

Full Length Research

The laughing Buddha, doing business and the art of motivation

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Abstract

All of us want to be successful in life. Most people are seeking that extra edge to move forward or forge ahead. In this paper, the researcher-practitioners investigate the use of a Buddhist Icon, the Laughing Buddha as a motivator to improve and better oneself. Buddhists pray to the Laughing Buddha requesting for healthy living, good luck, wealth and prosperity; and the Laughing Buddha, as a symbol of motivation, inspires them. In doing business, the Laughing Buddha way, it also helps businesspeople in attaining good relationship, great partnership, prosperity, peace and harmony in their business circle and society.

Keywords: The Laughing Buddha, *Pu Tai*; Buddhism, doing business, motivation.

INTRODUCTION

The Great Mahatma Gandhi (1869 - 1948) once said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world". This means that an individual cannot ever change anybody else; he or she can only change him(herself) and hopes he or she inspires other people to do the same. All people, almost everyone, including the ancient Chinese, want to change for the better; and more importantly, be successful and prosperous in life. Most are seeking that extra advantage to move forward or forge ahead. And they may look for whatever sources to do business, have more sales volume, make profits, gain and/or simply to get an advantage; and why not? Interestingly, some may also rely on spiritual powers and effective prayers.

PAPER'S AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Here, the paper's objectives are to examine the use of the Laughing Buddha as a source of inspiration and motivation. Buddhists pay respect to the Laughing

Buddha requesting for good luck, good health, wealth and prosperity.

Buddhism and the Buddha are associated with positive thinking (Low, 2010). Low in his paper argued that action-oriented Buddhism espouses and in fact, advances positive thinking.

Most Buddhists pray to Buddhas; some pray to the Laughing Buddha. The Chinese, though at times unwittingly, use the Laughing Buddha as one of the sources of inspiration. And indeed, the Laughing Buddha can be a good source of motivation; it is put in homes for Buddhists or often found in Chinese homes and offices as symbols of abundance and prosperity and sometimes even as a god of contentment and happiness.

Literature Review

One can say that, in general, people do not wish or want to have any sufferings; and they do desire and cherish happiness. In Buddhism, it is believed that there is no such thing as a creator and that the ultimate creator is one's own mind. Since the mind is intrinsically pure and good; and with good motivation, the mind's verbal and physical actions would become good and this produces good results that are pleasant and beneficial for oneself

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and for others (The Dalai Lama, 2009: 14). In this respect, the Laughing Buddha can be considered as a good human motivation. He is said to be a monk who is being portrayed as always smiling or laughing and hence, his nickname the Laughing Buddha (笑佛; *Hanyu Pinyin: xiàofó*). He is also being called as *Pu Tai* (Chinese) or *Hotei* (Japanese).

This literally means a monk and his cloth bag (布袋和尚; *hanyu pinyin: bù dài hé shàng*). It denotes a monk with a cheerful face and a protruding big belly; carrying a cloth sack full of things over his shoulder and these things are to be given to the poor and needy. Some Buddhist traditions consider him as a Buddha or a bodhisattva, often identifying him with Matrieya (the future Buddha). He is said to be an incarnation of Miroku Bodhisattva (Maitreya in Sanskrit). In 917 BC, his identification with the Maitreya is attributed to a Buddhist hymn (偈语, *Hanyu Pinyin: jìyǔ*) he uttered before his death:

彌勒真彌勒，化身千百億，時時示時人，時人自不識
Hanyu Pinyin: mí lè zhēn mí lè, huà shēn qiān bǎi yì, shí shí shì shí rén, shí rén zì bù shí meaning Maitreya, the true Maitreya; reborn innumerable times; from time to time manifested to men; the men of the age do not recognize you
 (http://www.newsfinder.org/site/more/hotei_pu_tai_maitreya_all_known_as_the_laughing_buddha/). In China, Miroku is known as Miluo Fo (彌勒佛) or as Milou Pusa (彌勒菩薩; *Hanyu Pinyin: mí lè pú sà*). (<http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/hotei.shtml>).

The Laughing Buddha absorbs negative Chi and emanates positive energies. This is a very auspicious symbol and can be seen gracing many homes, temples, restaurants and vehicle dash boards. This is an excellent gift item for the loved ones (<http://anamikas.hubpages.com/hub/Laughing-Buddha-Feng-Shui-Symbol-Wealth-Good-Luck-and-Prosperity>) to aspire or be inspired to achieve certain goals.

The Laughing Buddha figurine is seen with a protruding belly and a jolly smile. He is usually depicted carrying wealth symbols such as pots of gold, large ingots and a sack believed to contain treasures. This Buddha is believed to be a person having extraordinary happiness, patience and compassion. It is said that he stomachs all the troubles and problems and transforms them into happiness (positive energies). Hence the common Chinese proverb describing him as such, “肚大能容容天下難容之事。開懷便笑笑天下可笑之人。” *Hanyu Pinyin: “dù dà néng róng róng tiān xià nán róng zhī shì. kāi huái biàn xiào xiào tiān xià kě xiào zhī rén”*, literally translated as, “big belly can withhold or contain the worldly problems that are not easy to resolve; happily laughing at those people who are meant to be laughed at” (<http://www.mldc.cn/yxrx/sl.htm>). The wisdom is meant to tell people that one should be “awakened”; has a positive proactive mindset and continues to move forward; and not to be discouraged or frustrated by and/or be in any connected to all those worldly cares,

problems and worries. Very often, one of the authors used this proverb to elaborate and express the meaning in his painting of the Laughing Buddha.

The Laughing Buddha is also considered a patron of the weak, poor and children.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper relies on personal observations of Buddhist believers/practitioners and interviewing with three Buddhist practitioners; in some ways, they may be classified as mystics. The qualitative research interview seeks to describe the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say (Kvale, 1996). Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a respondent's experiences. The interviewer can pursue in-depth information around the topic. Interviews may be useful as follow-up to certain respondents to questionnaires such as to further investigate their responses (McNamara, 1999). This interview method is helpful since it enables much qualitative data to be collected from the interviewees. To get more information and data from the various interviewees, open questions were deployed (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2001); they were worded as follows:

1. What do you think of the Laughing Buddha? What does the Laughing Buddha mean to you?
2. How does the Laughing Buddha help you in leading your life? Or in your line of business?
3. Why do you pray to the Laughing Buddha?
4. How or in what ways in which you are motivated by the Laughing Buddha?
5. What do you like about the Laughing Buddha?
6. What attracts you to the Laughing Buddha?

FINDINGS

The results of the interviews are tabulated as follows in Table 1:

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Laughing Buddha to the Chinese business people is important because it is a symbol of good luck, wealth, happiness, prosperity and contentment (satisfaction). Chinese business aims for success and long-termism (Low, 2009). Often, there is universal search for success (Ong, 1994). Most Chinese search for success too; they want to succeed.

“If one looks at the Laughing Buddha, one will see the Chinese characters of “mouth” (口, *Hanyu Pinyin: kǒu*, Figure 1) and the ‘kǒu’ is said to appear in three places: one in the head and one at each knee of the Laughing

Table1. Remarks from the Three Buddhist Respondents
<p>1. Looked up to the role model. “I want to be like him laughing everyday”; “I envy him and want to be like him because he has no worries”; “I want to make people happy and he is my role model”. “Like the Laughing Buddha, I laugh to make people happy”; “I like him because he is kind and happy”; “I give donations to the charitable organisations and schools because of the poor and needy; this is what I learnt from the Laughing Buddha who is kind and charitable”; “I help others following the way of the Laughing Buddha”; “everybody wants happiness; nobody wants sufferings or sadness that’s why I choose the Laughing Buddha as my role model” and “this is what we all should be; not the body but the mindset and the attitude of the Laughing Buddha towards life.”</p>
<p>2. An example to be happy. “I like him because he is always laughing”; “he teaches me to laugh away all my problems”; “I always feel happy to see people laugh and smile at each other”; “When I see the Laughing Buddha either statue or painting, I feel happy”; “when you are happy, everybody is like your friends”; “my three-years old son like to watch the Laughing Buddha and he always laugh and smile at the statue or a painting”</p>
<p>3. A way to be detached e.g. through laughing or looking at the transient nature of our present life/living “Laughing makes me not worrying; and I feel detached from all the problems when I laugh”; “I feel the sense of detachment when I watch the painting or the statue of the Laughing Buddha because he is so pleasant to look at”</p>
<p>4. Seen in the light of spiritual motivation – looking at things that are permanent “Spiritually, I am simply motivated by the Laughing Buddha”; “The smiling face and the relaxing posture motivate me physically and spiritually; this behaviour encourages me to be happy in all circumstances”</p>
<p>5. A source for getting or gaining more sales. “Customers like me because I always smile at them when I serve them”; “I found out that when I am happy, I serve more customers and gain more sales”; “I want to get more sales; I want to get more money” and “one customer said to me that he likes my smiling face when I serve him and I said said that I learn from the Laughing Buddha”.</p>
<p>6. A source of positive energies “As a business person, I need to be positive and attract good energies”; “I learn to face life in a positive manner”; “even though he is my boss, he makes people relax when he smiles and laughs”; “Praying to the Laughing Buddha gives me positive energies”; “I draw positive energy from the laughing expression of the Laughing Buddha”; “ I pray to the Laughing Buddha for positive energy to lead my life”; “ I like to see the Laughing Buddha, it has a lot of good <i>Chi</i>” “I like it!”.</p>
<p>7. A source of peacefulness and that is motivating to lead one to work hard. “I feel at peace and often work harder because of the Laughing Buddha”; “thinking of the Laughing Buddha, I feel focus and I can concentrate my work better”; “When I start meditation in the evening, I always visualise the Laughing Buddha to calm my nerve and to attain peacefulness”</p>
<p>8. A source of happiness and good health. “I stay happy to attain good health. This is because I know that worrying and being unhappy everyday will make me sick”; “I feel healthy when I am happy”; “the Laughing Buddha makes people happy and healthy”; “For unexplained reasons and maybe spiritually, I feel happy when I see the Laughing Buddha’s statue or picture”; “It must be the open hearted laugh that I am attracted to the Laughing Buddha and I considered this as a source of happiness and good health”</p>
<p>9. A Way to live a secured life without temptation and be happy always “Believing in the Laughing Buddha would enable me to attain, ‘知足常樂’ meaning ‘to be satisfied with what I have got or achieved and to be happy always. This makes me happy doing my line of business and of course taking care and be grateful with my family”; “the Laughing Buddha protects me from doing wrong deeds such as cheating or lying to people; and bad influences” and “ the Laughing Buddha help me to encounter and make a circle of good friends”.</p>



Figure 1. The Chinese character for mouth

Buddha”. This is based on an interview with a Buddhist mystic. According to him, “if four ‘*kōu*’s are used, that four

‘*kōu*’s (mouths) are supposed to represent the Laughing Buddha”. It indeed stands for “abundance for the entire

family” (an interviewee’s inputs). Besides, the three “kous” when combined is or reflects the Chinese character 品, *Hanyu Pinyin*: *pǐn* which stands for quality, and that means the Laughing Buddha is being respected and prayed for heavenly perfection or the utmost abundance.

Spiritual motivation is the best motivation one can have; it is an intrinsic motivation. “It will grow and will make one thirsts (somehow without any sense of desire or attachment) for more as well as to help others”; “it is as if one is in love... walking in the clouds; one is in cloud nine” (interviewees’ inputs).

“One needs to satisfy oneself first, one’s basic needs need to be satisfied first and one’s abundance attained before one can lend a helping hand to others” (one interviewee’s input).

The Laughing Buddha is prayed for:

As A Role Model

The Laughing Buddha serves as a good role model; he embodies the 3Hs, that is, he is happy, healthy and helping others. He is also exemplified as a leader who is warm, loving and compassionate to people (Low, 2010c). It is worthy to note what Ong (1994: 9) has pointed out, that is, the Chinese, noted for their adaptable industry, business acumen and great love of having an enjoyable life, owed their success to these all-encompassing positive ideals. And they are:

1. Physical: industry and business acumen in accumulating wealth and health. (The authors here would like to clarify that to the Chinese being fat is not unhealthy; in fact it is the sign of prosperity). Similar to making the Laughing Buddha as a role model, most Chinese also embrace the concept of *Fu Lu Shou* (福祿壽; Wealth, Prosperity and Longevity) as their motivations and a life force in their daily living; these three elements are also very important in a Chinese person’s life. As said by Low in his book, they strive for a complete set and a balance of these three elements. If an individual lacks one of them, (s)he is perceived not to have a complete and happy life, and (s)he, of course, wants to have a complete and happy life (Low, 2010).
2. Mental: great sense of enjoying life through a beautiful culture.
3. Spiritual: happiness through family and community-orientated philosophy.

The authors firmly believe that the continual need to be motivated, stirred or striving is one method which teachers of motivation are aware of, and they frequently directly, indirectly or subtly urge or cajole their people or students. Indeed so, this is where reminders are really needed. Note that the Chinese often like to place signboards, tablets and Chinese paintings at their household doors. These signboards, tablets and Chinese paintings often with well written calligraphy, contain

undeniable auspicious words written on wooden boards or embroidered onto some red cloth or paper (Ong, 1994: 68). The Laughing Buddha also serves as one of these definite auspicious symbols.

As An Example to Be Happy

‘Whether we are rich or poor, educated or uneducated, whatever our nationality, color, social status, or ideology may be, the purpose of our lives is to be happy.’ (The XIV Dalai Lama, in *The Spirit of Tibet, Vision for the Human Liberation* cited in Metcalf And Callagher, 2012: 42)

“One feels happy when looking at the smiling face of the Laughing Buddha” (all the interviewees’ input).

It is often said that “smile and the world smile with you! The smile is a powerful secret of success” (Ong, 1994: 64). Customers like and enjoy the polite helpful smiling services and would, for sure, return. However, the Chinese go beyond just smiling. It may puzzle the world that the Chinese smiles because he enjoys his work! Indeed so, it is said that the adaptable ancient Chinese sees work as another field to enjoy. So he turns his work into a joyful activity which results in quality work because this brings pride and joy when liked or appreciated. He also turns his work colleagues and even customers into friends he looks forward to working with. Folklore has it that the Chinese man without work would be a bore; so he works eight days a week without leave and he works even when he is not well or sick! What the folktale demonstrates is that the Chinese fully enjoys his business (work) and the company of his friends found at his business or at the workplace.

It is recommended that people ‘need to laugh more and seek stress reducing humour in everyday lives. Laughter is the human gift for coping and for survival. There are various forms of laughter such as ringing laughter, peeling laughter, roaring laughter, bubbling laughter; chuckling, giggling, snickering and snorting. All these are the sounds of soul saving laughter which springs from our emotional core and helps us feel better, see things more clearly, and creatively weigh and use our options. Laughter helps us roll with the punches that inevitably come our way. The power of laughter is unleashed every time we laugh. In today’s stressful world, we need to laugh much more’ (Jenkins, 2000). Obviously, the benefits of laughing are to release one’s painful emotions of anger, fear and boredom by the natural physiological process of laughter (Jenkins, 1999).

As A Way To be Detached

A way to be detached e.g through laughing or looking at the transient nature of our present life/living. As one of the respondents said, “Laughing makes me not worrying; and I feel detached from all the problems when I laugh”

and another one said, “I feel the sense of detachment when I watch the painting or the statue of the Laughing Buddha because he is so pleasant to look at.”

As Spiritual Motivation

If everything is fixed by Destiny or Fate, then where is there room for motivation? Deep thinking minds are rightly aware that belief in Fate or Destiny is often fatalistic and can be an enemy of motivation. Buddhism is not fatalistic as some Western scholars would subscribe to; it is, in fact, proactive and apply proactive positive thinking (Low, 2010; 2010a).

The authors believe that the Ancient Chinese Masters, such as the historic monk who turned out to be the Laughing Buddha, created a kind of cultural philosophy to defeat Destiny. Ong (1994) also pointed out that out of their brilliant minds came a philosophy to inspire and lead the people. The ancient secrets of motivation created by them are designed to move the people to rise above “their common lot”, i.e. Destiny. (It has to be stressed that these Old Masters’ approach to overcome Destiny is first to understand that Destiny is real and that you need to know what Destiny is before you could overcome it! You must know the laws of Destiny before you can change them.)

The Laughing Buddha can thus inspire one to change one’s destiny. One can therefore work hard, pray hard to reverse one’s karma, and by doing good, one also accumulates one’s merits.

As one of the common Chinese sayings goes, “善有善报，恶有恶报，不是不报，时机未到。” *Hanyu Pinyin: shàn yǒu shàn bào, è yǒu è bào, bù shì bù bào, shí jī wèi dào* (http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/297048734.html)

meaning when we do good deeds we would received something good in return and when we do evil deeds, we would also receive bad things in return. It is not that the reciprocation would not happen. However, it would only happen when the time is right. This philosophy is very much likened to the Newton’s third law of physical motion which stated that action and reaction are always equal and opposite to each other. And therefore, in this respect, the authors assume that, according to Buddhist beliefs, if we keep on doing good things for many, many reincarnations, we would be able to live out of the karmic forces and well live into the Dharmic merits. Another school of thought in Buddhism propounds that one can be spiritually motivated through a so-called cleansing process of constantly reciting a mantra such as Om Mani Padme Hum (唵 嘛呢叭咪吽) in sanskrit meaning ‘to maintain one’s body and mind as pure as a natural lotus’. Here, lotus signifies purity even though it grows from the muddy pond and that it still maintains its character and integrity; and not affected or corrupted (the authors’ words) by the environment

(<http://9dozen.wordpress.com/2008/11/24/om-mani-padme-hum-its-meaning-and-importance/>).

As a Source for Gaining (More) Sales

People are usually motivated to get that quantum leap. In this respect, the Laughing Buddha is considered as a deity of abundance whose images and statues are seen in many business places. He is also represented as carrying symbols like ingots, pots of gold, treasure bag and usually associated with abundance, wealth and happiness luck. He is said to bring incredible luck and can be seen at cashier counters, reception desks, entry foyers and lobbies of hotels and restaurants and almost many premises in Asia (<http://EzineArticles.com/1351552>).

“I want to get more sales; I want to get more money” (an interviewee’s inputs). This coincides with what Ong (1994: 11, *italics authors*) has highlighted. Most of people, and the Chinese are not exempted, “may be often, though not always so, (*go on*) a ‘wealth Chase’ to get those extras of life ranging from flashy cars to expensive watches”.

It is common and natural that when doing business or serving customers, people would not like to see somebody with angry behaviour, sad or sour faces; people would like to do business or be served in a happy and friendly way. In this respect, the smiling face and the happy manner exemplified by the Laughing Buddha would enable one to draw more customers, serving them and doing business well (Low, 2002).

As a Source of Positive Energies Or Good “Chi”

“As a business person, I need to be positive and attract good energies” (one interviewee’s inputs). Here, Ong (1994: 52) has indicated that one of the most useful motivation forces the Chinese blessing symbols have is that they create a bright atmosphere in the home. Such a bright environment instils optimism, so useful for success. In this regard, the Laughing Buddha, a good Chinese blessing symbol, helps to create a bright setting as well as instilling much optimism, helpful for one’s success in business and life.

One interviewee commented that he “like(s) to see the Laughing Buddha, (to him) it has a lot of good *Chi*” “I like it!”. An auspicious symbol, the Laughing Buddha, while absorbing negative energies, emits positive Chi energies. (<http://anamikas.hubpages.com/hub/Laughing-Buddha-Feng-Shui-Symbol-Wealth-Good-Luck-and-Prosperity>).

As a Source of Peacefulness

There is a Buddhist’s proverb which goes as follows:

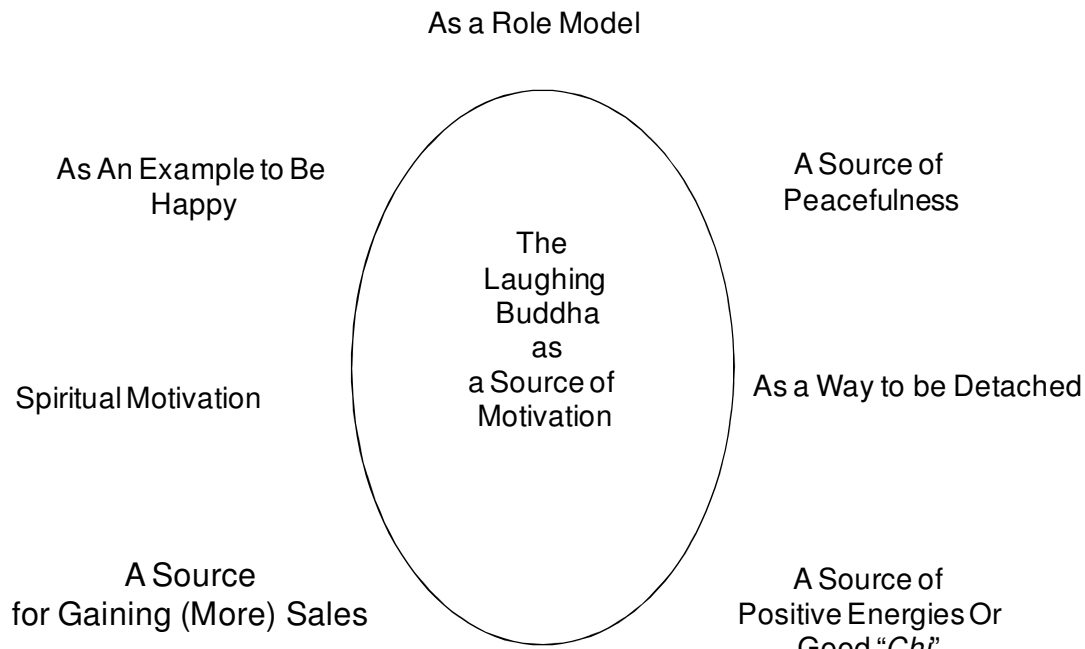


Figure 2. The Laughing Buddha as a Source of Motivation

Live in joy,
In love, Even among those who hate.
Live in joy,
In health,
Even among the afflicted.
Live in joy,
In peace,
Even among the troubled.
Look within.
Be still.

Free from fear and attachment,
Know the sweet joy of the way.
(from the *Dhammapada*, translated by Thomas Byrom;
extract from *Teachings of The Buddha*, pp.28)

It is indeed that the Laughing Buddha is a role model of joy and a source of peacefulness. One of the respondents said that he felt at peace and would work harder because of the Laughing Buddha; and some said that thinking of the Laughing Buddha, he can focus and concentrate on work better, and better still, without much stress. (These perhaps match with what Low (2008) has indicated that Singaporeans or for that matter anyone, need to relax and have cool heads.) And other says, "When I start meditation in the evening, I always visualise the Laughing Buddha to calm my nerve and to attain society peacefulness".

With all these remarks, the authors conclude that one can find a peace in seeing, visualising or having the

Laughing Buddha.

The authors believe that having the source of peacefulness can also lead one to have patience and hence the two values with practices coincide and are related to each other. Impatience can create anxieties and make one be attached "to the belief that a clock runs our life. A lack of patience is what separates us from our body. It projects our thinking mind beyond where our physical body is at any moment. Perhaps, most importantly, impatience induces judgment and intolerance of other people's behavior (and abilities) as well as our own" (Jones, 2011: 145). Here, in this it imposes restrictions and inadequacies on us, giving us the feelings of 'not enough', "poverty" or 'lack of abundance'; and one would definitely NOT be at COMPLETE OR INFINITE PEACE.

In summary, the Laughing Buddha as a source of motivation can be illustrated as in Figure-2

Prior to the conclusion, it is worthy to note that the research was not easily done as the researchers have to handle the mystic/ Buddhist practitioner respondents, and indeed they may speak in esoteric terms, at times not easily understood and in turn needed much interpretations, and confirmation. The researchers also checked with what have been said with other faithful so as to ensure objectivity and value of the study, picking the 'gems', to speak.

CONCLUSION

Life is easy for the shameless, cunning, corrupt, brazen, nasty and betraying. But for one who is honest and insightful, trying to pursue purity, it is hard (Dhammapada 244-245 cited in Metcalf and Callagher, 2012: 33). On the other hand, in the Chinese context, the Laughing Buddha has become a good source of motivation to pursue happiness and help people to have the positive energies in facing life; to do good deeds to one another and to the society. The symbol or icon also plays an important role in the business circle in helping business persons to gain more customers and more sales for the entrepreneurs.

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