

In the Culture Garden of an Enlightened Organization

The popular word “meditation” is a translation of the Pali word *Bhavana*, which means “cultivation,” a word with clear horticultural roots. The term also suggests hope: a field can always be cultivated — endlessly enhanced, enriched, developed — to produce a favorable and nourishing harvest. Indeed, gardening could be regarded as the personification of Buddhism in action:

- The soil represents the fertile ground of the Buddha Mind;
- The Sangha is in the community of plants; and
- The Dhamma as the expression of wisdom to nourish the collective environment – the garden.

What if the Master gardener Buddha were the CEO of an organization? What will the culture of such an enlightened organization be like?

Since the industrial revolution, businesses have undergone continuous and rapid expansions utilizing more and more efficient means to improve the productivity and profit. Overtime, most business’s organizational cultures have become *self-centered* and are characterized by *quantity, expansion, competition and domination*. As a consequence, less attention is paid to the care of its people and environment such as the rapid depletion of resources like fossil fuels as well as the increase of our carbon footprint. Should businesses be concerned with not only their shareholders, but also their employees, customers, communities, social and natural environments?

Indra's Net (depicted in picture 1), as found in the Avataṃsaka Sūtra of Mahāyāna Buddhism, could be a metaphorical description of an ideal Buddha’s garden:



Figure 1

“Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net that has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each “eye” of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at

it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number.”¹

We note from the above description that each Jewel ultimately reflects and expresses the radiance of the entire Net, and all of totality can be seen in each of its part. In other words, each of the jewels reflected in one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinitely repeated interrelationships among all the members of the net.

While no organization is infinite in size, Indra’s net does provide a conceptual model for modern global organizations which is distributed geographically while highly connected via *information* flowing through the internet.

The concept of Indra’s net demonstrates two key concepts of Buddha’s teaching, namely, *compassion* and *impermanence*. Compassion comes from the fact that we are all *one* in the sense that each of us is in all others. Impermanence is derived from the fact that changes occur all the time as each change is reflected in all. The concept of *compassion* can be considered as “taking the responsibility” for all, from the self to the organization, and then outward to society and the whole world. In other words, when acting from compassion, a person accepts the responsibility to help the self, the organization, the society and the world to be more *sustainable*. On the other hand, by embracing *impermanence* as part of an organizational culture, people take the responsibility to make the organization more *resilient* by initiating changes/innovation before they become necessary, a characteristic that is very important in today’s rapidly changing society due to fast paced technological disruptions.

We believe that a *responsible culture* helps people to find “the meaning of life” as noted by Viktor Frankl², who challenged his readers to answer the questions posed by life: “...to life he can only respond by being responsible!”

Here are some elements of a responsible organizational culture characterized by both *compassion* and *impermanence*:

1. Participatory – democratization of decision-making such as quality of working life, etc.;
2. Self-organizing -- a center could be formed with any node or a group of nodes depending on the quality and volume of information flowing through it so that *innovation* is a natural consequence of being responsible;
3. Joy –a consequence of *authenticity* flows through the organization that connects people to share and celebrate together;
4. Trust –the foundation of relationships among people inside and outside;

¹ Francis H. Cook, Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra, (1977), The Pennsylvania State University Press.

² Viktor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, (1993), Buccaneer Books.

5. Respect – to learn and to collaborate with people inside, customers, community, society, as well as with natural environment;
6. Service is natural consequence of being responsible provided to people, community, society and environment.

We believe that an organization with responsible culture can help to unleash individual and collective talents by fostering a psychologically safe climate where employees feel free to contribute ideas, share information, and willing to speak up on issues that concerns the collective whole. Such kind of organizational culture will be *inclusive* with a focus on: “*quality, conservation, service, and partnership*”!

While the master gardener, the Buddha, is no longer here with us physically, his teachings, the Dharma, continues to nourish all of us in different cultural gardens!