

THE FOUR ASSEMBLIES AND THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

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Introduction

In this paper I examine two significant developments in the Theravāda tradition from the viewpoint of the Pāli canonical teaching that the four assemblies – *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs*, male lay disciples, and female lay disciples – are the necessary foundation for the Buddha’s teaching to thrive. These two developments are the revival of lay meditation and the revival of *bhikkhuni* ordination.

The Four Assemblies

According to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*, the Buddha proclaimed that he would not pass away until he had established members of each of the four assemblies in being “wise, well-trained, and self-confident”, *vyattā vinītā visāradā* (DN II 104).¹ This passage makes it unmistakably clear that an essential foundation for the Buddha’s mission of teaching the Dharma was that *bhikkhus* as well as *bhikkhunīs*, and male as well as female lay disciples, are wise and well-trained, and that they are also self-confident.

The four assemblies come up again in the *Pāsādika-sutta* of the same *Dīgha-nikāya*, which sets the Buddha’s possession of four assemblies of such wise and self-confident disciples in contrast to other teaching traditions under the leadership of someone who is not a fully awakened Buddha (DN III 125). In other words, having these four assemblies of wise and self-confident

disciples is what distinguishes a Buddhist tradition from a tradition that is not Buddhist.

According to the *Lakkhana-sutta*, also found in the *Dīgha-nikāya*, the wheel-marks on the soles of the Buddha’s feet foretold his destiny of being surrounded by these four assemblies (DN III 148). This makes possession of four assemblies an integral, in fact indispensable, aspect of the Buddha’s ministry. A discourse in the *Anguttara-nikāya* highlights the rather unfortunate condition of being reborn in a “border country”, which is a country where the four assemblies of Buddhist disciples cannot be found (AN IV 226).

The *Mahāvaccagotta-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* reports that, on hearing that each of these four assemblies of Buddhist disciples had reached various levels of awakening, the wanderer Vacchagotta decided to join the ranks of the Buddhist monastic order (MN I 491). This stands in contrast to numerous other occasions when he approached the Buddha or his disciples with various questions, without the resulting discussion inspiring him sufficiently to want to go forth as a Buddhist monk². The message that emerges on comparing these passages to the *Mahāvaccagotta-sutta* is that even detailed replies to his questions could not achieve what was eventually accomplished through the inspiring example set by the accomplishments attained by each of the four assemblies.

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In sum, there can be little doubt that the Pāli discourses consider the four assemblies to be of fundamental importance for the thriving of the Buddha's dispensation, the *sāsana*. Their coming into being is seen as an integral aspect of the Buddha's mission and forms a distinctive mark of the Buddhist tradition. This in turn implies that any living Buddhist tradition that orients itself on the values enshrined in the Pāli canon needs to ensure that these four assemblies are in existence, and that each of these assemblies has the opportunity to develop wisdom, to train themselves well, and in this way to become self-confident.

Central for the development of wisdom and a way of training oneself in such a way as to become self-confident would of course be the practice of meditation. The canonical sources in fact repeatedly refer to accomplished meditators not only among *bhikkhus*, but also among *bhikkhunīs* as well as lay disciples. The *Etadagga-vagga* of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* presents various named *bhikkhunīs* as foremost in meditation, as well as in the attainments that result from meditation, such as the quick gaining of direct knowledge, the divine eye, recollection of past lives, and supernormal powers (AN I 25). Needless to say, the fact that, for example, *bhikkhunī Uppalavaṇṇā* is foremost in supernormal powers implies that other *bhikkhunīs* also had such abilities, albeit not to the high degree to which these had been mastered by *Uppalavaṇṇā*. There can be little doubt that the ancient *bhikkhunīs* were reckoned to have been highly accomplished meditators.

The same *Etadagga-vagga* of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* also presents the female lay disciples *Uttarā* and *Sāmāvati* as foremost in meditation or in the practice of loving kindness, *mettā* (AN I 26). An example for a male lay disciple accomplished in meditation is Pessa in the *Kandaraka-sutta*, who in front of the Buddha describes his practice of the four establishments of mindfulness, *satipaṭṭhāna* (MN I 340). Other lay practitioners proficient in *satipaṭṭhāna* are Sirivaḍḍha and Mānaḍinna, mentioned in the *Samyutta-nikāya* (SN V 177f). The householder Citta even confutes the leader of the Jains by proclaiming his expertise in attaining the four absorptions, *jhāna* (SN IV 298). This discourse shows him to have indeed become wise and self-confident, to the extent of successfully confronting the leader of the Jains in a debate situation.

Lay Meditation

In later *Theravāda* tradition, the involvement of lay disciples in mindfulness practice or the cultivation of absorption appears to have gradually diminished in favour of a stronger emphasis on ritual activities and the practice of supporting the monastic community through offerings and services. The revival of large scale lay meditation practice during the twentieth century, in particular the cultivation of insight, *vipassanā*, appears to have been in considerable part inspired by the activities of the Ledi *Sayādaw* in Myanmar.³ In particular the approach to the cultivation of *vipassanā* taught by the *Mahāsi Sayādaw* has spread far and wide, becoming a formative influence in the revival of lay meditation in the *Theravāda* tradition.

The *vipassanā* teachings by the *Mahāsi Sayādaw* did not meet with undivided approval from the outset. Some traditional *bhikkhus* in Sri Lanka were concerned that the method he taught did not conform to the canonical scriptures. For them this raised doubts about the potential of this style of meditation to lead to genuine forms of realization.⁴ In spite of such criticism, however, the insight meditation as taught by the *Mahāsi Sayādaw* continued to spread throughout Asia, including Sri Lanka itself, and eventually also reached the West. In the United States the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts, originally founded in 1975 by Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, and Jack Kornfield, has been continually offering courses and instructions in the cultivation of liberating insight and has become a central force in the spread of *vipassanā* meditation in the West.

Among the many thousands of practitioners who have attended a retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts was Jon Kabat-Zinn. Experiencing for himself the benefits of mindfulness practice led him to the intuition to promote its use in a hospital setting. Starting at the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, this intuition became the starting point for the well-known Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.⁵ By now, interest in and practice of mindfulness has spread from its clinical use to a range of other areas in secular society and is slowly about to become an integral part of daily life for many US citizens.⁶

In this way the revival of lay meditation,

in spite of initial resistance by traditional *bhikkhus*, has been successful and resulted in a range of beneficial effects. Although not all of the modern applications of mindfulness conform to the set of values that inform traditional Buddhist practice, there can be no doubt about the overall positive repercussions of this development. Equipped with the possibility to cultivate meditative insight, lay disciples of the Theravāda tradition are nowadays able to cultivate wisdom and self-confidence in a manner that would not have been possible in the past, when they had little or even no access to meditation instructions.

The Loss of *bhikkhunī* Ordination

In addition to the loss of regular lay meditation practice, in the course of history the Theravāda tradition also lost its *bhikkhunī* ordination lineage. Introduced during the reign of king Asoka to Sri Lanka by Saṅghamittā and a group of *bhikkhunīs* from India, at some point in the early eleventh century the *bhikkhunī* order appears to have come to an end. This seems to have happened during a time of warfare and inner turmoil that had forced many of the *bhikkhus* to leave the country. According to our present state of knowledge, at that time the order of *bhikkhunīs* in India had already become extinct and no living *bhikkhunī* tradition appears to have been in existence in other Theravāda countries⁷.

Before its eventual demise, in the early fifth century the *bhikkhunī* ordination lineage had been transmitted from Sri Lanka to China (T L 939c). In the eighth century, however, the Chinese emperor apparently imposed the use of the Dharmaguptaka

Vinaya on all monastics in his realm (T L 793c). The Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* is the legal code of one of the different Buddhist traditions that developed after the Buddha's demise, similar in this respect to the Theravāda tradition and its legal code, the Pāli *Vinaya*. The respective *Vinaya* texts, in spite of considerable similarities, show several differences. For one, the overall number of rules for *bhikkhunīs* differs.⁸ In addition, the ritual procedure as well as the markers required to establish the boundary for the location to be used for ordination also differ.⁹ From a strictly legal point, even though the ordination lineage received by the Chinese in the fifth century was Theravāda, since about the eighth century it has become a different lineage, basing its legal procedures on a different legal code.

The Eight or Ten Precept Nuns

Lacking an order of *bhikkhunīs*, the wish of women in Theravāda countries to live a celibate life under the guidance of the teachings of the Buddha has found its expression in the form of taking eight or ten precepts. The tradition with the longest history in this respect appears to be the *mae chis* in Thailand, who shave off their hair and wear white, a colour that in traditional Theravāda countries is worn by laity on religious observance days and never worn by *bhikkhus*.¹⁰ The dress in a way signals the ambiguous position of *mae chis* in between laity and monastics, evident also in other respects. The ordination of *mae chis* is considered a secular event and they continue to use their lay name after ordination. Unlike *bhikkhus*, *mae chis* do not receive free medical treatment or free

travel on public transport, but are expected to pay for such services themselves.¹¹ In contrast *bhikkhus* should according to the *Vinaya* regulations not possess or handle money.¹²

Comparable nun traditions in Myanmar are the *thila shins* and in Sri Lanka the *dasasil mātās*.¹³ In spite of some local differences, these share with the *mae chis* the basic problem of being situated in an ambivalent position between laity and monastics. There can be little doubt that lack of recognition of their monastic status continues to be a problem. This in turn makes it rather difficult for them to live up to the expectation voiced in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* as cited earlier.

The Revival of *bhikkhunī* Ordination

Attempts to revive the *bhikkhunī* ordination lineage have a long history, with two relatively recent attempts taking place in 1988 at Los Angeles and 1996 at Sarnath. These attempts involved receiving ordination from Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* or Korean *bhikṣus* and therefore in the *Vinaya* lineage of the Dharmaguptaka tradition. An emblematic expression of the problem of gaining general recognition in the case of both these ordinations is the circumstance that the candidates were asked to put on Dharmaguptaka-style robes, which are usually grey-coloured and involve the wearing of a sort of trousers. Whereas it is natural for Chinese and Korean *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* to expect candidates for higher ordination to wear such robes, in the eyes of traditional Theravādins this is easily perceived as an act of conversion to the Mahāyāna. In fact participants of the 1988 and 1996 ordinations have at times been maligned for "putting on trousers",

something that in the Theravāda tradition is seen as incompatible with monastic status. Another problem is the administration of the *bodhisattva* precepts that usually forms the last step in a higher ordination given by Dharmaguptaka monastics. Even though the *bodhisattva* path is recognized in Theravāda Buddhism as a viable option, those ordained in 1988 and 1996 have been considered as having now become adherents of the Mahāyana, instead of being recognized as Theravāda *bhikkhunīs*.

These negative repercussions would have informed preparations for another ordination held in 1998 in Bodhgaya with the collaboration of Chinese *bhikṣunīs*, at which the candidates were allowed to dress in traditional Theravāda robes and the ordination ceremony was done in cooperation with Theravāda *bhikkhus*. The Theravāda candidates also made a point of not participating in the taking of *bodhisattva* precepts, but only took part in the procedures that were strictly concerned with ordination.¹⁴ In addition, the Sri Lankan participants in the Bodhgaya ordination subsequently received another ordination administered only by Theravāda *bhikkhus*. This is of considerable importance for the claim to legal validity of the 1998 ordinations.

Theravāda Legal Requirements

Evaluating how the ordination conferred in 1998 could satisfy legal requirements according to Theravāda standards requires a brief excursion into the evolution of *bhikkhunī* ordination reported in the *Cullavagga* of the Pāli *Vinaya*. This evolution begins with the Buddha conferring

ordination on Mahāpajāpati Gotamī through acceptance of eight "principles to be respected", *garudhamma* (Vin II 255). The sixth of these eight principles stipulates that the ordination of a female candidate is to be given by both orders, that is, by *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs*.

Next Mahāpajāpati Gotamī asked how to proceed in relation to her followers, who also wished to be ordained. At this point in the history provided in the Pāli *Vinaya*, only Mahāpajāpati Gotamī had become a *bhikkhunī*. This made it impossible for her to form an order of *bhikkhunīs* that could collaborate with an order of *bhikkhus*, as stipulated in the sixth *garudhamma*. In reply to her query on how to proceed in this situation, the Buddha is on record for authorizing the giving of ordination to female candidates by *bhikkhus* on their own, that is, without the collaboration of an order of *bhikkhunīs* (Vin II 257).

The *Vinaya* continues with two more regulations that were promulgated after an order of *bhikkhunīs* had come into existence. The first regulation originates in relation to a set of questions of a somewhat personal and intimate nature that a candidate is to be asked in order to ascertain if she is eligible for ordination. In order to avoid embarrassment when having to reply to such questions in the presence of *bhikkhus*, according to this regulation the female candidate should be asked such questions by *bhikkhunīs* only (Vin II 271). After having gone through the questioning and other aspects of the ordination ceremony by an order of *bhikkhunīs*, the candidate should then approach an order of *bhikkhus* to

complete the ordination.

Another regulation concerns a situation when the candidate cannot approach an order of *bhikkhus* to complete the ordination because of some impending danger that makes it risky to travel. In such a situation, a messenger can act on behalf of the candidate and in this way the ordination in front of the order of *bhikkhus* can be completed (Vin II 277).

When evaluating these four different regulations it needs to be kept in mind that, according to a basic legal principle, the last rule on a particular issue is the one that is valid and which needs to be taken into account. It is not possible for different rules on the same issue to be in existence simultaneously, as one would be at a loss as to which rule to follow. A simple illustration is the setting of a speed limit for a particular road. Even if at a time in the past a faster speed limit was in existence, when driving on this road now one needs to take into account the current speed limit. If one is stopped by the police for speeding, it is not possible to get away by arguing that one had decided to follow the previous speed limit. This has been rendered invalid by the current one, which is the one to be observed.

This basic legal principle has been applied to the history of *bhikkhunī* ordination in the Pāli *Vinaya*, leading to the conclusion that, since the Buddha's authorization of giving ordination to female candidates by *bhikkhus* only has been followed by subsequent regulations, it is no longer valid. On this interpretation, once an order of *bhikkhunīs* has become extinct, the *bhikkhus* on their own are unable to revive it.¹⁵

This conclusion overlooks the fact that the authorization for *bhikkhus* to give ordination on their own was given in a different situation, compared to the later regulations. According to its narrative context, the authorization was given precisely in order to enable *bhikkhunī* ordination in a situation where an order of *bhikkhunīs* is not in existence. In contrast, the subsequent rules are meant to deal with a situation where an order of *bhikkhunīs* is in existence. In such a setting, the order of *bhikkhunīs* should first perform their part, including the posing of the various questions regarding the suitability of the candidate, and afterwards the order of *bhikkhus* will perform their part. If it is not possible for the candidate to approach the order of *bhikkhus*, a messenger can act on behalf of the candidate. These two rules refer to a situation in which an order of *bhikkhunīs* is in existence and is able to take its part in an ordination procedure. The authorization for *bhikkhus* to ordain on their own, in contrast, refers to a situation where an order of *bhikkhunīs* is not in existence.

These two basically different situations could be compared to speed limits set up for different roads. It does not matter if the speed limit for another road has been set up more recently than the speed limit for the road on which one intends to drive. However recent it may be, it still refers to a different road. For the road on which one intends to drive, only the speed limit set up for this road is relevant. In the same way, close inspection of the Pāli *Vinaya* shows that it does allow for a revival of *bhikkhunī* ordination by *bhikkhus* alone, as the permission given by the Buddha has not

been rendered invalid by other regulations that regulate a fundamentally different situation.¹⁶

Successful Revival

The Bodhgaya ordination held in 1998 has met with considerably more success than its predecessors. In addition to the careful design of the ordination procedure in order to make it appear as Theravāda as possible, its legal appeal rests on the combination of two ordination procedures. One is the ordination conferred by the Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs*. For those who see it as valid to reconnect in this way to what after all is an ordination lineage that stems from Sri Lanka, the first ordination can be considered acceptable. The subsequent ordination given by Theravāda *bhikkhus* on their own then assumes the character of a procedure known in the Theravāda tradition as *daḥhikamma*, “making strong”. This is a formal act through which monastics ordained elsewhere can be granted recognition by the monastic community of which they wish to be part.¹⁷

If ordination given by Dharmaguptaka *bhikṣuṇīs* is considered invalid, however, then the situation becomes similar to that described in the Pāli *Vinaya*, namely



The significance of the revival of lay meditation in the twentieth century has its counterpart in the revival of *bhikkhunī* ordination that is becoming a prominent feature of the early twenty-first century. Both result in improving the full participation of all four assemblies in modern Theravāda Buddhism. Both also share the circumstance

no *bhikkhunī* order capable of conferring ordination is in existence. For exactly this situation the Buddha is on record for having given the authorization that *bhikkhus* can confer ordination on their own. From this perspective, then, the first ordination conferred by the Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* will be of no legal consequence, but the second ordination given by Theravāda *bhikkhus* ensures that the candidates nevertheless did receive a legally valid ordination according to Theravāda standards.

The solution reached through the combination of two ordinations adopted in 1998, as well as the fact that the candidates at the Bodhgaya ordination were allowed to wear Theravāda robes, etc., seem to be chief factors for the present success of the revival of the *bhikkhunī* order. This has by now been well established in Sri Lanka and, in spite of continued resistance by some *bhikkhus*, has met with much appreciation from the laity.¹⁸ The lineage created by the Bodhgaya ordinations has also been successfully transmitted to Thailand, where the number of *bhikkhunīs* is steadily increasing. Whereas Myanmar spearheaded the revival of lay meditation in the twentieth century, in the revival of *bhikkhunī* ordination Sri Lanka has taken the lead, followed by Thailand.

Conclusion

that they initially met with considerable opposition from some *bhikkhus*, who were under the impression that these revivals do not conform to the canonical scriptures. Such opposition has been particularly strong in the case of the revival of *bhikkhunī* ordination, where legal concerns naturally

have a much greater impact than in the case of meditation practice. Nevertheless, in both cases such opposition keeps diminishing, allowing each process its natural unfolding.

In this way, these two remarkable developments promise to result in the full resurrection in the Theravāda tradition of the four assemblies that according to

the Pāli canon form the foundation for the Buddha's teaching. This will hopefully enable each of these four assemblies, be they *bhikkhus* or *bhikkhunīs*, male or female lay disciples, to become "wise, well-trained, and self-confident" and thereby to live up to the expectation held according to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* by the Buddha himself.

Notes and References

1. References to Pāli sources here and elsewhere are to the PTS edition, references to Chinese sources are to the Taishō edition. I am indebted to Adam Clarke and Mike Running for commenting on a draft version of this paper.
2. Cf. MN I 481, MN I 483, SN IV 391, SN IV 395, SN IV 398, SN IV 400, AN I 160, as well as the *Vacchagotta-samyutta*, SN III 257ff.
3. For a detailed study see Braun, Erik, *The Birth: of Insight, Meditation, Modern Buddhism & The Burmese Monk Ledi Sayadaw*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
4. A survey of the main arguments has been provided by Bond, G.D. *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka, Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Response*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988 pp. 162–171; the actual exchange has been documented in Kheminda and Nāṇuttara *Satipaṭṭhāna Vipassanā Meditation: Criticism and Replies*, Malaysia: Selangor: Buddhist Vipassanā Meditation Society, 1990. (originally published 1979).
5. The beginnings of the programme are described by Kabat-Zinn, Jon. "An Outpatient Program in Behavioral Medicine for Chronic Pain Patients Based on the Practice of Mindfulness Meditation: Theoretical Considerations and Preliminary Results", *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 1982. 4: pp.33-47. For a monograph study see Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1991.
6. A detailed study of the spread of mindfulness in the USA has recently been published by Wilson, Jeff. *Mindful America, The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
7. See Skilling, Peter. "A Note on the History of the Bhikkhunī-saṅgha (II): The Order of Nuns after the Parinirvāṇa". *The World Fellowship of Buddhists Review*, 1993, 30. pp.4 & 31.1:pp. 29-49.
8. For a comparative survey of the different codes of rules for *bhikkhunīs* see Kabūsingh, Chatsumarn. *A Comparative Study of Bhikkhunī Pāṇimokkha*. Delhi: Chaukhambha Orientalia, 1984.
9. See Chung, Jin-il. and Kieffer-Pūlz, Petra. "The karmavācanās for the Determination of sīmā and ticivareṇa avippavāsa", in *Dharmadūta, Mélanges offerts au vénérable Thich Huyēn-Vi à l'occasion de son soixante-dixième anniversaire*, bhikkhu, T. Dhammaratana and bhikkhu, Pāsādika (ed.). Paris: Édition You-Feng, 1977, pp. 13–55.
10. The same holds for the nun traditions in Cambodia and Laos.
11. See, e.g., Falk, Monica Lindberg. *Making Fields of Merit, Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007 and for further publications Anālayo. "The Revival of the Bhikkhunī Order and the Decline of the Sāsana", *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 2013. 20. pp. 110–193.

12. Vin III 237.
13. On the *thiḷa shin* e.g., Kawanami, Hiroko. *see, Renunciation and Empowerment of Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar-Burma, Building a Community of Female Faithful*, Leiden: Brill, 2013. On the *dasasil mātā* *see* Salgado, Nirmala S. *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice, In Search of the Female Renunciant*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. For further publications *see* Anālayo 2013 (as in the previous note).
14. For an account of the 1998 ordination *see* Li, Yuchen. "Ordination, Legitimacy and Sisterhood. The International Full Ordination Ceremony in Bodhgaya", in *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*, Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. (ed.), Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 2000, pp.168-198
15. This position is taken, for example, by bhikkhu, Thānissaro. *The Buddhist Monastic Code II, The Khandaka Rules Translated & Explained by nāhissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff), Revised Edition*. California: Metta Forest Monastery, 2013. (originally published 2001), p. 449f. A more detailed exposition of this position can be found in Payutto, Phra. *The Buddhist Discipline in Relation to Bhikkhunis, Questions and Answers*, Moore, R. (tra), 2013. <http://www.buddhistteachings.org/the-buddhist-discipline-in-relation-to-bhikkhunis>, p. 58ff.
16. *See in more detail* Anālayo, bhikkhu. "The Legality of Bhikkhunī Ordination", *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 2013. 20: pp. 310-333; Anālayo, bhikkhu. "On the Bhikkhunī Ordination Controversy", *Sri Lanka International Journal of Buddhist Studies*, 2014. 3: pp. 1-20; and Anālayo, bhikkhu. "The Cullavagga on bhikkhunī Ordination" (forthcoming).
17. On this option *see* Kieffer-Pülz, Petra. "Presuppositions for a Valid Ordination with Respect to the Restoration of the Bhikkhunī Ordination in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Tradition", in *Dignity & Discipline, The Evolving Role of Women in Buddhism*, Mohr, T. and Tsedroen J. (ed.), Boston: Wisdom, 2010. pp. 217-225, *see especially* note 16.
18. *See the report by* Mrozik, Susanne. "'We Love Our Nuns': Affective Dimensions of the Sri Lankan Bhikkhunī Revival", *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, 2014. 21: pp. 57-95.

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