

Are You Thinking Like an Islander? Or More So Like a Cosmopolitan?

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Abstract

In this article, the practitioner-academician author examines the thinking or mentality of islanders of Fiji and the other islands of the Pacific as well as the Maldives in the Indian Ocean as compared to those of a cosmopolitan/ urban center or mega-city. Comparisons and contrasts are thus made between an islander/ island thinking and cosmopolitan resident/ urban and mega-city thinking with learning points or lessons to be gathered for the readers.

Keywords: Being simple, being complicated, cosmopolitan, feeling isolated, feeling connected, islander mentality; being impatient/ patient; mentality; relationships

Introduction

Life at the islands is often quiet, quite laid-back, relaxed; cool and calm. The islands are ordinarily close to the seas and oceans, and even then, they are close to nature as in the form of trees and plants. The mega-cities or more so, cosmopolitans, on the other hand, are often bustling with activities and noises – the sound of vehicles, planes, machines and running motors, and more so, not to mention, the air and other pollutions.

Paper's Aim and Objectives

The paper's aims and objectives are to uncover and examine the likely thinking or mentality of the islanders in the islands of the Pacific and the Maldives in the Indian Ocean and at the same time, to compare and contrast the thinking of the islanders (natives or inhabitants of an island/ in Pacific/ Indian Ocean) with that of the residents of the mega-cities or cosmopolitans such as New York, Boston, London and Singapore; these are all world cities. Dictionary.com defines cosmopolitan in its adjective form as:

1. "free from local, provincial, or national ideas, prejudices, or attachments; at home all over the world".
2. "of or characteristic of a cosmopolite".
3. "belonging to all the world; not limited to just one part of the world". For the purpose of this paper, the cosmopolitans are simply taken as the residents of the big cities or cosmopolitans such as New York, Boston, London and Singapore.

Being Patient versus Being Impatient

Life at the islands is usually quiet, relaxed; cool and calm. Silence is also liked in Fiji. According to Nabobo (2006) "silence" in the Fijian society and the "vanua" (an essential concept of indigenous Fijian culture and society, and it can be translated as "land, people and custom"); many types of silence exists and just to name a few, there are silence in church (in church, it is disrespectful to create noise; and there's also holy silence), silence as respect to the dead and some moments of silence in village meetings. And there is also silence to still oneself when one meditates. Here, patience too is indeed a common virtue among islanders; they are more inclined to be patient and easy-going. Having the time to watch the sunrises and the sunsets, the Fijians or the islanders are "pretty easy-going" (<http://www.tourismfiji.com/fiji-culture-religion.html>).

On the other hand, there are loud racing Formula 1s and casinos in the mega-cities; the pace of city-life is fast and furious with the need to survive or win and competition in the air. Having little time to spare, the urban people tend to be less patient. After all, most time is expended on achieving, wanting to get or acquire things; and much time is spent on work or thinking about work, projects and assignments.

From the research perspective, it is noteworthy to highlight here that several islanders – a total of seven – approached this researcher to express their views voluntarily when they knew that the researcher was writing this review research paper; one such volunteered respondent spoke of, “I believe that islanders such as Fijians or even Maldivians are more patient than most of the other urban counter parts due the fact of isolation and that their islands are surrounded by sea. For several hundred years, Maldivians have been living in complete isolation and depending only on the resources available on the island and the surrounding ocean. The isolation perception is still very much engraved onto most Maldivians’ minds; and this is a clear example of the tolerance and patience of the islanders. It may be better to state that islanders are forced to be patient as there is indeed very limited access to the places outside the island.”

It is said that the paradox of our time in history is that we are now having taller buildings (especially in big cities) but shorter tempers, and even wider freeways, but perhaps narrower viewpoints. Sad though, we seem to spend more, but have less, we buy more, but enjoy less. Whereas “especially in Fiji, the *Bula* culture: hello, being friendly, time is not of the essence, there is no need to rush, better to be relaxing and taking things easy. This is good in the sense that it is more of letting things go and going with the flow; it is definitely less stressful” expressed one interviewee.

The big city people “live in a driven culture”; most push the pedal to the metal and ignore the speed limits; many are living in the fast lane (Burke, 2007: 17). People are and can be hyper-competitive (Ryan, 2013); they want to win and not lose out to others, and old habits die hard. We really need to be mindful of our lives and living (Rae, 2013). The big-city people can be very much impatient, for example, “when waiting for the lift to come to their level, some city people were seen impatiently stabbing the lift button several times” (One respondent’s comments).

True the big-cities are prospering; however, many would perceive that the big-city’s culture is essentially that of an achieving culture, heavy workload or at least an emphasis on high productivity, targets and goals, conquering/conquests and rush, rush. Many are boxed in the fast lane with no exit in sight and at times with no choice. Some are indeed driven to get the checkered flag and finish first. Interestingly, one should indeed pause and ask: Should life not be more enjoyable... one should instead enjoy the journey? Here, one is not talking about being passive, but rather, often it is also highlighted that there’s indeed no need to rush. If something is meant to be, it will happen – at the right place, in the right time, with the right person(s), and for the best reason.

Worse, added to the big-city (competitive) culture, the heavy work emphasis, the rush are the annoying crowded trains – “crowded. Actually, ‘crowded’ is an understatement” (Wong, 2013) that urban dwellers have to commute to and fro daily when going to work, and all these add stress, frustration or anxieties to the mega-city dwellers. Some writers (for example, http://english.caixin.com/2013-08-21/100572342_1.html) have also pointed out the various urban sickness or illness such as the rapid growth of cities as in People’s Republic of China, its overcrowding, traffic congestion, housing shortages, environmental pollution and damage and deteriorating public health as well as the growing rich-poor gap. As greater urbanization continues in the mega-cities, one can indeed say that worsening conditions are fast becoming a cause for concern.

And as if these were not enough, some may even claim and put the blame on the world’s changing climate, and the fact that it’s getting warmer or hotter? Researchers have expressed that the world is getting hotter. Accordingly, researchers said that as the world got warmer, people’s tempers were likely to get hotter (The Straits Times, 2013). (Under hot temperatures, the patience of people is highly likely to run thin). These all the more indicate that all of us must thus practice to be more patient.

Interestingly, the team of economists even came up with a formula that predicts how much the risk of different types of violence should increase with extreme weather. In war-torn parts of equatorial Africa, it proposes, every added degree Fahrenheit or so increases the chance of conflict between groups by 11 per cent to 14 per cent. For cosmopolitan United States, the formula says that for every increase of 5.4 degrees Fahrenheit (1 degree C), the likelihood of violent crime increases by 2 to 4 per cent. (The Straits Times, 3 Aug 2013: A26).

Then again, it is worthy to note that for years, Bhutan, the tiny Himalayan country has attempted to measure “gross national happiness” to counter measures such as gross domestic product (GDP), arguing that such simple metrics do not capture what is really meaningful to people. (Ghose, 2013). The 2012 study showed that whereas rich people are happier on average than poor people, increasing GDP in a country does not necessarily boost well-being. For instance, GDP tripled in the United States since the 1960s yet well-being has stagnated (Ghose, 2013). So also while mega-cities may grow and become prosperous in the material sense or technologically, these may not necessarily mean that their well-being is boosted.

Feeling Isolated versus Feeling Connected

Living in the islands, people feel isolated – this is applicable even for those who stay in the city. One islander opined these, “(True,) Male (in Maldives) is very similar or better than some of other metropolitans in the neighboring countries like Sri Lanka and India, the thinking of people living in Male will be very much like the thinking of the people living in metropolitans in the neighboring countries. However, there are several unique characteristics of an island which is approximate 2 square kilometers as compared with a city. The thought of sheer isolation is what every Maldivian or Fijian would think about, even the people living in the capital.” “The distances of the island(s) away from other centers may make the islanders feel isolated.”

“Islanders tend to be more collectivistic, they operate in teams to overcome or minimize any obstacles”; “the islanders, in fact, interacted a lot with each other.... There is a high sense of community living.” (Several interviewees’ inputs). What this researcher had personally observed while he was in Suva, Fiji recently was that the Fijians were very friendly; they interacted with other another very well. And even among friends they would share smoking a stick of cigarette; this rarely exists among urbanites not to mention that the issue of personal hygiene would be raised, and such sharing is seen as not good, and would be objected. Fijians, on the whole, are trained from young that family and friends are the most important things in life. Fijians continue their traditional family and cultural values even as they adopt and accept new technology. (Turtle Island, 2013).

On the other hand, “(being) more high-tech than high-touch”, cosmopolitan or city people, “not really that connected to one another” would “not feel isolated” (several interviewees’ inputs); although individualistically inclined, they feel wired and connected. The city people in business relatively travel more and often, and they have the necessary transport and technology to feel linked or connected. True, this is one point of view; another view point has it that the cosmopolitan people, no different from the islanders, are actually living in isolation, the world’s getting crowded with more people. Looking at them, it appears that their only concern is to work and earn a salary; HH The Dalai Lama (2001: 225) also spoke of “people who live in cities usually know quite a few people. One has to say hello. As there is a risk that one will be drawn into conversation with everyone, this isn’t practical. So we avoid contact and if someone speaks to you it feels like an intrusion.” Besides, he added that the modern city people are “terribly busy. If we talk to someone, even if only to say, ‘how are you?’ (*even these would be said perfunctorily*), we feel we are losing two precious seconds of our life” (HH The Dalai Lama, 2001: 224, *italics*, author’s). If these were true, it means that the feelings of the cosmopolitan people, that of being connected or linked is in fact pseudo.

One can also say that the islanders are connected to one another within the islands or within their community, but their feeling of isolation is more with the outside world. Islanders definitely know each other better, and they better realize the greater need for mutual support and help. Fijians and South Pacific islanders as well as Maldivians are very warm people. In Fiji, to share with others and care for one another are essentials to the term “veikauwaitaki”, recognizing and having feelings for. (Island Spirit, 2013).

The people especially in the villages live and work together. (Think Pacific, 2013). There indeed exists “a strong sense of respect and community” – indeed one cannot walk past a house without being gestured in to share food, this even happened in Suva. “Values and ideals too are still firmly in place as generations talk and live with each other allowing for the flow of inter-generational knowledge and respect. Full of soul and the warmth, the Fijian people appears to be overwhelming” (Island Spirit, 2013). In the Pacific islands such as Anuta Island (with only 300 people), there is high or good community spirit – after all, for the Anuta islanders, they maintain good relationships with each other; they have to; it is too far to trade with other islanders.

Relationship-based versus Transaction-based

It is worthy to note that islanders are also highly relationship-based rather than just being business-like or transactional. Here, one Maldivian expressed these views: “Islanders have very intense love towards their island(s). As late as in the 1990s, their culture is a very unique one... Helping neighbors and doing community prevailed even during 1990s. For example, if there are wedding celebrations, almost all the members of the island collaborate and help. If a house is being constructed, people would come together and help each other; they don’t expect anything in return. If one prepares a delicious food, he or she usually gives a portion to the neighbors. To sum up, I feel that they value relationships. (However, these values – perhaps because of modernization – may and are changing beginning from the new millennium)”.

In contrast, the urban people not connected or if they are, they are merely loosely connected to each other, and it is felt that they are transactional-based. They lack, so to speak, the warmth and the personal touch of the islanders.

It is true to also argue or in fact say that in cosmopolitan living, modern people can be very business-like and transaction-centered; and devoid of closeness in relationships, they can be leading lonely lives. Yes, it’s true, technology can help isolated people to connect with others yet it indeed cannot replace the human contact which everyone enjoyed when we still had close communities

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/haveyoursay/2010/05/is_modern_life_making_us_lone1.html). Indeed mega cities or developed countries can be attributed to be transactional-based as perhaps exemplified by the islanders’ urging to their sponsors – the developed countries – not to dictate terms and conditions when giving assistance to the Pacific Island countries. Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, the President of Fiji was cited (Fiji Sun, 2013: 2) as saying, “They (Sponsors/ developed countries) must come to as collaboration. In which we (the Pacific Island countries) set the priorities, define the agenda, channel assistance through our institutions and participate as equals every step of the way”.

We are not machines or robots; all of us all need people in our lives who take away the coldness of this world with the warmth of their presence, their chats and laughter. What is worse, these days, is that “there are thousands of people on city streets and yet none of them looks at each other. If their eyes cross, they do not smile unless they are meeting formally. People sit next to each other in trains for hours on end but do no talk to each other. Isn’t this strange?” (HH The Dalai Lama, 2001: 222).

Leading a Simple Life versus Living Less Simple, Even Complex or Complicated

It can also be taken that generally speaking, island dwellers, say in the South Pacific, are highly likely to think simply, and simplicity is good. It is clean, good and not corrupted as well as unmoved by greed or the lure of money and/or material things. [To this author, the lives of the cosmopolitans are even made more complicated by the pursuits of money and material things with a gamut of schemes and projects either to protect ordinary citizens from being fleeced or to prevent fraudulent practices. One case worth mentioning is City-state Singapore’s pursuit or continuation of its competitive materialistic search, attracting tourists, and building its integrated resorts (IRs) with casino operations, and these are chased in spite of obvious social problems including bad gambling problems, suicides after heavy losses, illegal loan shark troubles and high personal debts (<https://www.facebook.com/SayNOtoCasinoSG>). For the overall population and foreign employees, there are problem gambling safeguards, checks/ casino-exclusion measures (<http://www.knowtheline.sg/draw-the-line/casino-exclusion-measures.html>) and casino visit limits. And its civil service too, intending to prevent incidents such as the recent case of a senior official from the anti-corruption watchdog charged with misappropriating money, has also incorporated a series of procedures, rules and reporting for its employees should they visit casino(s); Reuters, 2013].

Being simple is to value or admire the intrinsic and inner qualities of people – loving people and using things – rather than what is external or extrinsic, merely using people and loving things. These fittingly match with several interviewees’ inputs, that is, “unlike the cosmopolitans with their gadgets and complicated gizmos as well as materialistic pursuit, the islanders prefer things to be simpler. The islanders’ life is not mechanical; they enjoy life by doing simple things such as fishing, mending their nets, swimming and so on. They tend to spend more time with the family and they are not that concerned about accumulating wealth. There is also plenty of ‘space’. Unlike in the mega-cities where the shopping complexes are crowded and the trains, packed to the gills with people, it is still possible in the islands to roam through large areas of jungle, if not trees, nature, sea, sand and coastline to find traditional villages.”

These match with an airline's description of the islands which is luxury in blue, that is, they are "fantasy islands... spread over 90,000 square kilometers, the Maldives (for example) is home to vibrant coral reefs (and) ...stunning beaches" (Discovery, 2013: 62). Overall, the interviewee added with emphasis that "the most important thing or the bottom-line is happiness living in a helping society which has much sharing and caring... and I enjoy it. Moreover, life is not for rushing, we have to take our time, spend time with people and being close to nature, this can help us to relax and be calm."

In *Keep-life-simple Therapy*, Mundy (2002: 15) wisely urges us to keep life simple, especially in "learn(ing) to value spiritual things over material things. They last longer, cost less, (and) bring more." Perhaps the cosmopolitans too can learn a thing or two from the islanders on ways to make themselves happy. It is worthy too to note what the Greek philosopher Epicurus once said, that is, wealth comprises not in having many or great possessions, but in having few wants. The cosmopolitans or city dwellers can also, in effect, really enjoy relationships and perhaps they can also reflect and understand what it takes to be rich or wealthy. People certainly feel significantly happier when they reflect on a particular time they spent money helping others. And this is bolstered by various studies, one of which is made by US behavior scientists Dunn and Norton (cited in Goh, 2013: 39); these scientists noted that people derive happiness from seeing their wealth or money at work in making other people happy. No wonder; this helps to explain why many wealthy people donate or give generously to build schools and hospitals; in doing so, they feel happy or gratified as they watch in real-time their money being utilized to help the community they live in.

The modern man seems to be structured and complicated that they have many gadgets or conveniences yet they are time poor. It is also observed that the modern human being has somehow forgotten how to relax or enjoy their own inner silence. (S)he rarely succeeds in being quiet for one or two hours and is not able to gain strength from silence (<http://osho-institute-for-martial-arts-and-zen-meditation.com/3.html>).

There is, in fact, an overall tendency to moving towards or getting into activities and getting things done. What is worse, is that among the cosmopolitans, **because of high population density – not to mention overcrowdedness, strong competition and the need to survive**, there exists a strong inclination towards greater imbalance with a heavy stress on work plus a lack of "letting go" (Carroll, 2004: 23-29; **bold author's**). Anxious and lack of (work-life) balance, the cosmopolitan residents are highly likely to be complex or simply, less simple. In mega-cities, the people, with the need to survive and 'keep-up-with-the-Joneses', are more of being forced to think in terms of countering business rivals, or winning businesses/ contracts amidst the fierce competition. "There is also this thing about achieving, the *must attain*." (several interviewees' inputs). And in the process and/or consequently, there is also lack of personal touch. "It is bad when someone connects with you, and he or she has an agenda in mind to make full use of you, to capitalize on his or her knowing you, his or her connections with you. This is no good and it's very utilitarian in approach. It's complicated... ..one has to be careful when dealing with such persons" (one interviewee's inputs).

Unlike the islanders' "living for the day" and relaxed way (Island Spirit, 2013), the cosmopolitan's or mega cities residents' pressurized way of life, materialistic and not relaxed pace as well as the lack of warmth in relationships can perhaps be best seen or further confirmed by the view as opined by Ms Aung San Suu Kyi's September 2013, her first visit to Singapore; she highlighted that, "(True) Myanmar had a lot to learn from Singapore, but thought the process could be two-way. From Myanmar, Singapore could learn a 'more relaxed way of life and warmer and closer family relations'. For her, Singapore's material success was not enough. For her country, she wants 'something more'" (The Economist, 2013). Clearly so, Myanmar's opposition leader Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi looks to Singapore as model; but indeed minus the materialism. (<http://www.dnaindia.com/world/1893198/report-myanmar-leader-aung-san-suu-kyi-looks-to-singapore-as-model-minus-the-materialism>).

Living in a Communal Way versus Living in an Individualistic Way

In Fiji, there is much warmth and the people live in a communal way; on the other hand, the cosmopolitans can be individualistic in their lifestyle. "Ethnic Fijian culture encourages children to have a strong sense of loyalty to their community and become good members of their village." (Otsuka, 2006: 1). Overall happy and in most ways, community satisfied, the islanders do pay a price for living in a community way. To discuss the issue in a more objective fashion, it is to be noted that enormous communal demands exist on time and labor of the Fijians.

True Fijians live communally, but they are socially and morally obliged to spend much time, money and energy on ceremonial events and church activities. This may perhaps be at the expense of providing formal education for their children. Besides, the study also outlined that the parents are often absent from home. This leads to non-supervision of children's homework. As for the secondary school students, peer pressure exists and this allows them to conform to social activities and playing sports in the traditional setting. Or perhaps having to indulge in communal kava drinking, an intoxicating drink made from the grounded roots of the pepper trees.

(Kava is drank in ceremonies meant to honor visitors, unite participants and validate their social identities; KavaRoot.com, 2013.) The typical home does pose a different environment to study for there is one, due to limited space, and two, it could also be seen that the socio-cultural background of ethnic Fijians, particularly the home environment, family values and priorities is one of the major obstacles to children's educational progress.

Indeed, what the people and governments – whether in developed countries (for the cosmopolitans' and mega-cities' residents) or in the Pacific islands (islanders) – can do is to look at ways to improving the typical environment for the youngster / youth to study well as well as balanced with good community living among the people.

Stressing on Craftsmanship and Quality versus Preferring Fast, Cheap and Bigger Products

Interestingly, with a slow pace of life or “being time rich”, the islanders appear to welcome and value workmanship or “craftsmanship, indeed wanting a slower pace with a quality finish” (some interviewees' inputs).

Cosmopolitans, on the other hand, having been brought up in the age where faster, cheaper and bigger were valued seem to emphasize the latter. Radparvar Brothers, cited in Rae, 2013, for example, grew up in an age where faster, cheaper, and bigger were valued above craftsmanship, values, and quality; quick, fast and bigger products are still better appreciated, if not liked.

Sweating It out Lifestyle versus Leading a Sedentary Deskbound Lifestyle

Generally speaking, although it is a slower pace, “life in the island is more manual.” The islanders are involved in “sweating it out, dancing as well as in doing various types of manual work such as repairing fishing nets or boats or planting crops” (Several interviewees' inputs). “Life in the mega-cities is more sedentary or inactive and the urban people indulge in few or little manual work” (Several interviewees' inputs).

Most times, the majority of urban people may not even exercise, let alone do manual work and/or have healthy lifestyles. Here, it is good to be reminded that “let manual labor, hard work, be part of your life. You'll be proud of how humble it makes you” (Mundy, 2002: 16). It is also suitable that urban people do some DIY, manual work or are involved in some physical activities. Besides, it is a healthier choice to sweat it out rather than be unhealthy, overeat, be obese and/ or not having much physical activities. Mundy (2002: 18, **bold author's words**) also exhorts “(us) to try to eat and live lower on the food and resources chain. You'll be doing a world of good to (**yourself and**) beings yet unborn.”

Before moving on to the conclusion, it is good to review the limitations and benefits of the study which is indicated in the section that follows.

Limitations and Benefits of the Study Review

One of the key limitations of this study review is that the author centered himself on certain key islanders/ Fijian thinking and/ or values which he saw as critical or important and positively selected these up as a way forward to relevantly relate to the lives and lifestyle of the mega cities' residents or cosmopolitans; the latter in turn lends strengths to this study, and lessons for all to learn or emulate.

It is also worthy to note that things are changing. Like any other cultures, the paradigms are shifting, and the thinking as well as the values in the Pacific islands' societies too – albeit slowly – are ever changing, and besides, there is a need to factor in the better educated Generation Y (born between 1979 and 2007) and Generation Z (born post 2007) who are or can be different from the Generation X people (born between 1964 and 1978), the traditionalists (born pre-1946) and baby-boomers (born 1946 to 1963). Besides, Generation Y people may be more information-technology and/or technological savvy and may not share the values of the previous generations; after all, the Pacific Islands such as Fiji or even Maldives in the Indian Ocean is very much subjected to the winds of change including globalization, Facebook and Instagram.

Some of the islanders may decide to plug into the grid of globalization and modernization, and to them that is part of progress; and with these islanders’ value of community, hospitality and warm relationships may be altered or changed.

However, the study has more or less created a basis to think further, extend more reflections on or in fact, serve as a platform for further exploration and study of analyzing, even (business) values, corporate cultures and the national culture/ values of the Pacific Islands such as Fiji and other islands.

Conclusion

For a summary of the key differences between the thinking and lifestyle of islanders and that of the cosmopolitans’/ mega-cities’ residents, please see Table 1.

Table 1: Below Shows Some Key Differences between the Thinking/Lifestyle of Islanders and That of the Cosmopolitans’/ Mega-Cities’ Residents.

| The Thinking/ lifestyle of the Islanders | The Thinking/ lifestyle of the Cosmopolitan’s/ Megacities’ Residents |
|---|--|
| Having a more cooperative lifestyle. | Having a more competitive lifestyle. |
| Being more relaxed. A more relaxed pace of life, a living for the day. [In Fiji, one who worries about the future is said to be “lomaocaoca”. There’s practically no need to panic or be upset if things did not occur the way one wanted. What is essentially vital is to be happy and contented now.] | Being more often in a hurry; rush, rush and more rush. |
| (Tend to) being more patient: Being time-rich; hence are inclined to be more patient. | (Likely to) being impatient: Being time-poor with plenty of rush, rush and more rush; hence they are inclined to be less patient. Most time is expended on achieving and wanting to get or acquire things. |
| Feeling isolated or separated from the outside world; personal relationships are stressed. | Feeling connected through technology, for example, Facebook, etc. But mega-cities residents may also feel isolated for there is little emphasis on relationships. |
| Relationship-based | Transaction-based |
| Living simply. | Living less simple, even complex or complicated. |
| Living in a communal way. | Living in an individualistic way. |
| Stressing on craftsmanship and quality. | Preferring fast, cheap and bigger products. |
| Sweating it out lifestyle. | Leading a sedentary, deskbound lifestyle. |

True, one can dismiss the above as generalizations but there may perhaps be some key differences between the thinking and even lifestyle of the islanders and that of the cosmopolitans’/ big cities’ residents (see Table 1). However, overall, all of us need to put some effort to have personal touch and connect, link and build relationships with each other or at least do something for the community, engage in communal activity or activities while growing our character and patience. And besides, we should not be building our anxieties, stress or indulging in meaningless rush while not allowing or treating work and play as rivals; although each may have its separate position at times, both can really occupy the same place. All of us should have a work-life balance. What more, each of us should, in fact, put in some efforts, and after all, we are in charge of ourselves, to live a better life, and to also make this planet a better and happier place for all to live in.

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