WILDFLOWERS INSTITUTE

VISIONBUILDING™:

DISCOVERING INVISIBLE CULTURAL PREMISES



All natural growth is exponential:

Plants send their roots down into the soil, deriving nourishment, and stability. As the roots grow deeper, the stalk grows higher, sending stems upward and outward, exploding with new life in the form of leaves, stems, flowers, and fruit. All of this growth occurs naturally and simultaneously. If the roots cannot grow deep enough, or if the leaves cannot reach the sun, growth slows and eventually stops.

Infants too grow in all directions at once, and their minds grow right along with their bodies. Even after we stop growing physically, all of our systems—neurological, physiological, mental, emotional, and spiritual—work in harmony to keep us strong and healthy. It all happens at once, without conscious control, at a rate and volume governed by our individual genetic code.

Wildflowers Institute believes that human organizations follow a similar pattern. Communities, corporations, and governments alike also grow exponentially, governed by their own genetic codes: the cultural premises that underlie everything they do, and which are often invisible even to those who are governed by them. Healthy human organizations are effective because all levels grow, learn, and work together. The growth occurs deep within the core of the organization, as it accumulates lessons and experiences, and it is also expansive—increasing access and developing innovation and new services and products. When communities and other human organizations find their growth slowed or even stopped, it is because they have stopped growing in one or more dimensions.

The Wildflowers approach works from the inside out, from the outside in, and from the bottom up to keep human organizations and communities strong, healthy, and growing multidimensionally. We focus our work on uncovering deeply held premises underlying visions and strategies—the domain of collective knowledge and transformation. Our framework, processes and tools, including VisionBuilding, are effective in helping any human organization to continue to learn and grow.

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VISIONBUILDING:
A NEW WAY FOR ORGANIZATIONS TO LEARN AND GROW

By Hanmin Liu

> One of the greatest business challenges is to find some models for how a whole organization can learn. . . . [Leaders] rarely get to the point where they are eagerly challenging deeply held assumptions about a company's strategies and processes and, in response, thinking and acting in fundamentally altered ways.
>
> —**EDGAR H. SCHEIN**
> SLOAN FELLOWS PROFESSOR OF MANAGEMENT EMERITUS, MIT

We each have our own distinct ideas about how the world works and the best way to get things done. Most of us rarely analyze our accustomed approaches to solving problems—we just go ahead and make things happen. We may not consciously understand the implicit assumptions that underlie our own strategies, let alone that of others with whom we must work. Organizations, communities, and groups also have distinct and habitual ways of seeing and working with others. Not surprisingly, when diverse groups attempt to work together—each with their own lens and underlying assumptions in play—the result can be uncertainty, suspicion, frustration, and inability to reach a consensus.

Management expert Edgar Schein's observation that businesses need to find new ways to learn is profoundly true. Finding new ways to learn is especially important for an organization that wants to capitalize on the diversity of its staff and the complexity of its institution.

For leaders, the key to continued growth and effectiveness is organizational self-understanding. Uncovering deeply held assumptions underlying vision, strategies, processes, and practices gives vital insight into how different groups of people prefer to work together and why programs work or cease to work. Learning to understand other organizational or community cultures from the inside enables effective working relationships based on mutually agreed-on premises. Clearly, capitalizing on the power of identity and building on assets creates continued growth and learning in every level of the organization or community, and enables healthy partnerships.

Wildflowers Institute knows that there are two very different approaches to relationship building, depending on the composition of the group. When a group is mostly composed of "insiders"—people who carry the same tradition and culture—there are more prescribed ways of relating and working together. The road to self-understanding is more apparent, and expectations of what to do and how to behave are more explicit. But when a group is composed of both insiders and outsiders, building relationships means first learning to understand each other. This learning process involves: (1) knowing ourselves and what we have to offer to others; (2) learning about others and what they have to offer to us; (3) developing the terms for engagement; and (4) identifying areas of common interest.

As individuals build relationships, they usually put aside their differences. But when differences inevitably arise, questions of credibility and trust follow, and the relationship

becomes at risk. Wildflowers addresses this issue of dealing with differences by including a critically important perspective: seeing the invisible premises that underlie our differences in behavior and recognizing the power of these premises. In every step of the relationship-building process, it is important not only to hear what others have to say, but to see the underlying motivating force that drives and shapes their behavior. The Wildflowers approach to relationship building is first to uncover implicit premises—to see the postulates and assumptions that shape behavior of individuals and groups—and then, through that process, to discover the core elements of identity, leadership, and work formations.

Simply put, the key to building solid relationships is to see and understand your own culture deeply, and to see the other cultures in the same way: from the outside in and from inside out. Learning to see the invisible patterns that guide organization and community dynamics is the Wildflowers approach.

What Is VisionBuilding?

Wildflowers Institute's VisionBuilding tool is a powerful and compelling cultural discovery process. Corporations, philanthropic organizations, government and civic leaders, and communities worldwide have used this tool to gain insight into internal dynamics, generate vision, enhance strategic planning, and strengthen cultural formation.

VisionBuilding is based on a model-building paradigm. Participants in our workshops—formal and informal leaders in business and the community—work individually and collectively, selecting from hundreds of miniature figurines and other objects and building simple three-dimensional models that clearly express their lens for viewing and working in their organization or community and for seeing their "will." Personal and group reflection on the models, moderated by licensed VisionBuilding facilitators, uncovers and amplifies deeply held implicit premises about group vision, leadership formation, premises, and practices.

The models are effective because they bypass our usual modes of oral expression and uncover implicit premises or postulates that motivate behavior. The models become a visual language composed of symbols that represent what goes on in an organization or community and what is important to the people. Creating these symbols in a model allows implicit assumptions and patterns to become visible and accessible—not only to the model builder, but also to those who view the model. In this way, the model acts both as a mirror from which we can reflect on our own group dynamics more clearly, and as a lens for others to see us and our dynamics more clearly. The immediacy and impact of the model, in combination with verbal narrative and reflection, create a multidimensional visual language that cuts through existing barriers of language and culture to create new wide-bandwidth communication pathways, increased understanding, and alignment.

This powerful visual language allows the most disparate groups to develop and use shared symbols for thoughtful and profound communication that goes beyond the usual meeting format. In workshop sessions, VisionBuilding participants use this new language to develop an individual and collaborative vision that brings life, energy, and consensus to leadership development, identity formation, product and service development, and organizational alignment and effectiveness.

In Wildflowers Institute's VisionBuilding workshops, leaders transcend the limitations of habitual thinking patterns and see their organizations and communities three-dimensionally, from the inside out—the way they really are. Using this insight, they work together to create a visual language that symbolically expresses the dynamics of exponential growth: guiding patterns, identity and meaning, assets and resources, new directions, strategies and processes.

How VisionBuilding Helps Community Leaders

Community leaders face challenges as they try to build unity between different organizations, and among different ethnic groups. To do this, they must find a way to harness the energy and creativity of diverse groups of people, and build bridges between them.

VisionBuilding's power lies not in showing barriers and problems, but in uncovering premises and unleashing the strengths that each side brings to a relationship, and in showing authentically and clearly what each believes to be true.

Wildflowers understands that when differences are expressed and amplified, there must be a framework and process for building balance and harmony within a community or between communities. We know that there is a core (traditional) culture and an interface (market-driven) culture in every community, and that these cultures may either compete or complement each other. How we frame the differences between the core and interface cultures determines how they are addressed. If differences are framed as "either/or"—do it my way or else!—tensions will inevitably continue. If they are framed as "both/and" (in a broader context that recognizes the importance of the interrelationship between them) and if there is a safe space for learning and exploration, then differences become complementary.

Wildflowers creates these safe "both/and" spaces for individuals and groups to work through the following process:

- Know yourself.
- See the strengths of others more clearly
- Uncover the invisible cultural premises that unite self and other and form the foundation for a common vision for the community.
- Build strategic approaches and alignment for realizing the vision and strengthening the culture of the community.

THE WILDFLOWERS FRAMEWORK

A deeper understanding of the following key concepts and terms will enhance your understanding of the Wildflowers framework and our approach to relationship building. Please take some time to read and reflect on these ideas.

Community Culture

A community's **culture** is its underlying life force (composed of a specific leadership formation, cultural virtues, structure and spaces, premises of relationships, and centers of gravity). Although there are many different ways to define "culture," VisionBuilding looks in a specific way for invisible and organic ways of leadership as well as identity and social formations, that is, through the framework of core and interface cultures.

The invisible and unconscious assumptions and practices of people in the community are authentic, and provide some of the most reliable information about the culture of the community. While values and beliefs are also part of the culture, anthropologist George Foster (see pages 12-13) demonstrates that even if people say these aspects are important to them, they may not always practice them. Wildflowers is therefore particularly interested in learning about the "real-time" culture of the community: the actual behavior and patterns of people in their everyday life.

To do so, we seek out the implicit assumptions and premises that form existing behaviors and practices. We map these premises as (1) those that have been in practice for many generations (core culture), and (2) those that have been around for a few decades (interface culture). This unique framework of core and interface cultures reveals two different sets of deeply held premises about the relationships between and among leaders and members of the community. It is these premises that form the actual attitudes and behaviors we call culture.

Often, people in the core culture and those in the interface culture are at odds with one another because their aims in life and their approach to success are very different. VisionBuilding helps to show these differences, and the importance and power that comes from creating greater balance and harmony between them.

Premises of Relationships

Individual, group, and community behavior is based on deeply held assumptions or **premises:** the unconscious expectations and postulates that shape perception and action.

The premises of relationships are so much a part of us that we often are not conscious of them or able to name them. We go about relating to family, loved ones, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers naturally and without much thought. But underlying each of these relationships are premises that set the expectations for the relationships. Take, for example, the very American premise of "choice." This premise underlies friendships with

colleagues, with personal friends, and particularly with transactional relationships, such as when shopping. But we sometimes have less choice when it comes to work relationships, family, and loved ones.

Culture is beyond personal. It is the collective knowledge and practice of the group.

Core Culture and Interface Culture

One key relation in every community is between the **core culture** and the **interface culture.** (The figure below shows this relationship.)

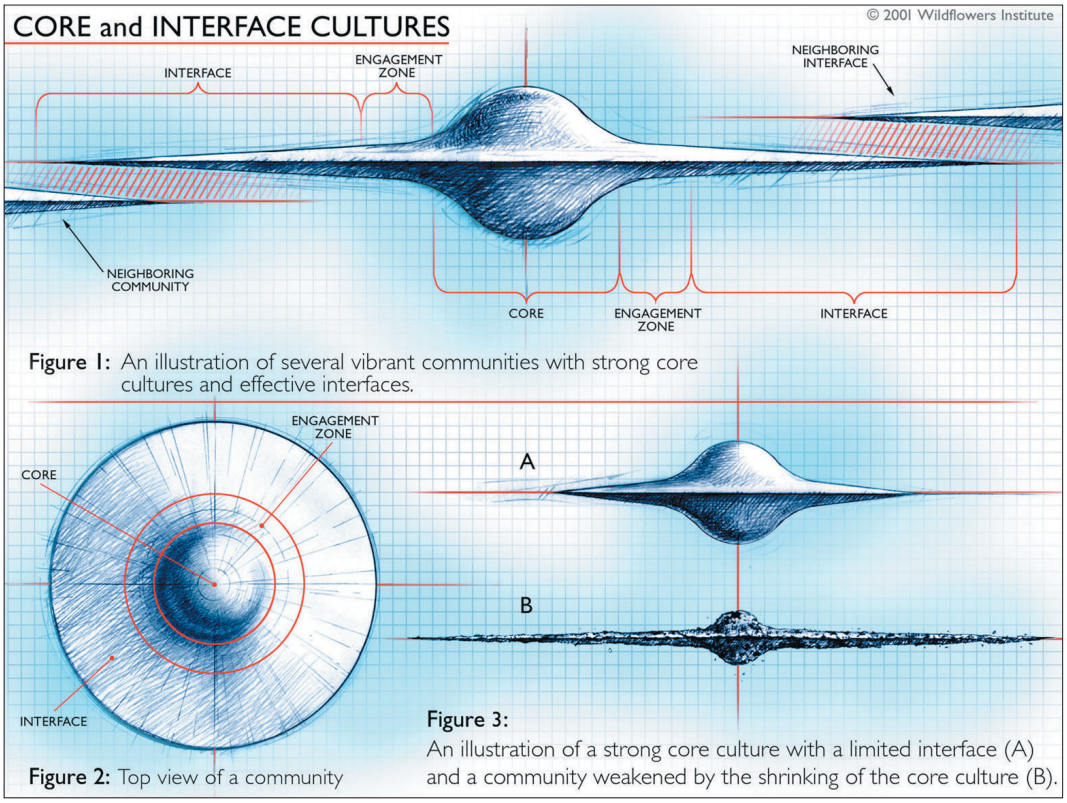


Figure 1: An illustration of several vibrant communities with strong core cultures and effective interfaces.

Figure 2: Top view of a community

Figure 3: An illustration of a strong core culture with a limited interface (A) and a community weakened by the shrinking of the core culture (B).

The **core culture** of a community holds the traditions and moral and ethical behaviors, and is deeply rooted in time and history. Its leadership formation is vertical and hierarchical, according to age, experience, and wisdom. Its virtues define individual and community identity.

Wildflowers is particularly interested in uncovering the deeply held premises that shape identity and the relationships among leaders and members of the community in both formal and informal activities. We seek out the premises that form moral and ethical behaviors. We look for the invisible ties between leaders and among leaders and the community. We search for the assumptions and expectations of the role of each family member, and of their relationship with each other. We focus on the organic processes of people coming together informally. Understanding these premises help to strengthen identity and the social formations of families and the community.

The **interface culture** of a community is most affected by and involved with the market force, and embraces its virtues and premises to a larger or smaller degree. The premises underlying the market force, for example, are time, choice, competition, and making money. In communities that include more than one ethnic, racial, or national group, the interface culture not only includes the market premises, but also the cultures of both ethnic groups. But in most inter-ethnic communities, the interface culture is predominately influenced by the market force because it is so strong.

As the market force grows in a community, more and more people embrace the interface culture. This causes the interface to become larger, while the core stays the same size or grows smaller. Less attention is focused on the core culture. When this happens, the community as a whole becomes unbalanced. There is no core from which to judge and make decisions. Competition and freedom of choice among institutions reign. The identity of the community changes to having more market characteristics.

VisionBuilding works to help people see what constitutes the core of their community, where the interface is, and the relationship between the core and interface cultures.

Core Players and Insterface Players

Core players hold up the core culture and enjoy traditional cultural activities. Their way of thinking relies on past knowledge and experiences.

People who have strong core culture have a very strong sense of boundaries—of what is inside and outside the culture. They prefer to relate to people who have similar cultural practices. These men and women generally stay within the community, and prefer not to interact with people from other communities. They are generally dependable, reliable, and loyal to their families and to each other. In the models developed by participants in VisionBuilding, it is important to identify the core players.

Interface players are people who operate in organizations and areas of the community that value both cultures. They may embrace a core traditional culture, but they also understand how to use the culture of the market force to interact with others.

Interface players cross boundaries and are open to new ideas and ways of thinking. People in the interface interact with people from other communities, and are actively involved in promoting and advancing innovation, growth, and development. In VisionBuilding, it is important to discover who are the innovators and developers of the community.

Virtues

Virtues are the cultural attributes that form the identity of the individual and the whole community. For example, in the Chinese community, core virtues include endurance, respect, politeness, harmony, and helping one other. Core American virtues, such as initiative, creativity and innovation, which are also the virtues of the market force, are very different. Similar differences in core and interface virtues are found in most ethnic communities.

Members of any ethnic community who operate in the interface world, and who also maintain a stable community life, understand and integrate the virtues of both cultures.

Replenishment and Nourishment

Replenishment—that is, activities that fill us up spiritually—is a very important attribute of the core, our spiritual home. For example, we feel spiritually replenished when we gain insight into our identity or feel connected spiritually to others.

We receive **nourishment** from activities that are supportive and caring and result in growth. For example, we may eat fast food when we are at work, but we are happy to return home to eat familiar home-cooked food and enjoy the company of our family. This nourishes us physically and emotionally.

People who hold up the core culture draw strength from their spiritual and social life; those who embrace the interface culture generally live a more stressful life, working to achieve and perform to maximum ability, and take care of themselves in more personal and individual ways. Replenishment and nourishment are antidotes to stress.

Centers of Gravity

When you see groups of people who have naturally gathered together, you are seeing **centers of gravity.** Centers of gravity are indigenous assets of the community, reflecting important aspects of the community relationships. When you are building community, it is important to see, understand, and support the ways informal leaders are selected and how relationships are formed in these gatherings, and to respect and work with these organic formations of people

Centers of gravity will be different in the core and in the interface. For example, a center of gravity in the core may consist of grandparents and grandchildren enjoying each other's company. The underlying premise is nourishment through intergenerational relationships. Another example would be a group of men playing chess together. Or, it may be a group of women sharing stories about families and relatives. These activities for men and women replenish them. An interface center of gravity may be a group of youth playing basketball, or young people dancing together or listening to jazz in a club.

Structures and Spaces

The **structures and spaces** of a community reflect core values of the culture. In the Philippines, for example, the community is constructed around a central plaza. In China, symmetry is important to denote order, harmony, and balance. There are parks where people can gather to enjoy nature in a social environment.

In the United States, structures and spaces are often developed around "time." Commercial districts are organized in such a way that people can access places and services such as banking, transportation, hotels, and restaurants within walking distance. In residential areas, there are areas nearby for doing laundry, food shopping, and other shops and services that residents require for daily living. Time and convenience have a strong influence on structures and spaces in America.

Social Capital

Social capital is the combined strength and power of community members. It is the trust and need for reciprocity that develops over time and binds the whole group together. Just as we can accumulate financial capital, which we can draw on to spend, a community can accumulate social capital in the form of trust and reliability among a group of people to carry out community activities.

Social Health

The **social health** of a community is expressed in the quality of life of community members. Good social health includes children who stay in school, strong families, elder support, good communication and means of reconciling differences between generations, low rates of crime and violence, and neighborhoods that are well cared for. Poor social health is reflected by increased rates of illness, school dropouts, crime and violence, abuses, and neglected and decaying neighborhoods.

VisionBuilding will demonstrate quite vividly the social problems that come from dysfunctional families and communities. These social problems lead to a lowering in the health of the children, youth, and elders.

Leadership Formation

Leadership formation is both formal and informal. The **formal leadership** is defined by the roles and responsibilities of an organization or government. The **informal leadership** is a pattern of self-organization. It is formed by what the community members expect from their leaders and from each other. Leaders who organize centers of gravity have an intuitive knowledge of how to get things done and what people expect from their leaders.

The formal and informal leaders in a community may be the same, or different people may occupy these roles. It is particularly important to understand how the informal leadership works, because it will help you to recognize the assumptions and expectations of leadership held by people in the community.

STATEMENT ON THE CONCEPT OF PREMISES UNDERLYING OUR EFFORTS TO DEVELOP PERSONAL NETWORKS

To help people of diverse cultural backgrounds appreciate their differences, and to understand the reasons for these differences, we at Wildflowers Institute and the United States–China Educational Institute (USCEI) are making increasing use of the concept of basic cultural premises, of assumptions, of postulates that underlie all behavior. Since 1980, we have been applying our understanding of cultural behavior to the development of collaborative tools to help people to understand and to appreciate the underlying cultural premises of one another.

Half a century ago the Chinese anthropologists Hsiao-Tung Fei and Chih-I-Chang in their book *Earthbound China: A Study of Rural Economy in Yunnan,* wrote:

> Human behavior is always motivated by certain purposes, and these purposes grow out of sets of assumptions which are not usually recognized by those who hold them. The basic premises of a particular culture are unconsciously accepted by the individual through his constant and exclusive participation in that culture. It is these assumptions—the essence of all the culturally conditioned purposes, motives, and principles—which determine the behavior of a people, underlie all the institutions of a community, and give them unity. . . . This, unfortunately, is the most elusive aspect of culture. Since it is taken for granted by the people, the student will not find it formulated verbally. On the contrary, it must usually be inferred from concrete behavior, a process which requires a certain insight on the part of the observer. (1945:81–82)

The important distinction between conscious premises that are recognized and that can be verbalized by most members of a society, and the unconscious premises that lie at a deeper level, is emphasized by the Mexican psychiatrist Rogelio Diaz-Guerrero:

> A socio-cultural premise may be a clearly conscious assumption upon which a given group bases its thinking, feeling and behavior and it may also be unconscious, i.e., a not clearly verbalized assumption which may still—or perhaps because of this—be even more powerful in its effects upon the thinking, feeling and action of the individuals of a given group. As a matter of fact much of what goes on as very natural and unquestioned behavior in a given culture, may be described by its members as 'just the way we are' or 'just the way we do things' without any clear ability to refer it to a more powerful but unverbalized socio-cultural assumption or premise that may command it. It may also be that these more powerful socio-cultural premises of a given group are altered and turned into caricatured stereotypes by members of other cultural groups, who perceive them from their own overpowering and unconscious socio-cultural context. (1967:263)

American anthropologist George Foster, in writing of "the unquestioned assumptions, the basic premises, the unrecognized postulates that underlie the cultural forms and individual behavior of the members of a group," makes the same distinction:

> All members of a group share a common cognitive orientation, a comprehension and interpretation of the world around them which, in effect, set the terms and conditions on

> which they feel life is lived. Some aspects of this common cognitive cognition are fairly explicit, in that they are found at an overt, conscious level and can be verbalized by most members of a society. Middle- and upper-class Americans, for example, have no difficulty in expressing their assumption that manual labor has dignity, that hard and intelligent work usually is rewarded with success, and that "people are basically alike all over the world." (Needless to say, it is the presence of the assumption, rather than whether it is in fact correct, that is significant.)
>
> Other aspects of cognitive orientations are more covert and subconscious; they represent assumptions and premises so deeply imbedded in the individual's mind that normally he is not aware of them. (1969:67–68)

To illustrate this point, Foster points to the "cognitive judgment" of many peasants that all good things in life—land, wealth, health, friendship, power, and influence— exist in limited, unexpandable amounts, and that consequently one person's gain is seen as another's loss. He calls this zero-sum concept the "Image of Limited Good," and believes that much traditional peasant behavior—stereotypical at least—such as apparent apathy, lack of concern with "progress," reluctance to stand out from the crowd, tendency to conceal well-being, gossip and back-biting, rejection of compliments— can best be understood as a function, a consequence, of this premise, which peasants themselves do not verbalize.

It is apparent that many cultural forms—perhaps all—are a function of or a response to the shared premises, both conscious and unconscious, of the members of a group. Premises condition attitudes about the appropriate ways of interacting with other people, depending on our perception of role and status underlying interpersonal encounters. They determine how we view work and its rewards; they underlie feelings about religion and the supernatural, and philosophies of life; and they establish forms of logic and express basic values structuring behavior. It is not going too far to say that, seen against the background of the relevant premises, *all* behavior is rational. A particular bit of behavior can be said to be irrational only when evaluated by persons whose premises are quite different, as in the Western view that Burmese religious behavior is "irrational," as described by Melford Spiro in the following paragraphs.

Recognition of conscious cultural premises offers no problems; they are explicit, visible to anyone who looks, listens, and thinks. But how are powerful unconscious premises discovered? The answer is, usually, when students of culture note a striking nonconformity with their own cultures, a contrast that cannot be overlooked. In "Buddhism and Economic Behavior in Burma," the American anthropologist Melford Spiro gives a beautiful example of the process of discovery. He points out that descriptions of behavior of the Burmese by Westerners stress their "economic irrationality." They stress spiritual as opposed to material values:

> They build pagodas, support monasteries, and maintain monks, while they themselves reside in thatched huts, live on simple fare, and so on. In short, from observed facts concerning the 'disproportionate' allocation of economic resources for religious ends, it is inferred that the motivation for these actions is "spiritual." (1966:1164)

Further, the Burmese are often said to have little if any concern for the future, preferring to believe things will take care of themselves. They spend lavishly on religious displays, and manifest little interest in saving ("much less investing") for future contingencies; they are, it is often said, "improvident."

But, continues Spiro, he finds on the basis of his field research that most Burmese are much concerned with material things, that they desire money, property, and luxury. "Almost without exception, the Burmese layman, whatever else he may desire, desires good and plentiful food, fine clothes, a 'pukkha' house, and so on" (Ibid. 1165). How can this apparent lack of congruence between behavior and desire be explained?

The answer, suggests Spiro, lies in the premise of reincarnation. "This means that the duration of 'life' is not confined to the mere 60 or 70 years of existence, but extends over an incalculable duration of tens of thousands of years. One's present existence is but a brief moment in a total life of inconceivably long duration, extending from a remote past to an equally remote future" (Ibid. 1167). Hence, one struggles to amass karma in this life, to enhance one's chances for a better next life. How is karma amassed? It is due neither to luck nor chance. Rather, it is the net balance of one's merits and demerits acquired in all of one's rebirths, including the present one. Merit is acquired by morality, meditation, and especially by charity. And, "the building of pagodas, the maintenance of monasteries, the provision of monks, and so on, is charity par excellence" (Ibid.). Hence, when one sees spending on religious charities in the light of the premise of reincarnation and countless future lives, the building of pagodas, maintenance of monasteries, and provision for monks is the wisest economic investment that a prudent Burmese can make. Economic behavior viewed in Western terms as "irrational" turns out to be highly rational when seen as a function of this basic Burmese premise.

And, it is only when the significance of the premise of rebirth to the Burmese is called to our attention do Americans realize that the apparently trite expression "You only live once" is in fact a basic, largely unconscious premise underlying our behavior. Only then do we realize that our life strategy is based on a period of a mere 70 or 80 years. While believers in a hereafter, in heaven, may model some of their behavior in the hope of a new and better life, the situation is quite distinct from that in Burma.

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WILDFLOWERS INSTITUTE MISSION STATEMENT

To design and develop frameworks, processes, and tools that help individuals and groups build productive interfaces between diverse cultures and to strengthen the cultural formation, quality of life, and social health within the community.

We believe in an asset-oriented approach to building community that encourages local control and capitalizes on diversity. Our goal is to contribute to the next generation of thought and practices in sustainable social development in communities in the United States and abroad.

Wildflowers Institute is an international not-for-profit organization operating in San Francisco, California.

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