KNOW THYSELF

BY

NA’IM AKBAR, PH.D.

MIND PRODUCTIONS & ASSOCIATES
324 N. COPELAND STREET
TALLAHASSEE, FL 32304
(850)222-1764
CHAPTER 3

*Education as Power*

*Power is the ability to influence the environment consistent with one's self-interests.* It is true that power in this respect carries the implication of domination, but definitely not the domination of other people. This definition of power has implications for the domination or mastery of our needs. Power is intended to put people into the unique position that they can obtain and achieve within the context of their environment those things that maximize their survival and the continuation of themselves to the best of their ability. In a world of plentiful resources as this one is, such power does not require arming oneself as a predator of other human beings. In a world of predators, though, such power would perhaps equip people to adequately defend themselves from becoming prey from the greed of others or to at least seek safe asylum from the predator's oppression. Power in this sense does not require the conquest of other people but only the acquisition of those things which have been realistically assigned for the advancement of one's own people as participants in the human community.

We assume that the environment of the outer world and our inner resources together have all that is needed to insure the comfortable and effective advancement of the human family. We must use our inner resources in order to take from the environment those resources that insure our advancement as human beings. Power then has to do with the relative effectiveness that we have in getting from the environment those things that are in our self-interest. At the simplest level, the environment is the source of food, shelter and clothing that are the fundamental necessities for physical survival. Translated to a broader dimension, all
of the resources that are needed for advancement of the physical being are located in the physical environment. The farmer, the scientist, the manufacturer, the banker, the realtor and the stock broker are all engaged in the process of extracting from the physical environment those resources that insure survival and expand a people’s control over those resources. Those who have maximum influence over those physical resources are considered to be very powerful. Those who have limited influence are considered weak or certainly, lacking in power. The effect of greed and the drive for domination is that it drives certain people to gain more and more influence so that they can limit the access of other people to these resources in the environment, while maximizing their own access. This is an exploitation of power that is the exaggeration of a natural impulse of self-preservation that becomes the drive for domination rather than participation. What is needed by a people to insure that they are able to eat, are protected against the elements and can defend themselves from danger or disease is nothing magical nor does it require anymore than influencing the environment consistent with our own self interest.

Influencing the Physical Environment

Education is the instrument that should equip people to gain control over the physical resources of the environment. The skills that one develops in the educational environment should maximize each person’s ability to gain better access to the resources in their environment. In the highly complex and modern societies, the actual labor of growing food, building houses, creating clothing, discovering new medicines does not depend on individual mastery in these areas. Instead, there is the process of exchange or trade where we give someone something that they need in order to provide us with something that we need. This is what money is about and how the economic process operates. Though these things have been made to appear very complex and abstract, even magical, the bottom line is that people establish mechanisms to insure the survival of themselves and their kind. They are naturally motivated to develop power, i.e., the ability to influence the environment consistent with their own self-interest. A criterion of education then is not how much money that you make, but how effective you are in gaining independent mastery of this power to influence. Are you able to develop such attractive skills or resources that you are always able to negotiate a trade and not depend upon the arbitrary choices of being hired or fired based on someone else’s ability to exercise maximum control? So, ultimately, one does not pursue education in order to get a job, but to control resources in such a way that you will always be in a position to negotiate a trade. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad said:

As a people, we must become producers and not remain consumers and employees. We must be able to extract raw materials from the earth and manufacture them into something useful for ourselves. This would create jobs in production. We must remember that without land there is no production. The surplus of what we produce we would sell. This would develop a field of commerce and trade as other free and independent people . . .

The slave was removed from the effective negotiation of his/her skills because their skills belonged to someone else. He could eat if he worked, but he could also work and not eat depending upon the arbitrary decision of a slave master. Because, the slave had been robbed of access to education, s/he could only develop the skills that gave them the only privilege of trade. "Neo-slavery has provided African-Americans the opportunity to spend a decade in training beyond secondary school and can only develop skills that permit their "masters" to negotiate a trade. African-Americans become brilliant CPAs who cannot conceive beyond one of the contemporary "master’s" firms. There are brilliant surgeons who cannot negotiate their skills unless an HMO "master" chooses to bring them to their plantation. Because we believe that power can only be given as a favor from a powerful master, we fail even to seek the kind of education that effectively empowers us. Too many of the most gifted African-American managers, scientists and manufacturers have no aspiration beyond acceptance on one of the impressive plantations (referred to as "major corporations" or "firms" in modern language.) Everyone who gets an education cannot become an independent entrepreneur, but everyone should gain the independent ability to negotiate the trade of their skills for the necessary resources for survival and advancement. An education that doesn’t equip you to do this and ultimately to become an instrument for the collective advancement of your own community is miseducation in that it doesn’t empower you. Again, as the Honorable Elijah Muhammad observes:

Since our being brought in chains to the shores of America, our brain power, labor, skills, talent and wealth have been taken, given and spent toward building and adding to the civilization of another people. It is time for you and me . . . to start doing for ourselves. We must not let our children be as are we, beggars of another man for his home, facilities, clothing, food and the means of providing a living.

In order to select a proper education rather than training, it is important to appreciate the goal of education as a device to gain this kind of influences over the environment. If the end result of education is only to compete for a job rather than to negotiate for influence then that education has been ineffective. We need to develop the kind of skills that will bring us autonomy in our immediate environments as individuals and eventually to be a part of a community that has auton-
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America, Israel, France, etc. must cooperate with other nations in the world for maximum survival and effectiveness but they ultimately approach the world markets with autonomy because they have independent resources to negotiate. This is quite unlike most of the so-called “Third World” nations who are dependent on other nations and international money systems in order to engage in any type of trade. They are therefore, completely at the mercy of those who control those independent systems. The educational systems of so-called “developing” countries should have as their objective the same kind of ultimate autonomy that we are describing here as the goal of education for the African-American.

It is important to remember that autonomy and independence are not terms that mean the same thing as separation and isolation. They mean that you must always interact with others from a position of self-reliance. You can never do all that you need by yourself, but you should always be able to offer those who can do what you need something from your arsenal of capability to fulfill some need that they might have. When you understand that we are all people of a similar destiny, fate and identity and see our cooperation as a necessary part of gaining mutual respect in the larger human arena, then you have come to understand autonomy in the sense that we are describing it here. Autonomy also means cooperation, but it means that you control your own chips in the trade. The laws governing effective cooperation require a moral responsibility to consider the needs of those who share your cooperative unit. If your primary moral demand is to insure your personal success then you are morally liable because you are unlikely to consider the needs of others beyond their ability to fulfill your individual needs. The ultimate result of selfish individualism is a disregard for the needs of other human beings to achieve their human share and a failure to help facilitate that process. In more advanced civilizations, such as the Native Americans and Africans (who actually gave refuge to their conquerors,) there is almost always a strong consideration that each human being will at least have equal access to opportunity. This was the defined agenda of America’s Declaration of Independence though slavery and the genocide of the Native Americans were blatant contradictions to this claimed agenda.

The Environment of Ideas

We must understand that this “power to influence the environment” is not limited to the physical environment. For the human family, the environment of ideas is even more important than the physical environment. Ideas represent images, concepts, values and all of those things that influence how people think of themselves and the world around them. Those who influence ideas literally control the minds of the people within the environment of those ideas. Our concepts of what’s beautiful, what’s important, what’s news, what’s good, what’s desirable, etc., are all determined by the environment of ideas. Where people put their energy, their resources, literally, what they do with their lives is determined by the ideas that they internalize. In that we are living in the information age, where our daily experiences are so thoroughly influenced by the media and the ideas that we absorb from it, we are even more subject to the environment of ideas than previous generations have ever been.

Whoever controls ideas can actually manipulate the physical resources of the entire world. An indication of the value of ideas is the fact that advertisers will pay more than $1 million in order to expose their product for less than sixty seconds during a Superbowl game. No one would expend those kinds of resources if they were not aware that they had the power to influence millions of people to want what they have to sell. These companies actually create “wants” and then offer the product to satisfy the want. They are then able to acquire the physical resources of millions, which gives them even greater influence in the material world. There is a genuine understanding that whoever controls ideas, can control whatever they want from the environment. Advertising, marketing, etc., are devices for controlling ideas and manipulating appetites.

The educated person would aspire to gain access to influencing major ideas in the environment. The educated person in communications would not aspire to just sit in front of the camera, but they would want to be the producer in the newsroom where those items that will be reported as news will be selected. They want to be involved in shaping public opinion and not simply reporting those opinions. An “educated” person would want to maximize their control of ideas that are to be communicated because they understand that a real measure of human power is the ability to influence ideas. The kind of influence that properly educated people seek is the ability to exploit people by enforcing your agenda on them. Instead, the influence of ideas is the way by which people can advance the environment consistent with their self-interest, survival and advancement as human beings. Dr. Woodson states regarding the influence of ideas:

“When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his “proper place” and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.”

To be influential simply means to insure that your children will be able maximally to benefit from opportunities that develop their genius and contribute to humanity out of their unique talents. Influence means that your dignity and resources will be respected and you will be capable of developing yourself and your people consistent with the highest human ideals on the planet. Influence means that your perspective will gain a hearing and will be presented before the human family with the same potential impact as the ideas of any other human group. Developing the ability to influence ideas permits you to tell your story to
the world and gain the same respect as any other group.

The miseducation of African Americans beginning with our captivity, subsequent enslavement and continued oppression has systematically restricted our power to influence ideas. In fact, we have been particularly controlled by the ideas of others that have systematically limited our human effectiveness. Since we have not had access to real education, we have developed faulty ideas about ourselves and do not fully appreciate our capability and human potential. What’s even worse is that we have not developed an aspiration to influence ideas, but have comfortably accepted the role of a participant in other’s ideas. Our education encourages us to join other people’s schools of thought and not to develop our own even when those other schools of thought may have been developed as a tool to insure our continued oppression. Our miseducation results in our participation in other people’s environment of ideas with no sense of responsibility to develop our own.

An example of the irresponsibility that miseducated people show to themselves can be seen in the condemnation that has always come to scholars such as Dr. Carter G. Woodson and other so-called “radical” Black scholars. Those thinkers have frequently met with ridicule who have argued that a real education must expose us to ideas about ourselves which inspire us to develop in developing ideas which tell our story our way. Afrocentric thinkers have received broad condemnation because of their commitment to developing influential independent ideas about African people. Such condemnation frequently comes from other African-Americans and is another example of the acceptance of our powerlessness in the environment of ideas.

A true education encourages and empowers people to become influential in the world of ideas. A miseducated person neither develops independent ideas nor a desire to influence the environment of ideas. If a person has not developed the power to influence ideas then their education has not been effective.

Influencing the Societal Vision

Another important aspect of power that comes from proper education is the ability to influence the vision of the society. The vision represents the goals, the agenda and the collective aspirations of the people. The vision raises ones perception from the level of specific ideas to the higher level of ideals. Whereas ideas create the image of how the world exists, the vision creates the image of how the world should be. Here again, the expectation is that people who are appropriately educated would certainly aspire to create a future environment that insured their presence and contribution. People projecting their continued influence across time create this vision. It grows from a sense of the importance of their uniqueness and the value of their continuity. At the physical level, there are few drives that have the intensity of the reproductive drive—that physical urge to perpetuate oneself. Without being told by anyone, normal human beings are driven to continue their lineage beyond their mortal existence. This same drive has a parallel in the arena of ideas and vision. This is the reason that people exert so much energy in the construction of monuments and edifices that they feel will immortalize their ideas for future generations. Every mighty civilization devotes considerable energy to the process of insuring their continuity. In fact, educational institutions themselves are set up, not only to prepare people to preserve the gains of the past, but to insure the continued influence of the present into the future. People write books, develop art works, create images that they hope will preserve their influence on future time.

The desire for immortality ranks high in the religious beliefs of people because they seek to preserve and extend their influence. Education should not only be a device to sustain a people’s special vision about the world, but it should equip them to influence the world’s vision in very special ways. This is real power when one has developed the capacity to influence the vision of the world. African people have always maintained a vision of the interconnection of human beings and the spiritual significance of all things. This vision is an important one for all humanity and our education should equip us to influence the world in this way.

The African-American victory over the dehumanization of slavery is testimony to the resilience of the human spirit and the world’s vision should be influenced by this example from our experience. The world’s vision should be free of the kind of oppression that has characterized European racism and genocidal attacks on groups of human beings based on claims of racial superiority. This influence on the world’s vision will not be possible if we are not educated about our experiences and the special contributions that we have made to humanity.

In order to influence the vision, we must have the power of information as well as inspiration. The active work of philosophers, theologians and thinkers in the western world is one of continuously seeking to affect humanity’s vision. African-American philosophers, thinkers and artists should seek to influence the vision of the world as well. Those goals of human excellence and moral integrity to which people aspire are defined by the societal vision. As artist seek to create images of beauty and to influence the world to adapt their creative vision, they are exercising the power of shaping the societal vision. Even the desire to engage in vision building is a product of an effective education. Not only should the education equip people with access to their particular vision, but it should empower them to express that vision so that the world will be positively influenced by their creativity.

The power to influence the environment is the most tangible outcome of education. Such power is the result of knowing who you are and what resources are available to you. The reward is the ability to achieve those very things which survival dictates we must all have. The ultimate determination of our successful education is the degree to which we are able to develop power for independent influence. This power should provide us with mastery of sufficient skills to obtain
from the physical environment whatever minimal resources we need to insure our survival. We should possess the ability to present ideas about the functioning of the environment and those ideas should bring a positive evaluation of ourselves and enhance our overall effectiveness in the world. Ideas that tell our story, and generate respect for us as a people is the result of effective education. Ultimately, the power that comes from education should well-equip people to participate in structuring the vision that inspires people to reach for greater heights in the advancement of humanity. People who fail to develop this kind of power or who don’t want this kind of effectiveness are people who are quite definitely miseducated.

Chapter 4
How to Study the Self

Any discussion of self-knowledge must contain several elements:

1) Knowledge of the human nature or make up: This is the study of what constitutes the self. From the perspective of European-American study this includes psychology and the social sciences that we have described in the earlier section in our definition of the Self.

2) Knowledge of the origins of oneself: This is usually thought of as the study of the history of oneself as a human being and the development of civilization.

3) Knowledge of nature, her patterns and the environment in which we live. This is the study of science and mathematics.

4) Knowledge of God: Since life occurs within the context of creation, and Africans agree with most of the human family that we are in the image of God, then knowledge of our Creator is essential to understanding who we are.

Origins of civilization:

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad (1965) stated:

To know oneself is to know all men, as from us came all and to us all will return.29

The study of the origins of civilized life must begin in the Nile Valley of Africa.