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Buddha's Maritime Nature: A Case Study in Shambhala Buddhist Environmentalism

Barbra Clayton¹

Abstract

This paper describes the Buddhist environmental ethic of Windhorse Farm, a Shambhala Buddhist community in Atlantic Canada supported by ecosystem-based sustainable forestry and organic farming. The values, beliefs and motives for this project are described and contextualized within the Shambhala Buddhist tradition, and these results are discussed within the context of the debate in scholarly discussions of environmental Buddhism over whether interdependence or virtues such as compassion and mindfulness are more significant for a Buddhist environmental ethic. The results of this study suggest that both areteic features and the metaphysical position of interdependence play key roles in the Shambhala approach to environmentalism. Results also suggest that the Shambhala environmental ethic defies the theoretical

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demand for a fact/value distinction, and that this case study may indicate why Buddhist traditions tend to lack systematic treatments of ethics.

The aim of this paper is to articulate the environmental ethic of one Shambhala Buddhist community in Atlantic Canada. Shambhala Buddhism is a Westernized form of Tibetan Buddhism founded by the charismatic Tibetan teacher, Chögyam Trungpa.² In 1977 Trungpa decided to relocate his community, then based in Boulder, Colorado, to Halifax, capital of Nova Scotia, where Shambhala International's headquarters are now housed. In attempting to fulfill their founder's dream of Shambhala, or an "enlightened society," Trungpa's followers have had a significant socio-economic impact on Atlantic Canada, particularly in the provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (Swick). Environmentalism is an aspect of that impact that has yet to be fully explored. This study involves investigating one environmental initiative of the Shambhala Buddhist community and describing the values, beliefs, and motives that inform that project. In particular, this paper focuses on the ethic of Windhorse Farm, a sustainable community located in New Germany, Nova Scotia and established by Shambhala practitioners Jim and Margaret Drescher. The overall aim of this research is to contextualize the ethic underlying Windhorse Farm vis-à-vis Shambhala and Buddhist ethics, and to consider these results in light of theoretical issues raised within academic treatments of environmental Buddhism, in order to shed light on those

² For a description of Trungpa and some of the controversy surrounding him, see Eldershaw ("Collective Identity"). In 1994 Trungpa's son and successor, the Sakyong ("Earth Protector") Mipham Rinpoche renamed the organizations founded by his father (Vajradhatu and the Nalanda Foundation) Shambhala International. For a discussion of Shambhala International, see Prebish (158-171) and Eldershaw ("Shambhala International").

issues and to illuminate the relevance of such treatments for the practice of environmental Buddhism.

The results presented here are based on interviews with the Dreschers and other Shambhala practitioners, participant-observation in Shambhala and Windhorse programs and retreats, and content analysis of Shambhala documents and publications.³ As a study that focuses on particular environmental projects and the communities and individuals involved, this is a study of what has been called “lived religion” or “empirical ethics.” As such I am compelled to be mindful of certain features of this approach to religious ethics, some of which have been usefully outlined by Robert Orsi and Maria Heim. The first relevant feature is the importance of recognizing that it is impossible to abstract moral decision-making from local circumstances and conditions, which include, among other things, complex personal histories and personalities, social circumstances, and cultural factors. In other words, more transhistorical and translocal factors such as Shambhala Buddhist teachings interact in complex ways with local and particular conditions to inform moral perspectives and decisions. Taking this complexity into account means that rather than seeking *the* Shambhala environmental ethic, and taking particular Shambhalians to be convenient representatives of this, I seek to explore the nature of the ethic that underlies their work and to articulate in what ways it is and is not informed by the Shambhala teachings. To put it succinctly, I need to be mindful of the fact that individual Shambhala practitioners are more than just Shambhala practitioners. So, for example, in Margaret Drescher's approach to gardening and food production at Windhorse, which has been informed by beliefs and values from a range of sources, including organic gardening, permaculture, and

³ Interviews and participation-observation primarily took place between June 2007 and August 2011.

biodynamics, and which cannot be understood as reflecting Shambhala Buddhist beliefs exclusively.

A second factor to take into account in an empirical study is the recognition that there is a temporal aspect to morality (Heim 583). This entails acknowledging, for example, that the Windhorse ethic has changed over time, and is still evolving. This is of course one of the challenges, but also stimulating aspects of dealing with living humans as opposed to conveniently dead authors: they can and do change their minds, so the work takes on a dynamic quality that undermines any attempt to make definitive claims. This supports Robert Orsi's point that the study of lived religion provides both a way to study religion and a critique of the discipline of Religious Studies at the same time (174), for by highlighting the shifting nature of religious phenomena it belies the tendency in Religious Studies to reify and essentialize traditions such as Buddhism.

The third feature of empirical studies of ethics is their intersubjective nature. As Heim suggests: "To take seriously what it is to be human in a karmic reality is to be profoundly aware of a person in time, formed by past events and enmeshed in complicated entanglements with others in past and present" (583). Orsi points out that not only are religious identities and practices that are the subjects of study intersubjectively created, but that research is as well (173). In the case of this study of Windhorse Farm, the research was conceived from the start to be a collaborative endeavor, with the Dreschers and I working together to articulate the moral nature of the work they are doing. This has been both highly rewarding and somewhat unnerving, as I am unsure of how and to what extent the questions I bring are influencing the shape of the ethic that emerges. As a scholar who is more used to dealing with texts, the obviousness of my role as a co-creator of religious worlds and the uncomfortable lack of academic distance seems new and strange (though

of course it is not). Moreover, because I am dealing with people whom I like and whose work I respect, there is a strong sense of responsibility to accurately reflect the Dreschers' work and ideas. Frankly, the stakes involved in being right seem a great deal higher than when dealing with texts. This raises issues of power, also mentioned by Orsi (172). That is, it highlights my ability as a scholar to authorize certain views of Windhorse, the Dreschers, and Shambhala—a limited power, admittedly, but some power all the same. Recognition of the power and responsibility entailed in this work has meant in practical terms that the research has proceeded much more slowly than it would otherwise, because each draft of an article must be checked by them, which spurs further questions and dialogue. Despite the pragmatic and more theoretical difficulties with an empirical study, I would suggest that this approach is a rewarding one that sheds some useful light in the area of Buddhist ethics, and that such studies have the potential to complement, challenge, and transform the more systematic and philosophical treatments of Buddhist morality.

While there are a number of environmental initiatives within the Shambhala community, one that is of particular interest because of its well-developed ethic is that of Windhorse Farm, founded by Jim and Margaret Drescher, long-time students of Chögyam Trungpa and teachers within the Shambhala Buddhist community. The overall mission of their project is to establish an economically and environmentally sustainable and self-sufficient rural village. To fulfill this mission the Farm promotes and practices sustainable forestry, and houses an organic farm, native plant nursery, and native seed business. As well it presents educa-

tion and training programs in various aspects of sustainability in forestry, agriculture, gardening, and energy conservation.⁴

When the Dreschers bought this farm in 1990, they agreed to continue a 150-year-old “forestry experiment” in the practice of “ecosystem centered economic forestry” (Drescher 1-2). This has entailed non-mechanized, selective harvesting of logs and adherence to a number of environmental practices and standards, which for example, preclude the use of pesticides and prohibit clear-cutting. These practices have yielded more board feet of timber than if the forest at Windhorse had been clear-cut four times, and with wood of much higher quality and value. And while the sustainable forestry practices have remained somewhat consistent over the years, the ethic that underlies these practices has changed since the project began.

Jim Drescher⁵ describes the ethic that grounded Windhorse at the beginning as a “resource management ethic” based on Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, where the focus was on trying to make a living from the forest while still respecting and not harming the other beings that lived there (2). Gradually, there was a shift away from this to what Drescher calls an “environmentalist ethic” (4-5), which was aimed at restoring the Acadian forest to its state prior to contact with Europeans.

However, with further experience and reflection, Drescher came to see in both Leopold’s land ethic and the “environmentalist ethic” of

⁴ For detailed information on Windhorse Farm and the programs offered see the organization’s website: <<http://www.windhorsefarm.org>> (accessed 31 July 2013).

⁵ Note that Jim took responsibility for forestry at Windhorse and Margaret was in charge of food production, so when discussing forestry I am referring to Jim Drescher’s views. In the following section I cite Jim’s own description of the evolution of the Windhorse forestry ethic, but according to Margaret her approach to gardening underwent a parallel evolution (personal interview, 11 August 2011).

restoration forestry a kind of thinking that was problematic: in fact a kind of thinking that he feels is at the root of environmental degradation. Leopold's land ethic is based on the principle that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community and wrong when it tends to do otherwise" (cited in Drescher 2). Because Leopold's ethic is based on distinguishing between right and wrong in this way, Drescher argues that it encourages a tendency to divide people into camps: to create an enemy in the "other" and obscure the "unaligned basic goodness of each human being and the underlying sacredness of the phenomenal world" (7). By reifying conflicting opinions and oppositional behavior, it can in fact contribute to "painful ecosystem unraveling" (7). Related to this is Drescher's belief that Leopold's ethic, and much environmental activism in general, is based on a sense that there is a problem in nature that humans need to repair. This, he thinks, is associated with two negative emotions: guilt and pride. The guilt stems from the belief that humans have caused a problem and the pride comes from the sense that we are now going to fix it. Such a perspective belies what Drescher came to believe is the more fundamental truth of "no problem," which reflects the Buddhist view or perspective which now grounds his work.

This view begins with the understanding that there is, as Drescher puts it "Nothing Missing" (7). Another name for this fact of Nothing Missing is "basic goodness," which was Chögyam Trungpa's translation for *tathāgatagarbha* or Buddha-nature. It is also associated with the Kagyü doctrine of Mahāmudrā, which holds that the nature of mind and reality is primordially pure, innately clear, and luminous. From Drescher's perspective all these terms—Buddha-nature, basic goodness, Nothing Missing, Mahāmudrā—are equivalent, and refer to the fundamental nature of all of reality.

Recognizing the reality of basic goodness leads to Drescher's understanding that *fundamentally* there is no problem, either with the forest or those who work in it. It is an approach to living that is based on appreciating oneself and the world, and celebrating the innate purity of reality. This is contrasted in Shambhala parlance with a "setting sun outlook" which is grounded in a fear of reality and shame about oneself, and manifests in the tendency to cocoon oneself in familiar habits (Trungpa 45).

The view of basic goodness yields Drescher's current approach to forestry practice, which is captured by the phrase "Enrichment Forestry" (6). This is best summarized in his words as follows:

What is required, then, of our forestry practices is to reveal, or uncover, that underlying health, beauty and wealth *within our own minds* and within the forest itself. In other words, what appeared as a problem was, in fact, mere confusion about the fundamental reality. Rather than fixing a problem, the challenge became one of unwrapping our direct experience of the undeniable "isness" or inherent "sacredness" of the forest. . . . Therefore, the primary forest practices at Windhorse Farm have become ones that tend to connect us with the fundamental reality, which is experienced before we resort to judging and conceptualizing. (7)

Thus, whereas a "setting sun" approach to the environment would entail "trying to conquer the earth so you can ward off reality" (Trungpa 102), an enrichment approach aims to reveal and nurture the fundamental health in an ecosystem. Drescher illustrates this with an analogy to gardening: when you plant a garden, are you trying to discover and cultivate the inherent fertility of the earth, or stamp out the weeds? This is

the difference between 'enrichment gardening' and gardening with a setting sun outlook.

Insofar as the enrichment environmentalism at Windhorse is firmly rooted in Chögyam Trungpa's thinking, and clearly resonates with the perspectives of the current leader of Shambhala, Sakyong Mipham, I think this can be understood to represent one Shambhala approach to the environment, even though it might not represent all possible Shambhala approaches. This "Nothing Missing" approach is striking in that it challenges what is arguably one of the dominant narratives of our time, in which the environment is depicted as victim of humanity's greed and folly, and must be saved by, ironically, us humans, or else we all face certain doom. That this narrative features the themes of sin, redemption, and an apocalyptic forecast is surely no accident, and its resonance with deeply ingrained Western religious tendencies is perhaps why the Shambhala approach seems so counter-intuitive to non-Shambhalian Westerners. Even putting this Christian narrative of ecological sin aside, in a context where the news is peppered daily with stories of oil spills, species depletion, climate change, and dire forecasts about the future of the natural world, one might be forgiven in feeling a sense of deep incredulity at the idea that there is "no problem" and "Nothing Missing" vis-à-vis the environment, and perhaps even a sense of offense that one could assert a position that seems to irresponsibly undermine the need for active intervention. In terms more familiar in the Shambhala traditions, the question that arises is: "How do you reconcile the idea of the basic goodness of the present situation with the idea that the world needs transforming?"

The Dreschers' answer to this question is framed in terms of ultimate and relative truth.⁶ Ultimate truth is associated for the Dreschers with basic goodness and luminous emptiness, and from this perspective, there is nothing to be transformed. However, from the relative point of view there is tremendous suffering, and innumerable situations require amelioration. Citing the Madhyamaka perspective, the Dreschers stress that both of these truths must be held together, inseparably. If so, how do we engage in the world and what are we trying to do?

The Dreschers' response to this question suggests that to hold both the ultimate truth of basic goodness together with relative truth which sees problems entails being neither too goal oriented, in the sense of thinking, "I am going to save the world," nor falling into the nihilistic view that "nothing can be done: the world is doomed." The ultimate view of basic goodness reveals a "great, infinite potentiality" that stems from the unfixed openness of emptiness. According to the Dreschers, by stepping into this view of "basic openness" you can engage the world with a wakefulness that allows you to see and help the beings right in front of you. You respond appropriately to problems and challenges, without fixating on absolute ends, such as saving the planet or curing poverty once and for all. Nor do you fall into what in Shambhala is called a "poverty mentality" of feeling that since you cannot do it all there is no point doing anything. You are able to see the inherent richness and potential of any situation, and engage appropriately with the suffering you see here and now.

This position brings an interesting perspective to certain issues raised within theoretical treatments of Buddhist approaches to nature. For example, there is a tension in the literature on Buddhist environ-

⁶ The Dreschers' response to this question was discussed in an interview conducted 15 August 2011.

mental ethics regarding the role of the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda*, or conditioned arising, and what is usually taken as the attendant view that everything is interconnected and interdependent. Some earlier commentators (e.g., Thich Nhat Hanh in Badiner; Cook; Batchelor and Brown) stressed the importance of this doctrine for Buddhist environmentalism, and in particular Joanna Macy has argued that this is Buddhism's key contribution to environmentalism.⁷ Macy suggests, for example, that a full understanding of interdependence, or "the ecological self," will obviate the need for moral practices or virtues. Full recognition of the true nature of the self as interconnected with all life, she argues, is essential because it can serve *in lieu of* ethics and morality (445). On the other hand are those who critique the application of Buddhist notions of interdependence to environmentalism, or who argue that its relevance for an environmental ethic is misguided. Ian Harris, for example, suggests that those who favor the relevance of Buddhism for environmentalism tend to interpret *pratītya-samutpāda* as reflecting a "spatial" view of causation, which sees the world as an interconnected whole, rather than as reflecting a linear and temporal view of causation, as it did in the early Buddhist tradition. He argues that such a spatial and atemporal understanding of causation undermines a notion of *telos*, and thereby any kind of environmental goal. Such a reading of *pratītya-samutpāda* is thus, he argues, fatally problematic for an environmental ethic.⁸ Similarly, Alan Sponberg suggests that recognition of interdependence does not in itself lead to any kind of environmental ethic: the *fact* of interdependence does not lead to the *ought* of environmental re-

⁷ See Christopher Ives for a discussion and critique of contemporary Buddhist teachers who lay similar emphasis on this doctrine for Buddhist environmentalism (166-169).

⁸ Lambert Schmithausen offers a related critique, suggesting that modern interpretations of *pratītya-samutpāda* as "interdependent co-origination" do not reflect the early Indian Buddhist understanding of the "origination in dependence" of phenomena like suffering on particular causes and conditions (234).

sponsibility. Christopher Ives has echoed this critique, also warning against the naturalistic fallacy of mistaking the “is” of the current interdependent world for the way the world should be. Rather, he argues that since some conditions are harmful to beings and ecosystems, an environmental ethic demands a value system and reasoning to intelligently make decisions that support environmental sustainability (167-171). In contrast to the emphasis on interdependence, scholars such as Sponberg, and Cooper and James, hold that what is most relevant about Buddhism for an environmental ethic are the virtues it advocates and the traits the Buddhist path aims to cultivate, such as non-harming and compassion.

It is my contention that neither of these theoretical positions alone are adequate to capture what we see going on at Windhorse Farm. It is certainly not the case that the understanding of the interdependent nature of self and reality—the “ecological self”—*fully* accounts for the ethic which informs the practices at Windhorse. That is, contra Macy, the Dreschers’ work does rely on Buddhist moral teachings, such as the first precept. The original framing question for the forestry practices at Windhorse was, “How can we make a living in this place while respecting, and not harming, the other life forms that are also trying to make a living here?” (Drescher 2). Today, whether practices cause harm to non-human beings or enrich their lives is part of an elaborate “Five Filters Analysis” that is used as an evaluation method at Windhorse. This analysis also considers whether given practices promote “kindness, compassion, and awareness” or cause an increase in “covetousness, aggression, and ignorance” (Drescher 9). So the case of Windhorse Farm would tend to support the assertion that the first precept and primary Buddhist virtues such as benevolence and compassion are indeed central to a Buddhist environmental ethic.

Yet neither is this the whole moral story, for the ethic at Windhorse cannot be fully explained in terms of what we might consider the obvious moral teachings. In an important way the doctrine of conditioned arising is very central to the Windhorse ethic. Recall that for Drescher,

Rather than fixing a problem, the challenge became one of unwrapping our direct experience of the undeniable “is-ness” or inherent “sacredness” of the forest. The forest is as it is, and our feelings or opinions about it exist only within our own habitual ways of seeing. Therefore, the primary forest practices at Windhorse Farm have become ones that tend to connect us with the fundamental reality, which is experienced before we resort to judging and conceptualizing. (7)

Here Drescher indicates that a direct insight into the “what is” of the forest is the crux of his forestry ethic. But a key aspect of the nature of the forest is that it is an “infinitely complex interdependent web of life” (5). Therefore, seeing or understanding interdependence is key to seeing the fundamental nature of the forest, and this insight is the basis of his moral approach. In this way, both the Buddhist metaphysical position of interdependence and the “path” dimension of the virtues and precepts must be seen as important aspects of the Windhorse ethic.

Furthermore, in its reliance on insight into interdependence this ethical position defies the critiques brought against its use in environmental Buddhism. As already indicated Harris argues that the interpretation of *pratītya-samutpāda* as universal interrelatedness cannot support an ethical position because it cannot account for meaningful change, and thus cannot be teleological. He points out that the doctrine of interdependence entails that phenomena are empty of inherent existence, but if both entities and states lack identity you cannot account for meaningful

change from one state to another (Harris 49). Above all, an “authentic” Buddhist ethic for Harris must be able to make sense of an environmental goal (46). But for Drescher, having an environmental goal is part of the problem if it is not grounded first in an awareness or experience of the interconnected whole of the forest. This interconnected whole is the matrix (*garbha*) of the Tathāgata; it is basic goodness. It is the fact *with* value that is revealed through non-conceptual, direct experience. Drescher’s description of the forest at Windhorse Farm suggests this conflation of fact and value:

For many people, the tranquility and natural energy of this place is directly perceived in one’s body even before the brain thinks about it. This “direct”, or “non-conceptual” knowing is a first key to solving the riddle of Windhorse Forest. Before the conceptual mind kicks in and packages up one’s experience of the forest, it’s almost as if the feeling emerges that there is nothing missing at all in this wonderful interconnected system. (1)

The true nature of the forest as interconnected is also “wonderful,” “tranquil,” and “naturally energetic”: it is fundamentally or basically *good*. Though there certainly are other dimensions to this ethic, such as refraining from harming beings and compassionate care for them, we could say that in an important sense the primary imperative is to see the ultimate truth of basic goodness. As Drescher states, “The important changes are in how we understand and experience mind and nature. . . . [we need to] rediscover an intimate heart connection with the self-existing energies of ‘forest mind’” (8). And while basic goodness is said to be beyond all dualities and thus beyond *relative* good and bad, there is also a sense that there is something absolutely “good” about it. It must be significant, after all, that Trungpa chose to translate *tathāgatagarbha* (the womb or matrix of the Buddha) as basic *goodness*: because as the

primordial purity of mind and potential for awakening it is fundamentally a *good thing*. This means that for this tradition the ultimate truth of human nature is that it is also *good*: it has positive value.⁹

Ives, and before him Sponberg, have argued that the Buddhist ethicist should not conflate the “is” of the current world with the “ought” of how it should be, but the fact is that this ethic simply *does*. It flaunts the naturalistic fallacy. In this sense the Windhorse ethic defies the demands put forth in theoretical discussions of Buddhist ethics, and reminds us that doctrines like conditioned arising are always interpreted in particular contexts. In this case perhaps most significant is the intellectual context of the Tibetan Kagyu and Shambhala lineages, where conditioned arising or interrelatedness is embedded in the matrix of *tathāgatagarbha* and basic goodness, where facts are not ultimately extricable from value.

The Shambhala ethic at Windhorse also allows us to reflect on a question that has vexed theoretical or textual treatments of Buddhist ethics, which is why there do not appear to be ethics *per se* in Buddhist canonical texts: that is, why there are no systematic treatments of moral issues such as the nature of the good or the principles behind lists of moral precepts and virtues such as the perfections. In the keynote address to the conference “Contemporary Perspectives on Buddhist Ethics,”¹⁰ Damien Keown proposes a number of factors that might explain

⁹ Note that when discussing phenomena such as the natural world Trungpa used the phrase “sacred world,” whereas “basic goodness” is used to describe the nature of human beings. Both refer to a primordial, energetic, wakefulness as the essence of reality. See for example “Sacred World” in Trungpa (138-149).

¹⁰ The conference was held at Columbia University, 6-7 October 2011. A podcast of Keown's keynote address is online. Available HTTP: <http://www.cbs.columbia.edu/buddhist_ethics/keynote-one.html> (accessed 2 August 2013).

why there are no systematic ethics in Buddhism. This case study would appear to confirm the importance of one of the factors he identifies, namely the focus on metaphysics and gnosis in Indian traditions. Because truth in this tradition is eternally wedded to value, once one achieves gnosis and knows reality as it is (*yathābutā*), the assumption is that one will automatically be and do what is good. Such a perspective might then undermine the need for systematic reflection on ethics, since ethics would be embedded within ontology.

Furthermore, the Madhyamaka assertion of the non-duality of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* lends a paradoxical nature to ethics because it requires embracing or pairing two contradictory views: both the essentially non-teleological ultimate perspective of basic goodness, where there is “Nothing Missing,” “no problem,” and “nothing to fix,” alongside the relative reality that needs fixing and is problematic.¹¹ That the ultimate truth brings a profoundly non-teleological dimension to the Buddhist (or at least Madhyamaka) worldview may be another factor making Buddhist morality resistant to the categories of Western philosophical ethics.

Finally, the Windhorse Shambhala ethic also directs our attention to aspects of Buddhist values not normally emphasized in scholarly discussions of Buddhist environmentalism, such as the doctrine of Buddha nature, and especially the importance of contemplative practices for connecting with that nature.¹² Drescher stresses the need for “stillness practice” in which foresters spend time “hanging out” in the forest doing as close to nothing as possible in order to reach and understand the

¹¹ This echoes what Jin Park has argued in relation to ethics in Hua-yen Buddhism.

¹² Though discussions of Buddhist perspectives on the environment by Buddhist practitioners are more likely to include an emphasis on contemplative practice. Thich Nhat Hahn’s writings perhaps best exemplify this (e.g., “The Last Tree”).

place where there is “Nothing Missing” (8). Contemplative practices such as mindfulness are an aspect of Buddhist traditions that have not received a great deal of attention in academic discussions of Buddhist approaches to the environment. Yet in Margaret Drescher’s approach to gardening, for example, one is struck by the importance of sitting back and watching. Much of her strategy for dealing with weeds is to spend a great deal of time observing. There are strong parallels to this in the Japanese agriculturalist Masanobu Fukuoka’s “do nothing” natural farming, which stresses studying nature closely while doing less and less. The importance of mindfulness practice and refraining from action are dimensions of Buddhist environmentalism that call for further exploration at the theoretical level. We might consider, for example, whether mindful inaction should be considered a Buddhist virtue, particularly vis-à-vis the environment. Thus in fitting paradox, the Dreschers point us in new directions of research by setting out a path of sitting still and fixing nothing.

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