Budi as the Malay Mind

By Lim Kim-Hui

The word ‘budi’ originated from the Sanskrit word ‘budhī’, which means wisdom, understanding, or intellect. A Sanskrit-English Dictionary defines the meaning of budi as ‘the power of forming and retaining conceptions and general notions, intelligence, reason, intellect, mind, discernment, judgment...’ (Monier-Williams 1956:733). However, once this word was accepted as part of the Malay vocabulary, its meaning was extended to cover ethics as well as intellect and reason, in order to accommodate the culture and thinking of the Malays.

Budi now carries many nuances of meanings in the Malay world view and plays a pivotal role in every aspect of Malay life. It can mean intellect, as shown by the phrase aklal budi, meaning ‘common sense’ or ‘healthy mind’. It can also carry the meaning of kindness or virtue, as shown in the last two lines of the famous pantun: Pusing emas bawa balayang / ma'uk xeji di atas peti / hutang emas dapat dibayar / hutang budi dibayar mati (’Bali away with a bunch of bananas/ one ripe fruit remains on the box/ Debts of money we can repay/ Debts of kindness, we take to the grave’ (Sim 1987:59). Commonly, however, it can be denoted as ‘moral behaviour’ or ‘moral character/’action’, like budi pekeri. It can also be understood as ‘discreet’ or ‘good judgement with flexibility’, when used in conjunction with akal (mind) and hati (feelings) and as reflect-ed in budi kicara. Budi should also contribute to the practical aspect, in the form of budi dharmawan. Overall, when we deal with the mind of the Malay, it is the ‘budi’ and its networks that determine their thinking (judgement), their moral attitudes, their goodness, and how an argument should be presented. Pure budi can be led astray if not guided by the ethical aspect of budi. It should be noted that budi can also mean akal (mind) (dl arti kecerdikan menipu atau tipu daya) (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia 1991:150), as in herman budi, ‘to deceive’ by using the intelligence of mind, which is rather rhetorical in terms of argumentation. Rhetorical, in this context, refers to the common and popular meaning of rhetoric, which is normally considered as empty and abstract, flowery without content. The Malay mind develops through a spec-trum of akal budi and hati budi, which encompasses ‘mind-emotion-moral-goodness-practicality’ in their scales of decision-making. A wise person, budih-mas, should be thoughtful, considerate (berhati) perut, literally means ‘has liver and stomach’, normally means ‘not cruel in decision’), and of good conduct, and his decision should be an enlight-ened and practical one that helps soci-ety towards prosperity. In order to understand the Malays’ thinking and their argumentation, we should, there-fore, bear in mind that their purpose of argumentation is to ultimately seek for truth, goodness, and beauty.

The goodness of the good

In order to resolve conflicts between various civilizations and tolerate the dif-frences that arise in this cultural and political setting, the Malay-Indonesian world has indeed tried to synthesize various positive values (akal budi, hati budi, budi pekeri etc.), these values later being crystallized into a greater molec-ular ideal of budi (fig. 1). At this stage, we can perhaps call the Malay philoso-phy eclecticism. Budi, to the Malay mind, is not an atomistic component but rather a molecule. It can be observed but cannot be fully broken down, as these components are always interconnected and interwoven, even if we were to present them in a scient-ifict laboratory under the study of logi-cal or emotional chemistry. This mole-cule of budi and the concept of budiman (wise person/sage) reminded me of what we can see in the Confucian Analects as interpreted by Pung Yu-lan (1976:42-43), in which Confucius sometimes used the word jen (ren in Pin Yin, normally translated as ‘human-heartedness’) not only to denote a spe-cial kind of virtue, but also to denote all the virtues in combination, so that the term ‘man with jen’ becomes synony-mous with the man with all-round virtues. It is in this sense that we can see that budiman is the man with all-round budi (virtue) or, as I have coined it, ‘budi and its networks’. If jen can be trans-lated as ‘perfect virtue’ in such contexts, then the Malay budi can be constructed in the same manner as ‘perfect virtue’ of the Malays.

Rationality should not be worshipped in all dimensions of life. There should be time for rationality, expression of emotion, and the combination of both or more (budi). It is the demand of his-tory that these elements (reason, emo-tion, budi) become explicit in certain communities and hidden in others. To conclude that there is only one ‘ration-al’ way of resolving disagreement is to totally deny the need for space and time throughout history. The results that I have obtained prove that the strength of the Malay mind lies in the applica-tion of budi, and as such, that the man of culture should be based on budi as well. The highest stage of a man of cul-ture is for him or her to achieve the sta-tus of budiman or ‘the man of budi’, where the word budi should be treated as a synthetic connotation between the acuity of reason and the gentleness of feeling, or what we feel through budi.

Dialectical thinking, which puts stress on who will be the champion in the battle of the mind, is not important for the Malay world and, as such, is not fully developed. It is considered more important to allow various dimensions of the human mind (i.e. reason, emo-tion) to adjust to the diversification of cultural values and religions. The fact that the dialectical mind is not devel-oped in this part of the world is under-standinable. Biologically, if certain parts of our human body are not being used, it will be weakened in much the same way our muscles will get smaller and weaker if we do not exercise them.

The non-dialectical aspect of budi

Despite the usefulness and positive budi that we have already discussed, we must not forget that budi also has its negative dimension. In Malay, hermain budi literally, ‘to play with’ means ‘to cheat or deceive (menipu or tipu daya), mengherbukalikan also meaning the same thing (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia 1991:150). This negative connotation reminds us that we should not be too extreme in whatever we take on, as anything that is pushed to extremity will engender the opposite result: rendah diri (humblelessness) will become bisa diri (self-degeneration); too much herbudi will become what the Malays call mengada-agada (over-act-ing). As early as 1891, Clifford, in his article ‘A New Collection of Malay Proverbs’, observed an interesting trend in Malay rhetoric: ‘In discussions among Malays, too, it is the man who can quote, and not he who can reasons, that bears away the palm’ (Clifford 1891:88). Clifford had a point in terms of dialectical argumentation. The Malays must have their reasons as to why they choose not to reason. As usual, reasons demand argumentation in return, which will bring the two parties (herbert and opponent) into a state of confrontation. Compared to reason, quotations bring the opponents into a state of agreement, in terms of their cultural memory and the budi of their ancestors and cultural wisdom.

Budi is an entity which is non-dialec-tical and, therefore, hinders the true spirit of dialectical argumentation. It is the lack of dialectical argumentation that distinguishes the Malays from the Greeks. No doubt the application of budi in human affairs and human relations is more humane, as we have seen earlier, but budi is something situa-tional. Compared to rationality, which is more confrontational, com-petitive, forceful, aggressive, and his-tile, where attaining ‘truth’ and ‘win-ning’ is the purpose, budi encourages the opposite, which is non-confronta-tional, non-competitive, gentle, friend-ly, and succumbing (in the sense of giv-ing in or giving way). Because its final goal is consensus and compromise. Hence, I believe that it should be our responsibility to have a real under-standing of rationality, budi, or even emotion, and their employment in our everyday affairs.

The culture of budi, as I see it, should be adjustable to two different spheres, viz. rational-public sphere versus emo-tional-personal sphere. Since the con-cept of budi has taken root as the mid-dle path of argumentation, it is rather hard to fit it into the rational-public sphere, where the purpose of argu-mentation is the achievement of truth through rational persuasion and the search for knowledge is based on the concept of truth or falsehood, white or black. It cannot accommodate a syn-

thesisic nature of both truth and false-hood, both black and white at the same time, or a positioning between these two polarities, or something which we could call a spectrum of truth. Budi, however, is something synthetic and a-ational, which tends to compromise between both polarities as long as con-sensus and compromise can be achieved. Nonetheless, there are many realms of human communication which are a-ational. A rational is used to differentiate it from irrational: whereas something which is non-rational may either be irrational or something that cannot be explained from the perspective of rationality (i.e. a-ational).

In order to handle this irrational sphere, we should not be carried away by pure emotions. The champion of truth through rationality might accuse the Malay budi of being two-faced, hyp-octrical, deceitful, or insincere in telling the truth. This claim is valid in one sense, but in another sense, we per-haps need more philosophical scrutiny and argumentation. For example, in the heat of the moment of a conflict, dialect-al forcefulness will bring harm (that is, claim a life), and therefore one should ‘lie’ in order to preserve har-mony. But this ‘lie’ should be untangled when the heat is over. This is true of budi and its networks.

References

Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia, Jakarta: Balai Pustaka [ed. & rev. 1991].

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