capacities for the benefit of society restricting their own selfish desires and prevented them from acting in a manner harmful and detrimental to the common good (Ramajois 1987: 40). Mere knowledge of what is virtue and what is not does not enable an individual to be virtuous. This aspect is forcefully brought forth in the character of Duryodhana in the epic *Mahabharata*. He says: 'I know what righteous conduct is, but I have no inclination to act accordingly. I know what unrighteous conduct is, but I cannot abstain from doing it'.

Just as an ordinary stone requires a beautiful design and long and continued effort of an expert sculptor in chiselling and engraving in order to make it a beautiful idol, a proper blueprint or scheme and constant, vigilant and untiring efforts of all those concerned are necessary, to make a child into a worthy individual. A very useful observation has been made by Swami Vivekananda in this context:

The character of any man is but the aggregate of his tendencies, the sum total of the bent of his mind. We are what our thoughts have made us. Thoughts live: they travel far. Every work that we do, every movement of the body, every thought that we think, leaves an impression on the mind stuff. What we are every moment is determined by the sum total of these impressions on the mind. Every man's character is determined by the sum total of these impressions. If good impressions prevail, the character becomes good, if bad, it becomes bad. When a large number of these impressions

are left on the mind they coalesce and become a habit. The only remedy for bad habit is counter habits; all the bad habits that have left their impressions are to be controlled by good habits' (Ramajois 1987: 56)

Many rites and rituals were developed in order to infuse piety and religiousness in the students. The rituals that a student had to perform at the beginning of his educational career, the religious observations that he had to observe during the educational course, the daily prayers that he offered morning and evening, the religious festivals that were celebrated very often in the school or the preceptor's house—all these tended to foster piety and religiosity in the mind of the young learner (Pandey 1994: 32).

Ancient education system aimed at character formation through proper development of moral feelings to make the students really learned, pure in their life, thoughts and habits (Ghosh 2005: 170).

Teaching of values, ideal life led by teachers, and examples of extraordinary personalities cited from the epics, poetry, literature, and history—all these helped to mould the character of students (Altekar 1943). Ancient Indian educational system also aimed at the development of personality by eulogizing the feeling of self-respect, by encouraging the sense of self-confidence, by inculcating the virtue of self-restraint and fostering the powers of discrimination and judgement.

Ancient Indian thinkers fixed for education certain life-long objectives that require life-long effort to achieve and realize (Joshi 1992: 35). These objectives were summarized in triple formula which gave a wide and lofty framework to the ancient system of education.

*'asato ma sadgamaya
tamaso ma jyotirgamaya*

mrityorma amritam gamaya'
 (Lead me from falsehood to truth
 Lead me from darkness to light
 Lead me from death to immortality)
 (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, I.3.28)

To them the ideals of truth, light and immortality constituted a triune unity, each subsisting in the other. The students were not allowed to forget that they had within them a higher self beyond their little personal ego, and that numerous ways and disciplines were provided by which they could realize the higher self. The holistic education of ancient India involves a harmonious blending of the knowledge of the outer world (*avidya*) and that of the inner-world (*vidya*). The former, as it were, enables a man to keep his body and soul together and the latter, that is, *vidya*, wisdom, leads him to immortality, freedom from all sufferings of the world of change (Raja 1950: 38).

Another unique feature of this educational system is that it aims at creating a mind that is both scientific and spiritual at the same time—one that is enquiring, precise, rational, and sceptical but at the same time has the sense of beauty, wonder, aesthetics, sensitivity, humility and an awareness of the limitations of the intellect. It also aims at developing a mind, which is rational, flexible and not dogmatic, open to change and not irrationally attached to an opinion or belief. In this system of education both scientific and spiritual quests are complementary quests (Krishnamurti 2000: 26), one for the discovery of the order that manifests itself in the outer world of matter, energy, space and time; and the other for discovering order (peace, harmony, virtue) in the inner world of human consciousness. Actually they are both quests for truth into two complementary aspects of a single reality which is composed of both matter and consciousness.

Strategic Pursuit of Human Needs

For an ordered, gradual and holistic development of human personality and to secure a progressive balance and harmony of growth, the ancient educational thinkers developed another unique concept, namely, the '*Purusharthas*'. *Purushartha* is translated to mean a human goal, an object of desire, consciously pursued. This significant concept of development upholds the legitimacy of man's desire for economic security (*artha*) and sensuous aesthetic satisfaction (*kama*) and spiritual welfare (*moksha*). This scheme may be represented as in Figure 1:

Figure 1
Human Needs/Pursuits

<u>Material well-being</u>	<u>Spiritual well-being</u>
Bodily needs (<i>kama</i>)	Need to overcome suffering and realize oneself (<i>moksha</i>)
Needs for material well-being (<i>artha</i>)	
Need for social and moral order (<i>dharma</i>)	

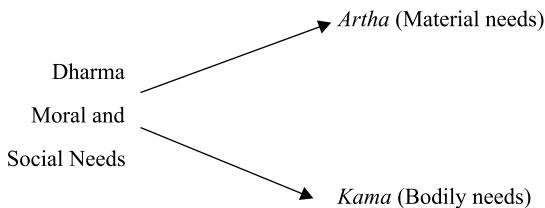
But it does not support the insatiable greed, which could destroy the possibility of realizing them. Both wealth and pleasure are goals only pursuable in society, but they can be successfully pursued only if society has at least some amount of stability and harmony. Dharma is claimed to be an important factor in the maintenance of social stability and harmony. Therefore, the observance of dharma, in virtue of its being a necessary condition of social stability and harmony, is insisted upon as an indispensable ethic for the pursuit of wealth and pleasure. Dharma is an ethical law, which prevents human beings from falling into crooked ways of

the ordinary and unbridled demands of impulses, desires, ambitions and egoism.

Dharma denotes that morality and those values which are founded upon higher, that is, meta-physical and cosmic principles and they appeal to the highest goals and yet they are related to common life and social processes.

Dharma is learning (*vidya*), in a broader sense, which can enlighten human beings to understand the subtle niceties of living a dignified life. The values inculcated through education included a rule of prohibition regarding acquisition of wealth or securing or fulfilling of pleasures and desires of an individual. The rule is: Reject the wealth, pleasures, and desires which are inconsistent with moral law (dharma). This may be termed as strategic pursuit of human needs for developing a holistic personality and the same is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Strategic Pursuit of Human Needs

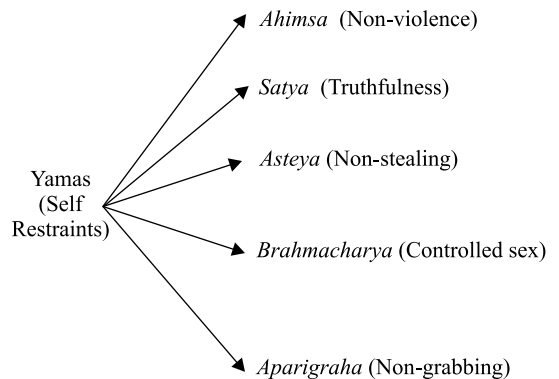


Ancient Indians also developed the concept of Yoga for disciplining the mind and the body. Without the practice of the principles of *yama* and *niyama*, which lay the firm foundation for building character, there cannot be an integrated personality (Iyengar 2005: 27).

In Yoga Sastra the ‘Right Living’ is based on *yama* and *niyama*, very simple ethical disciplines of ‘dos and don’ts’. Sage Patanjali, in his authoritative treatise *Yoga Sutras* builds his

entire Eight-fold path of Yoga on the foundation of *yama* and *niyama*. Practice of *asanas* without *yama* and *niyama* is mere acrobatics. Discipline does not arise from one’s own mind. It has to be learned from outside. The word *yama* can be broadly translated as ‘Self Restraints’. They are five in number as shown in Figure 3:

Figure 3
Yamas (Self Restraints)



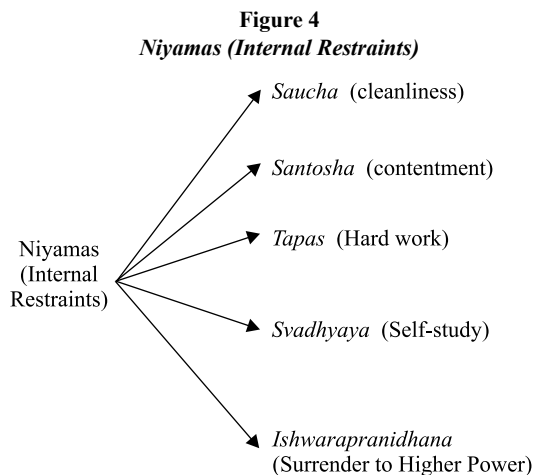
A brief explanation is given as follows:

1. *Ahimsa*—Non-violence. Restraint from harming other living beings. Extending compassion, mercy and gentleness towards every other living being.
2. *Satya*—Truthfulness, restraining from falsehood, in thought, word, and action. It implies not only abstention from untruthfulness but also from exaggeration, pretence and other faults in saying or doing things that are not in strict accordance with what one knows as true.
3. *Asteya*—Non-stealing. Restraining from desire to take what is not belonging to oneself. It also means not taking credit for what one has not done. Developing an attitude of pleasure at seeing others enjoy their possessions.

4. *Brahmacharya*—Having controlled sexual life. Self-restraint from yielding to impulse or desire.
5. *Aparigraha*—Non-grasping (coveting). Restraining from hoarding and greed. Non-grasping also involves curbing the tendency to accumulate unnecessary things. One should not amass wealth and objects which serve no other purpose than satisfying their childish vanity and desire to appear superior to others.

Apart from the complications this causes in society, for the individuals it means spending time in accumulating things and using their energies in maintaining and guarding them. The worries and anxieties of life increases in proportion to the accumulations (Yardi 1996).

Niyamas are translated as internal restraints and they are five in number as shown in Figure 4:



A brief explanation is given as follows:

1. *Saucha*—Cleanliness and purity of body, mind and thoughts. This will bring orderliness, punctuality and clarity in one's living.

Purity of body can be brought about by water and consists in the eating of pure and wholesome food. Internal purity consists in keeping the mind pure and in weaning it away from evil tendencies and thoughts.

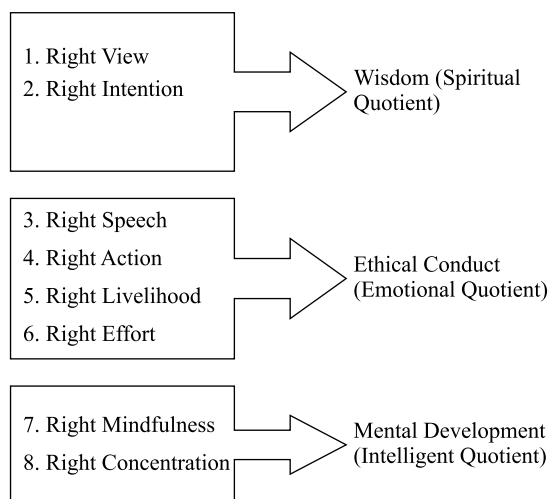
2. *Santosha*—Meaning contentment within. True happiness in life lies in accepting the way of things that the life offers. The deep contentment or *santosha* implies not only not desiring more wealth and material things than what accrues naturally but also not desiring intangibles like power, position, praise and so on.
3. *Tapas*—Hard work.
4. *Svadhyaya*—Self study and life-long learning. It is the broadening of intellect through the study of known and unknown. All knowledge comes from within; this is part of the significance of the prefix 'sva' in *svadhyaya*. Another meaning is that this study should include the study of working of the 'self', the 'I', how the personal self always intrudes and obstructs the working of the higher Self. This is best studied in one's relationship and action with others.
5. *Ishwarapranidhana*—Surrender to higher power: Understanding the workings of the unknown power that lies beyond our control.

Practical Morality of Lord Buddha

The middle path is the harmonious development of the multiple dimensions of the human personality which lies between the two extremes, namely, vile pleasure seeking and extreme asceticism. The emphasis is on: Purity of conduct, truthfulness, love and benevolence, obedience to parents and respect for the elders, non-drinking, charity and kindness, and mercy to all living beings.

The eightfold path recommended by Lord Budhha for personality development is better understood by the diagram in Figure 5.

Figure 5
The Eightfold Path



A brief explanation of this eightfold path is given as follows:

1. Right thought: avoiding covetousness, the wish to harm others and wrong views
2. Right speech: avoiding lying, divisive and harsh speech and idle gossip
3. Right actions: avoiding killing, stealing and sexual misconduct
4. Right livelihood: trying to make a living with the above attitude of thought, speech, and actions
5. Right understanding: developing genuine wisdom
6. Right effort: joyful perseverance to continue
7. Right mindfulness: trying to be aware of the 'here and now'
8. Right concentration: trying to keep a steady, calm, and attentive state of mind

Conclusion

This brief exposition of ancient Indian educational concepts points out that all educationists have to appreciate the fact that the spiritual growth attainable through mental equilibrium and material progress possible through the empirical methods of science is necessary for the holistic development of human personality.

The ancient Indian thinkers felt that a healthy society was not possible without educated individuals. They framed an educational set up carefully and wisely aiming at the harmonious development of the multiple dimensions of human personality.

This is essentially a universally applicable educational framework highlighting the purpose of human life and interconnectedness at all levels of existence as a basis of human values.

In this system understanding oneself (self-knowledge) is as important as understanding the world. According to them without a deep understanding of one's relationship with nature, with ideas, with fellow human beings, with society, and a deep respect for all life, one is not really educated.

The sense of equality, mutual respect, the philosophy of live and let live should be the result of educational models which in turn lead to the peace, well-being, and settled order of the human world which are desperately desired by mankind. There is no second opinion regarding the fact that the feeling of love, respect, beauty, and friendship, cannot be taught but like sensitivity, it can be awakened.

This can be done by developing a richer human and interpersonal field of interests. Influences from humanistic disciplines such as history, literature, music, and so on, play an important role in this regard. Developing actionable insights in

the students for attaining a holistic personality is a challenge which is worth accepting. On the basis of insights obtained from our journey through ancient Indian educational processes we are able to say what the goals of educational philosophy for tomorrow should be:

- To educate students so that they are able to develop a holistic personality
- To inculcate a love for nature and respect for all forms of life
- Not to condition the students in any particular belief, either religious, political or social, so that their minds may remain free to ask fundamental questions, enquire and learn

In conclusion, we may reiterate that education must address the issue of character formation along with developing the full potential of human beings besides revealing the great and hidden values of life, which lie beyond the obvious, phenomenal phase of existence, a broader vision of life and insight into the unfathomable ocean of wisdom. It must also reveal to the students the possibilities of attaining values in life much greater and higher than those found on the level of relative existence.

True education must lay a secure foundation for trust, cooperation, teamwork, altruism and similar indispensable lubricants of societal life.

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